

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 10 March 2010

No, the proverbs aren't original, and they weren't even inspired by me. But I will claim the commentary. Even if you don't think much of religion, I dare you to defy the common-sense logic of the advice given in the book of Proverbs. They exhort wisdom from parents to children, and are timeless advice whether you believe in the Bible or not.

Proverbs 1: 8 & 9

A big 'duh' moment here: teenagers rarely listen to parents' instruction, and regularly forsake their mother's teaching. Every morning, we wake up here in north Texas and wonder which kids will appear. Will they be the kids who are quiet, listen and are respectful, or will they be the fire-spitting, defiant dragons who lurch from their caves (rooms) to breathe smoke and fire at us for daring to occupy space on the same planet?

I struggle a lot with that, wondering what I, as a father, could do to better inspire my kids. I want my son to listen to instruction. To inspire him to do that, I work on listening, and holding my temper, and not swearing like I used to, and to be more patient. I want him to respect his mother, and to hold her in high esteem, and to listen to the lessons she teaches just by being a mom whose hand is involved in so many things every day. I struggle with what "I" can do and then I realize I'm struggling for the wrong reason. That "I" focus is at the heart of why I sometimes think he isn't listening.

It's about him. I lose sight of that fact. That I'm the grownup and that I really do need to go the extra mile to teach lessons to use in life. That the kids are stuck in being teenagers, ripe with angst, swimming in a tepid pool of self-esteem bullshark and conflicting lessons. That they really do want to do their best, and to try, and to succeed with honor. They're young adults, doing the best they can, living in a time and place where it's not about them and it's not about others. They're just trying to learn what life really is about, and how they should live it. It's not about them, though.

It's not about me either. That's the real lesson behind the proverb. Listen and do not forsake because, Dave, you bonehead, it's not about you. It's about passing on what's right and true and of real value to the kids. Patience, listening, kindness, sympathy, resolve, understanding, and honesty are the tools to use to inspire. They're fruits of faith, and the hallmarks of a good young man growing up into a solid man of his own.

Listen to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 11 March 2010

Today talks about resisting temptation. How we should all flee from temptation because yoking ourselves to people who wallow in doing something wrong just never comes to a good end. How, in the end, going after things that aren't ours causes our lives to become wreckage.

Don't I know that.

That road to hell really is paved with good intentions. Even when we just want to love and be loved, or when we're honestly giving it that old college try, without focusing on what's right, it just never works. Sure, there's timing, and history, and circumstance, and whole bunch of other stuff that plays into the equation. All those are true. But when you boil it all down, we're each responsible for what we do. Us and only us; me and only me.

Take me as an example. I like to drink. Me and George Jones, well, we have that beer bone nestled someplace down in our frames. Am I an alcoholic? No, I can't describe myself as that. I don't feel I need the stuff. I don't have an incomplete day without it. But, man, I do like to tie one on every now and then. I don't do it at home, but my friends from the road can tell many colorful stories of Dave's loud mouth and bad intentions.

That rarely comes to a good end. I've said and done things influenced by the fruit of the vine that I don't think I'd ordinarily do. Inhibitions break down; my tongue gets free; I say and promise things I can't deliver. And I wake up with a bad headache. Oh, and there's 40 pounds of beer weight that I'm frantically trying to exercise away.

That happened when I yoked myself to the enticement of going out to have a good time.

Now, it's true that there's nothing wrong with having a drink with friends. Or a glass of wine to enjoy the evening or the company of someone dear; lately I'm into malbecs. But for me, there's a line that is too easily crossed. So I have to be constantly on the watch for when I'm close to that line and stay on the 'good Dave' side of it. Besides, I don't like the feeling of being out of control of my senses anyway.

Do I know people who are slobbering drunks? I do indeed. Do I know people who can't handle their liquor? Quite a few. Do I know people who get belligerent if liquored up, or the opposite and become completely silly? Yep on that one too.

Am I one of those kinds of people I just described? Yes. Yes I believe I am.

All of it comes from enticement. From letting myself be enticed into falling into temptation. With good reason does the Lord's Prayer say "lead us not into temptation". I struggle with that one alot.

Wanna know more? Check out Proverbs 1, 10-19.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, March 12, 2010

Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out, in the gateways of the city she makes her speech. Proverbs 1, verses 20 - 21.

Some things are self-evident. Thomas Jefferson used that argument to further the point that liberty is self-evident. That it speaks for itself, and that it needs no supporting proof, no outside argument that it should say more about itself than it does. Some things just are, and they simply prove themselves just by virtue of being.

So it is with wisdom.

I think it's funny how wisdom, real wisdom, like the proverb says, cries out in a loud voice that can be heard above the noise of a busy street, or in a bustling mall, or on the outskirts of a town where it is the first thing you hear when you enter the center of commerce. It's self-evident, it just is, and that self-evidence makes a louder, stronger case than anything man does in the hectic pace of our lives to counter it.

I used to be wrapped up in the pursuit of knowledge. I love to learn, and to me, learning is one of the gifts we're given in life. Not a talent, though talent is certainly part of learning, but it really is a free gift given in grace. As a believer, as a man, as a citizen of the world, learning is a lifelong pursuit for me that is always in flux, always changing, always new.

But learning isn't wisdom. I'm well educated; got the degrees and T-shirt to prove it.

But I'm not very wise. Not all the time. For much of the time, I'm not very wise at all.

If wisdom really is discernment through the morality of God, and if fear of God really is the beginning of wisdom, then I have to be honest in confessing that I haven't always been wise. That I've sought wisdom in the ways of the world and have come back from my seeking unwise. I can be taught all the workings of the human body and still not be wise. I can seek yet another degree in college - and I hope to - and still not be wise. I can know much, and be experienced from travels to all the continents and I can still not be wise.

It's not hopeless though.

Because, even when I'm unwise, that wisdom, that self-evident thing that I've sought but not attained, still calls out in a clarion voice of gentle grace, and it calls me back to learn yet again. It convicts with strength and honest fortitude, yet it does so in a hug and not a slap across my face. It says to me "I understand" not "I approve", and it calls me back to sit at the feet of its teacher, and to listen and learn yet again. To persevere and try once more, and to know that I need no proof that real wisdom, real learning from above, will always be there to do so again for a penitent and hungry heart.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 13 March 2010

How long will you simple ones love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge? Proverbs 1, verse 22.

I'm one of the simple ones. Ok, if you know me, you may be laughing because I usually put up a front to make people think I'm all complex and mysterious and deep and a bunch of other qualities that really aren't much more than a facade.

If I'm going to be honest with you, though, I need to tell you that I'm really pretty simple. Every day I find myself all wrapped around the axle of my simple ways.

Last time, I talked about wisdom being self-evident and gentle; it is. I also mentioned how much I love to learn, which I really do.

But I'm a simpleton.

I'm one of those people Solomon would have called a mocker, and a fool; a simple one. See, it just isn't that hard to understand, e.g. it's simple.

I know best. I decide what's best. I think for myself. I plan for myself and I dream for myself.

Simple. Simply self-centered. Simply foolish. Simply uncaring. Simply unwise.

That's me.

No, I'm not the worst person in the world...or am I? I'm responsible for me, before the eyes of God and yours as well. To think I'm not the worst I could be is to ignore the callous ways I've treated the people I love, or squandered the love I've been given, or stomped on the hearts of good people, or ignored the blessings in the days of grace through which I simply stroll.

In my book, that's pretty bad. It's not a difficult thing to understand. How long will I love these simple things instead of the complexity of the richness of real wisdom that spoke the universe into being? The endless knowledge of ages, and the wise lessons of he at whose feet I'm unfit to sit? How long will I exchange the simple complexity of my selfish actions, of my worldly knowledge, for the graciously simple love that doesn't take much effort for a weary soul like mine to grasp?

Not long, I hope. That hope is more than just a wish, you know. It's a promise, a promise built through suffering, perseverance, and even my tarnished character. It's a bedrock on which to stop strolling through the good days of today and walk confidently into whatever comes tomorrow.

It's simple, just not simple like me.

It's wisdom. How long will I be 'simple' and mock this real wisdom? Only as long as it takes to walk up that hill, and stand under the tree of life, and look up at one who bled down wisdom and know that I can bask in that real knowledge, that real wisdom, and put aside my simple, childish ways. And then live forever.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 14 March 2010

If you had responded to my rebuke, I would have poured out my heart to you and made my thoughts known to you. But since you rejected me when I called and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand, since you ignored all my advice and would not accept my rebuke, I in turn will laugh at your disaster; I will mock when calamity overtakes you— when calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind, when distress and trouble overwhelm you. "Then they will call to me but I will not answer; they will look for me but will not find me. Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the LORD, since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes. Proverbs 1, verses 23 -31.

Have you ever felt rejected? And in feeling that way, have you ever felt like the world, like maybe even God himself, had forsaken you? That just nothing could ever go your way, and even nature is conspiring against you?

Pretty heavy thoughts for the morning, I suppose. But, duh, sure, I've felt that way from time to time and I bet you have too. There are times when things are just not going my way, and when I feel that earth, sky, and gravity are just dead set against me. When your heart is breaking, or you hurt the woman you love with things you say or do (or don't), when you wish you could take things back, when you say things you didn't mean and have to bear the consequences, when you get bad news that you didn't expect, or when things just don't turn out the way you wanted and tried and hoped they would: days happen when nothing seems to go right and it feels like the divine Himself must be having Himself one great, big belly laugh at my expense.

I've felt this alot lately.

When those days happen, they really do feel like calamities and disasters don't just blithely pass through my life. They sweep over me, and overtake me, and overwhelm me. That last word especially: overwhelm. I get overwhelmed easily, it seems. I'm depressive at times, and overwhelming seems to burden every inch of my soul. When it really hurts the most, when the chips are really down, and when (as John Wayne said) "we get down to the rat killin," overwhelmed is an understatement.

It feels sometimes like God himself is mocking me, laughing at me. Purposefully targeting me to ruin my life and pile all the forces of nature against me.

But here's the flip side of all this: it's just not true.

I believe God does have righteous anger. Awe-inspiring, thundering, cataclysmic, and disastrous anger. And He has that anger at things big and small. He gets angry because, well, He's God and He can because He's holy. Righteous. That's a concept it's easy for me to make light of, you know, that 'righteous' concept. It's easy because I'm not righteous, and I all too often ignore the simple calls of love that God puts out to me through the people I love. Or in a ray of sunshine, or the accident that avoids me every time I turn left onto the street where I live. Or the mysterious power of His timeless words, and the knowing He's here in the darkness and in the light.

That's righteous love. Unconditional, unending, unexpected, and unstoppable love that unwise people like me don't always understand.

When I screw things up pretty good (and I do this quite often) I easily reject that righteous anger, feebly rationalizing my actions to paint myself in a better light. I'm not to blame. It's not me, because while it's not really about me, can't you get it through your thick head that it really is? Pretty selfish thoughts, I think, especially since I'm the one responsible for much of the heartache I let plague me.

In light of those thoughts, it seems pretty reasonable to understand why a holy creator would have righteous anger at me, or you, or us, for the ways large and small that we fall short of Him and the very simple things he asks of us. As a father and a friend, He asks mainly that we love him by loving others, and that we do that with a whole heart. Everything else flows from that.

Not me, though. I'll get to that later. I have MY priorities and MY life and me, me, me.

And then the weight of the moon and stars seems to fall on me. It feels sometimes like I've been turned over to the consequences of my actions to accept the penalty they deserve. That I'm 'filled with the fruit of my schemes.' Let's be honest here: sometimes that actually happens. It's the essence of why faith is so necessary because I lay all my sins at

the cross and they're swept and hidden away. Not the consequences. Those, God leaves for me to deal with. Sometimes, when I let the selfishness creep back in, it seems like He's playing a cruel joke on me, not listening to me, ignoring the agony of my pleas for help and just not seeing me the way I really am.

It's just not true. That righteous anger is there, but it's covered over by righteous love, by real caring, and true wisdom. By concepts so simple and so magnificently powerful that it's difficult for me to understand them. I forget that they're really lessons for me to learn and live, that He knows what makes me tick. He leaves me the consequences because He wants me to come back to him for help, and for guidance, and for trust. He gives me the gift of rebuke, and second chances, because He's a father just like me, and he wants his kids to grow up and be solid, loving people. He entrusts me with them because He loves me.

But Dave, you say, what about the times when things just happen? When bad crap just happens that I didn't cause, and I didn't ask for? What about when the lady who flips me the bird, or the husband who beats his wife, or the corporate downsizing, or the virus that locks up my computer? Where's your God in all that?

He's there too, and He's there encouraging me to seek his guidance first because He and I both know I really am in charge of my reactions as well as my pro-actions (if that's even a word). God still allows us full control, and full responsibility, for how we respond when chance and fate step in. He does it in a way that always says "seek me first because I love you and I know what I'm doing."

Is it any wonder I'm not a criminal? Is it any wonder I'm sane at all? Is it any wonder I'm not the president? Lyrics to a pretty corny song, I know. But knowing that it really is not about me, is it any wonder, then, that a righteous God could feel righteously angry, and a man who consciously falls so far short of divine expectations should feel, every now and then, the weight of his actions upon his shoulders?

Feeling that weight can be a delusion, you know, because at the end of it, there really is good news after all.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 15 March 2010

For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them; but whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm." Proverbs 1, verses 32 and 33.

The weight can bear you down. I've carried a lot of it lately. The weight of things I've done, people I've hurt, things I've done and not done is a wearying load to bear. Sometime soon perhaps I'll write more about it. For now, let it suffice to say that it's a heavy thing to tote around, like a giant stone hanging around my neck, or a too-heavy load on the weight you try to lift at the gym.

If I'm not careful, it'll kill me. That's not really conjecture, I suppose. My grandfather had already had his first heart attack by the time he was my age. My father was already diabetic. Me, I'm just a sometimes-loser trying to stay ahead of the health game but internalizing my wrongs and letting them eat me alive from the inside out. They're the weight I carry around, a weight I'm trying to lose, and it's more than just a spare tire. It really will kill you if you aren't careful.

It's unwise. It's a simple thing to understand. It's ground we've already covered.

It's wayward and it'll suck you into self-spiraling complacency if you're foolish enough to let it happen. For me, that complacency is wrapping myself around the axle of my wrongs and thinking there's nothing I can ever do to make them right and they've already, permanently destroyed me.

Here's the good part. It doesn't have to happen.

Real wisdom, real comfort will set you at ease if you let it. All that stuff that I let cloud my life can really kill me from the inside out and the one who prods it on will do nothing but delight in that.

It doesn't have to happen. With real wisdom, real listening, real love comes real comfort and, what I want most, real peace. Some rest. A place to lay down the weight and put it down for good. The Proverb talks about how listening to divine wisdom will allow us to live in safety. It says "be at ease, without fear of harm." All from doing nothing more than really opening my heart and my ears to that wisdom of love. Then letting it soak into my soul. It doesn't say the world will suddenly become rosy. It talks about comforting me enough to live in a place of inner safety, of being free from the fear of being hurt, or of letting that weight crush me.

I once dated a girl who was consumed by the guilt of things that had happened to her. She constantly fought against the demons who tortured her with hurts she never deserved. She was my first real love and it hurt so much to see her hurt so much. I used to wonder why she didn't put down that weight and walk away from it. Of late, I've come to understand some of why she didn't. I've carried my own weight, and it has daily left me feeling like Atlas with the world on my shoulders (but without the cool physique). It's tempting to try to carry it all myself, to think "I can do this on my own." Reality steps in and tells me I can't. Reality asks me to set it down, then set it aside, then listen. And learn. And love. And forgive as I've been forgiven, starting from the inside out. Then move forward. That's weight loss I could really dig.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 16 March 2010

My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.

Proverbs 2, verses 1-5

I have a teenage son. He's fourteen, and he's smack dab in the middle of the years when he's not a boy anymore but he isn't yet a man. The awkward years, 8th grade especially. If somebody gave me the choice between a gruesome death and repeating 8th grade, I think I'd choose the gruesome death. My son is better off. He's discovering being in love for the first time, and showing off, and struggling with grades that are harder than they've ever been, and with his father bristling every time he turns on Eminem. He's a good guy, trying to find his way, and not yet knowing that he doesn't have to show off just to prove himself.

We struggle alot with school, namely that I bristle too when he doesn't do his homework or apply himself to learning. The discipline of doing my studies came easy to me, so I struggle with how it doesn't come so easily to him, and how he detests doing his schoolwork. It really is a chore for him; always has been. I yearn for him to seek knowledge, and to find contentment in things above. And to have a closer relationship to God because that has brought me comfort in times like these when there doesn't seem to be much comfort elsewhere.

I sometimes don't know whether it's because of dyslexia, laziness or rebellion, or maybe something I don't even know about. Or perhaps a combination of many things. I work to inspire him to apply himself better, but usually it doesn't go the way I want it to. That causes friction. Of course it does: he's a teenager and I'm a parent. He puts up a front, or raises his voice. I respond calmly at first, but he knows just what buttons to push, and, predictably, if he crosses a line where I feel he's assaulting fundamentals, I go to the option of "you don't have a choice. Do it." That means an argument, or he loses his phone, or the internet, or TV, or he's grounded. Usually a combination of those things.

Then comes the guilt of being a parent. I hate to punish him, and I hate myself when I let myself get goaded into reacting negatively. We haven't used corporal punishment for years; he's way too big for it anyway and he's strong as an ox. But it feels just as bad to me as if I'd taken a strap to his behind when I argue with him. Kids say things to hurt, to demean; I don't let myself respond in kind. It's the behavior that's wrong, not him. It's what he said or did that is the trouble, not him. He's a good young man, and I don't want to crush him. Yet I feel crushed by disciplining him, even when the discipline is just, especially since the lessons we argue over most are those concerning DTX.

Come to think of it, though, that's ok. Of all the kids in his confirmation (DTX) class, Dman is the only one done with all his homework assignments. He doesn't like people pushing him to say what he believes because he's still sorting it out. In my incessant nagging to get him to 'do more' I forget that, at fourteen, he's doing something that most people in the world don't do at any time in their lives. He's facing up to God, and standing before Him saying "I don't understand. Help me understand." My son doesn't always get the fine details of book & chapter, but when he falters he gets back up and tries again, and keeps seeking to understand in his own way, and to be genuine.

The message is sinking in, and that will draw him closer on a timeline not our own. His life will be richer for it. The lessons rub off in time. He's learning that, to have a personal relationship with our creator is a personal thing, yet a public thing, and that it's not about him even when it seems like it is. "Fear of the Lord" is what Solomon called it. He's learning that, and learning that it's not the intimidating, frightful terror we associate with 'fear' but, instead, it's reverence and respect. A parent/child relationship, one where he'll be able to open up his inmost thoughts, then share them with the creator who desires an open relationship with him. The years of rebellion and friction will render him a man, and he's learning how to be a good one. He's calling for insight, and crying for understanding; storing up good commands and learning to accept their wisdom.

I'm proud of him for many reasons, but this one more than the others. And it gives me encouragement when we're stuck in the middle of arguments over small things that, like Bogie said, don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 17 March 2010

For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. Proverbs 2, verse 6.

God gives wisdom and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. That's Proverbs 2. I have so been trying to remember this these last few days. I've been striving to say and do the right things, seeking his wisdom first. And it's hard. I believe that every detail with which we deal, even the mundane ones, is important. Decisions around those mundane, small details are what make up the background for the big decisions. Struggling over how to decide on those details, or what to do, or any number of aspects in life is what makes up most of my days. Generals decide on a strategy but then have to understand and plan for a myriad of details that would make that strategy successful. So it is with our lives as well.

A friend made it clear to me that there are Biblical and non-Biblical answers to everything. God sets down the boundaries but manifests himself there and everywhere in-between. That's a good thing for me to remember, especially now. God is tactical as well as strategic; forest and trees; canvass and painting. He wants us, directs us, to follow his edicts, but forgives us through Jesus when we don't.

He does that because He's the source of wisdom and knowledge. Those things he asks of us are for our own good because he really, truly, honestly does love us with unconditional love. He wants that unconditional, holy love to drive our lives, to show itself in everything we think, say and do. He wants it to govern our relationships, our friendships, our work, our web-surfing, our conversations, and even when we're in the shower. And he's unwilling to compromise on it, to do anything that lessens or cheapens that love because He knows it's the real deal and worth waiting for.

That's where I'm stuck now: learning to base all my decisions on God's guidance. It's so difficult to do. Shouldn't be that way, but it really is because, for me, it's giving up control. In some cases, it's doing things that my head tells me are right but my heart tells me no. Or vice versa. Divine knowledge is black and white; I'm stuck in gray. It's a tough thing to do, especially when a thousand small decisions comprise what to do about one bigger one. I don't want to mess up, so I constantly fall back on "I need to," forgetting that God's guidance, his wisdom and knowledge, guide me to say "let go." Then follow.

Is there any real knowledge apart from God? For me, any real answer must come down on the side of 'no, there isn't.' All we know, do, think, conceive, plan, or scheme happens within human understanding. We seek that understanding, but I believe we only really get it when we seek first God's guidance. It's that sudden "a-ha" moment you get when an idea really becomes clear, or when you see a thing of beauty in something uncommon. It's seeing a sleeping baby and knowing you're staring at the face of peace, or looking around the table when your loved ones are all there and knowing that it just doesn't get any better than this.

What about when we decide to do something that's apart from God's knowledge? Does that mean every human decision is sin? Or that we're just damned if we decide to do something apart from what is Biblically ordained? I don't believe that. Born sinful of a sinful heritage, yes, but forgiven and found clean by the wise, loving, and sacrificial act of God's Son. No matter what I end up doing through each and every day, I know that real knowledge and understanding are a gift from God, and that even when I reject them, He gives me a path home that is always on the straight and true.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 18 March 2010

I am a warrior. I exited the military 14 years ago (ok, 10 to be all technical) and I laid aside that lifestyle when I did so. It was what I trained for, what I was devoted to, and I loved my fellow warriors like brothers. I gave it up because it was time, and it was the right thing to do. Yet I still hold dear to the things I learned, the way I undertook, way back then. Even today, it's not "I was," it is "I am." I am a warrior.

For me, the war goes on. It's not a war to engage an enemy with weapons of steel or electronics. For me, it is a war of the spirit. It is just as real to me as what we trained to do, what we did, all those years ago. The proverb I read today talked about that, about God holding 'victory in store for the upright,' of being a shield, a guard, a protector. He is those things, does those things, for people who are upright, blameless, just, and faithful. It speaks in clear, military terms, terms I understand and hold dear.

Um, I've been none of those things. I'm a good man. Don't get me wrong on this; you've read some of the anguish I've posted here, about how guilty I feel, how guilty I am, in some things. Those are still true. Yet I'm a good man. I'm a good friend, and a good father, I've been a good husband in many ways, and I'm a good worker and I'm loyal. I love openly, and sometimes desperately too. Spiritually I'm growing stronger, even when it's in fits and starts, and physically I'm in the best shape I've ever been in. I know I'm a good man, and thank you my friends who have reminded me of this.

But I haven't been upright, blameless, just or faithful. I've done things in my life about which I'm not proud. I've sought comfort in places I shouldn't. I've given my heart where it wasn't mine to give, and I don't want to take it back. I haven't been the example I wanted to be, and I've fallen short of all kinds of expectations. And I've squandered gifts that were given to me. No, I'm not going back through my maudlin list of iniquities; they've been honestly said and they need to stay in the past. What am I to do about them?

Perhaps I've started doing it. Man up, for one. I'm responsible, and I'm stuck with the consequences of where I've fallen short. God took away the spiritual guilt but left me to pick up the pieces here. That's just. I think He wants me to do it by turning my responses over to him as well, relying on Him for strength and discernment. I mean, Solomon, the richest man in history, didn't ask for more riches or power. He asked for wisdom, and God gave it to him. In spades. Even with that, later in life, Solomon still screwed the pooch. God didn't abandon him, though. He continually said "come back to me. I will give you real wisdom, and I'll never let you go."

To really grasp that, I had to man up. Take it by the horns and hold on for more than the 8 second ride. He doesn't promise an easy ride, or an easy road through life. "It" still happens and still will as long as I'm exercising my free will, making good choices and bad. What He promises is that He is always imparting that real wisdom and never lets go. He, too, is in it for more than the 8 second thrill. In 'manning up' I realize, then, that there are all kinds of things I 'do' to live my life, to pick up the pieces, to love and be loved by people of real beauty. The real work, however, the real heavy lifting, was already done, and not by me. Manning up, even Peyton Manning, you get to realize that it really isn't about what we do, but about what was done for us. To put it another way, it's not about me. Sound familiar?

Why does God do these things? Ask him; He's God. One explanation is that he does it for us, so that "wisdom will enter your heart and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will protect you and understanding will guard you." Doesn't seem accidental to me that those same things God does in this proverb are for us, and are done through His knowledge. He does it through daily battle, waging that battle with His words, His Word, for the good of all of us. Neither He, nor I am an unwilling participant, and the battle will rage until the end of time.

I am a warrior still, and every day there is a battle waged within my soul, within my life, and in which I'm actively engaged. My tools are my faith and my friend, my creator, and I'm always in a battle that will ebb and flow through the rest of my days. Some days it'll go better than others. Hoping, then, that today will be one of them. Time to man up, get my head down, and take the battle to the enemy.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 19 March 2010

Proverbs 2: 12 through 22.

It's really one complete thought here, made up of 10 verses talking about a number of different things about how wisdom will keep you on the straight and narrow. They talk about how real wisdom is like immunization against wicked people, people who thrive on evil, people whose ways are devious, and who are just up to no good. And they talk about adultery, about how real wisdom will save you from cheating. In that, it's not talking about just the sex part. It's talking about how basking in real wisdom, God's wisdom, will bathe your heart in such love that even thinking about cheating will become anathema. Finally, it talks about how that wisdom will ensure that people who believe in it will remain upright and gain God's blessings, while those who reject it are rejecting those blessings as well.

It talks about how they are torn from the land. That tells me that we, as people, are made for being in 'the land.' To me, that 'land' is in wisdom, basking in God's knowledge. It's in our DNA; it's in how our brains work; it's in the love we feel for each other. We were made to live within perfect knowledge and love, not to live in struggle and strife.

Now, I'm not going to get into some discussion about the fall from grace and how sin clouds our lives. Face it: we all screw up. We all do it, some more than others, and some of our junk is more serious than others. We each have been wicked, evil, devious, no good, and even adulterous. I have, more times than I want to admit here or anywhere. All of it drags us away from that perfect love, that real knowledge and true wisdom.

Every time I stumble (or when I really mess up), that love pulls me back. It wrenches me back and rebukes me. It corrects and scours. It's like alcohol on a wound, and it's for the healing. Hurts A LOT. Real knowledge prods my conscience and bids me to repent and try to do better. It's HARD to leave the things you've done behind, and it's hard to live with some of the things you've done. That real love doesn't though. When it forgives, it does so instantly; when it cleanses, it cleanses immediately and fully. And it wipes it away as if it never existed. God did that himself because we aren't made to carry all our junk around. We were made to live in love, and wisdom, and real knowledge with Him and each other despite, and not because of, all the things we do as a part of what we call 'living.'

Being saved from all the crap we do in our lives, then, isn't about making sure it never happens again, or that we never become repeat offenders. Instead, it's about us knowing that, to walk upright, we need that perfect knowledge and only our maker can impart it. We can't get it ourselves on our own. We need the help and it's always freely offered.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 20 March 2010

How can fear prolong your life? I think that word 'fear' gets a bad rap these days. We define it as terror or dread, but the Proverbs talk about fear as a form of respect. Fear of the Lord, fear of His power, fear of His judgment: it's true that all those things could inspire real dread in somebody (which seems like evidence of conscience doesn't it?). Yet here, in Proverbs 3, it's talking about how keeping wisdom and all it teaches in your heart, that is 'fear of the Lord,' will bring prosperity and long life. I believe that because, when I think of people I respect who seemed upright, I think they each walked in respect for someone who taught them, or carried them, along their journey in life.

And in the very next phrase it talks about how we should let love and faithfulness never leave us, how we should bind them around our necks like a beautiful necklace, and write them on our hearts like a personal code of honor because they help us gain a good name in front of all. The verse doesn't say 'try' or 'strive to' or 'think about' but it says 'let' as in 'allow' because we allow them into our hearts rather than doing something to convince them to enter.

These are true as well.

All through my life I've wrestled with those concepts: fear, love, and faithfulness, especially in these last seasons. You're my friends, so please judge me honestly: do I seem cocky? Arrogant at times? Do I occasionally walk around with a chip on my shoulder? Have I selfishly demanded respect from others before I've selflessly given it? I am those things, and I do walk around being too big for my own shoes, and I have indeed been selfish in meting out respect and honor to others.

If I love you, have I ever loved with half a heart? Or sometimes with too much heart? Have I ever been infatuated, or given my love too freely, or maybe not freely enough? When we've shared our friendship and affection, did it feel like I was sometimes holding back? Have I really let unconditional love guide every detail of my life, giving it generously for others, unto others, instead of for myself? Have I loved to the point of being willing to give all for you? If you're being honest about me, I believe you'll conclude I occasionally come up short in this department.

What about faithfulness? No comment from the administration at this time other than 'guilty.' Please just remember that we're not only talking about fidelity, but also loyalty, reliability, even being accurate. Still guilty, especially when you factor in the additional definitions.

Take it from me: when you're breaking down, or being broken, it's hard to rely on fear, love and faithfulness. When the monkey is on your back and he's morphing into a gorilla, it's hard to keep your heart focused on these things and not get distracted into feeling all wrapped around the axle of hurt. A good friend this week reminded me that we're never broken just to be broken. Instead, we're broken to be built back up. There's a purpose in both, and fear, love, and faithfulness are inherent throughout the process.

Oh no! Dave is sliding back down into the self-loathing pit of depression and bitterness, and it's really gonna be a downer to read this blog again! No, not today. I write these things just to admit I fall short of the proverb's expectations. Just like we were designed to live in unfettered peace, so I believe we were designed to live in fear, love and faithfulness. To me, these are selfless traits, learned behaviors learned from people who gave of themselves. We learn them to apply them, even if we've failed at doing so in the past. Then we let them bind together our attitudes, our behavior, when things are good, so they can serve as a solid foundation on which to live our lives. When times really suck, they still bind us together, giving us encouragement to overcome, and that same foundation on which to rely.

Today is the first day of spring, or at least the first part-day. Letting respect for loving wisdom, agape love for others, and faithful adherence to the first two govern my life is a good way to enter the coming season of rebirth. I challenge you to do that same. It's a fitting code of honor by which to live life this year, and a good foundation for building up once the tearing down is over.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 21 March 2010

This one is hard for me to do. It's a proverb you've probably heard some time before: trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In ALL your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight.

I've been in crisis and have been gradually breaking down day by day. I find myself shedding countless tears in ways I never have before. For a long time, the blues rarely left me. My blood pressure is through the roof. And, the stress, much of it my own doing, has been at unbearably high levels. Crisis, even when it's one you bring on yourself, is a thing that rarely leaves you permanently unaffected.

In talking with a great friend, he advised me that the best thing I could do was let it break me. Let God work through me however he will do it, and lean not on my own understanding. Trust in God completely and let him work through you. Give up control and see what happens. That's easier said than done, I replied, because I'm one stubborn SOB. "Yes, you are," my friend replied. "Do it anyway."

It's a darn hard thing to lay aside all your control, to give up all your pro-action, even your reaction, giving it to the wise God of whom you have so much awe and fear. I seem to have trust issues with the Almighty, not because of anything He's done. More appropriately, it's because of things I've undone. For all my honest profession of unconditional belief, I've been real good at attaching conditions to it.

I'm ok with going out on a limb, with doing THINGS on faith. God told Abraham to go when Old Abe was way past Social Security, and go he went. I can understand that way of believing. I mean, I've moved on a whim, and gone across country for much less. In my life I've done all kinds of crazy things that have made me who I am and in a state of grace I've made it through just fine. Leaning not on my own understanding doesn't seem to be a problem for me when action is involved. When it comes to control, though, there I've had some difficulty.

Give up control, that something that isn't a THING? Giving up that control is especially hard when you're living through times of change. I mean, we all live through change. In the past few months, I've endured some real life-changers. Job switches, financial rollercoasters, kids leaving home, personal injuries, relationship trauma, and the ever-present ghosts of unmet expectations: all of these I've endured just since last spring. And through it all I've found it to be so humanly, vainly, understandably, tragically hard to simply let go of control and give that control up to God.

Maybe that's part of why I've struggled so much. I know in my heart that God will indeed make my path straight even when I try to deny that. I know in my heart that it's always ok to jump into the pool because He won't let me sink. I know in my heart how right it is to let go of all my junk and give the burden of carrying it to him, and yet I carry it around and complain how heavy is the weight. And I know in my heart that I'm never really in control here, that even through the major decisions over things large and small, my Redeemer is with me in the details as well as controlling the larger scene.

Trust with all my heart and lean not on my own understanding. It's not impossible, but I have to admit that it's just about the hardest thing I've ever had to do.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 22 March 2010

First fruits. My church is big on first fruit giving. If you don't know what that is, it's giving to the church, or to God in some capacity, the first of your labors. You do it before you satisfy your other obligations, and it's an attitude shift. If it's money, you give money. If you have no money, it's your time. If you have no time, it's prayer. If you have no prayer, it's following. It's putting first things first by remembering that we are made to live selfless lives in thanks for all the good done for us.

That kind of thinking transforms you. I think it's a responsible thing to pony up and take ownership of your debts, financial and personal, to others. If you spend it, you pay for it. If you owe it, you pay it. If you are indebted to someone for their kindness, you repay that kindness to them, maybe by doing kindness to others. God tells us to serve him by serving others, and giving money and time BEFORE satisfying our due commitments does this. It strengthens the bonds of society, and it reinforces that more perfect union our Founding Fathers wrote about. It's what makes the world go around.

Even when things are tough, even when times are tight like they are now, and even when there just doesn't seem to be enough of me to go around, we're asked to give. Not just give more or give differently, but give. Give first and give freely. We're asked to give first, before satisfying our other commitments (NOT in spite of them or to not fulfill them) that we may learn to be thankful. Even if you don't believe in God, wouldn't your attitude change for the better if, instead of just paying your bills and credit cards on payday, you wrote out a check to a charity, then paid those bills? Or, instead of planning my weekend to get things I want to do done, wouldn't it shape my outlook if first I planned to do something good for somebody else, then went off on my merry way? You don't have a to give a fortune, just give something. Something good is always better than nothing good.

That it puts a smile on your face and warmth in your heart seems undeniably common sense to me.

I once worked on a project where I needed a developer to write an Access program for me. Microsoft Access isn't very difficult to program, but I didn't know how to do it. So my coworker wrote the program and, in doing so, taught me how to do it. When I thankfully told him "let me buy you lunch or something" he said, "no, no need for that. Just take what I taught you and teach someone else." To me, that's a real first fruit giver. He gave of his busy time to mentor me, then selflessly said 'payment' would be sharing. He put me as a priority, and asked nothing for himself in return.

This is a hard one to do, especially when there doesn't seem to be enough in the checkbook to stretch things as is. When we've done it, though, I can't say of any time when there didn't turn out to be enough anyway. Usually, there was more than enough. And we felt better for doing it, knowing that we were able to share what we've earned – and what we've been given – with others. I'm not a big fan of the guilt-induced idea of 'giving back.' This concept doesn't give back. Instead, we give of our hearts before there's anything to feel guilty about. In my book, that really putting first things first.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 23 March 2010

God's discipline. Lately we've had a flurry of fires to put out around here. A number of things have happened that have really shaken my world in fundamental ways. Long-term changes, small decisions that have long-lasting consequences, things with kids, job up's and down's: John Lennon said that life is what happens when you're busy making other plans, and I agree with that. Through all this, I have this vision of some fire and brimstone preacher breathing hell down on me, screaming out at a congregation about God's disciplining the people He loves in times of trial.

Whatever.

See, I don't look at these things as discipline. Refining, like discipline, sure. Correction, like discipline, sure, as well. Evidence that God is active in the details of my life, sure yet again, and that too is instructive discipline. But not the punishing, corrective discipline that comes from the need for it. No, that isn't it at all. Instead, I choose to believe that the discipline happening in my life just now is what's intended as instruction to follow, part of learning to be a follower. Maybe, as the root of the word goes, it's part of learning to be a better disciple.

If you're looking for somebody wholly unworthy to follow in the footsteps of good teaching, look no further than yours truly. The guilty side of me thinks of that fiery preacher and feels the sting of knowing he could rightfully be talking to me. I believe, though, that such thoughts are good mostly for breaking down, and maybe that's not all a bad thing either. To have my defenses worn down is good, chipping away at the scale of hurt and the rock-hard junk that I've plastered over what's good. If it takes discipline to do that, so be it. It will only destroy if I let it, and I don't think destruction is the goal. Besides, when things happen, do we really have a choice? Get busy living or get busy dying; I'm not ready for option two just yet.

No, instead, here and now today, worthy or not, I choose to focus on how it feels to walk out of Rev Brimstone's church, keeping his words of warning in perspective. Out the front door, and then I feel the welcoming spring sun, smell the flowers, feel the warmth of the people who love me, and move into the world hopefully. That sun, warmth and love? They're reminders too, teaching and refining, correcting even, and building up instead of simply tearing down. If there really is a time and purpose for all things under heaven, so it is then with basking in love as well. Because that's part of being disciplined too, and I believe more and more that's why God does it, why He allows for trials in our lives and prepares us for things to overcome. Discipline as preparation, as instruction, as fatherly love for children who need guidance: that's something I can live with and even look forward to.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 24 March 2010

This one is for the men in my list. If you're a lady, feel free to read on but know it ain't intended for you.

If you read Proverbs 3, you read the psalmist's words describing the value of wisdom. "More profitable than silver, more precious than rubies, nothing you desire can compare...long life...riches and honor...a tree of life to those who embrace."

And do you know how else wisdom is described? "She." "Her." The divinely inspired word (given by the supreme creator of the universe) refers to His ultimate knowledge, his ultimate code for all living, as a woman.

Doesn't surprise me a bit.

Not to sound too cheeky, but He has good taste, you know. And He knows what he's talking about, especially in this subject. Where a thing of beauty is concerned, He's all man.

Let's face it: we adore beautiful women. Whether it's long hair streaming down her shoulders or the look you see in her eyes that tells you there's something there nobody else has ever seen, the allure of a lady is mysterious and overpowering. The feel of her hair, the lengths she goes to just to make herself feel beautiful, her skin, her laughter, her tears, being one with her; talking at night, talking across the table, walking together, struggling together, the feel of her kiss, listening to her (I mean really, really listening to her), even just the time when you're sitting together and saying nothing at all: woman made for man, and we men made for woman. Helen of Troy launched a thousand ships with her beauty. She had nothing on this kind of beauty.

The longer I live the more I believe that real beauty lies down deep inside. Some of you know me better than others: my eyes have indeed turned at the sight of a beautiful lady. I'm guilty of that. But as I get older, I find myself valuing what's in her heart and her thoughts more than just the lady on the outside. We look at things different, we men and women. Nowadays I find myself craving to learn what's in her heart, not just how spectacular, astounding, amazing and wonderful she is on the outside. Those qualities matter even more when her beauty is seen from within.

I've told you before how highly I value learning. It's almost a sacred thing to me, the value of knowledge and the appreciation of it; how accumulating that knowledge is like a wonderful journey. Learning is a thing of beauty, something to yearn for, to cherish, and to revere. As life goes on, we get to appreciate facets of that beauty that we hadn't considered before. We take great risks for it, we pour out our treasure for it, and, if the love is great enough, we'd even be willing to die for it.

Stop me if I'm wrong, men, but couldn't you say that of a beautiful woman as well? She's somebody beautiful, to yearn for, cherish, revere, appreciate, give all for and even die for. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. Seems to me, then, that our creator thought of those things and wrote them down for us almost 3000 years ago.

God loves us as a father, a friend, a creator, and as a man. Man to man, he challenges us to constantly push ourselves harder, strive to do more, man up and take it on the chin when we need to. All good and all cool. And, because he's all man, he reminds us too how his real loving wisdom is something beautiful. It's the knowledge he wants us to pass on to our children, something to protect, something to strive for, to cherish, value and to love as we're loved. His knowledge, then, is like a mysterious, tempting, beautiful, and always loving woman.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 25 March 2010

If you're an evolutionist, this will probably hack you off. Me, Joe College Degree, Mr. Reason and Common Sense: I reject it. Too many gaps and too little redemption. It's like watching LOST and thinking you have it all figured out. Me, if I am compelled to believe in something based on faith (which is the only way evolution could be accepted as 'fact'), I choose to believe in divine creation.

Now, that line in the sand having been drawn, we all know the creation story (even the evolutionists). God spoke, it appeared, it was good. Done. There's nothing really missing from the account; you either believe it or you don't. What I didn't realize until I read Proverbs 3, though, was a pretty simple fact: it was a wise thing to do; something done through wisdom.

Verse 19 says it was all done 'by wisdom.' By wisdom the Lord laid the earth's foundations, by understanding he set the heavens in place, by his knowledge the deeps were divided, and the clouds let drop the dew.' Lots to unpack there, and I really don't have the inclination to do so. Why? Well, because I just accept it. There aren't any holes in it for me; I'm ok with not knowing more...

...except for this one thing. Wisdom speaks to order. Yes, I know the world, indeed the whole universe, is an ever-changing circus of chance encounters. Chaos theory has merit to it. Hundreds of scientists conclusively agree that the human species is but one species of millions descended from common protoplasm over a half billion years of evolution. On the outside looking in there doesn't seem to be much of a pattern to it, much organization...

...that is, until you look closer. DNA? Order. Seasons? Pattern. Laws of nature? Universal. Even love? Game, set and match. There is harmony and reasoned thinking in how things work, and to think otherwise seems foolish to me. Think it through and there are hundreds of things that come to mind bespeaking ordered thought, not random, natural selection. To me, that is evidence of wisdom, evidence of planning, not something random.

It wasn't as if God sat around in eternity and had the impromptu decision to make a universe. It took reasoning, and planning, and wisdom, and love. It wasn't something He did just to roll the dice: He did it for a reason and with thought, purpose. To me, that's the single biggest draw for why I believe it to be true: that it happened with wisdom and purpose. We're not here just because 2 mutant apes got frisky in the trees. We're here for a reason. In a time when pessimism and corruption are on the march, I find it encouraging to remember that this place we call our home was set into motion by Him, for us, with wisdom as the mortar that holds it all together. I'll take that over Mr. Darwin's story any day.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 26 March 2010

Let's face facts: it's tough to not fear disaster. I have to confess (and brag a bit) that I don't fear the unknown like I used to. Years ago, it seemed like I would just sit around and worry about things that COULD happen, or MIGHT happen, or hadn't yet happened. If it was going to rain and I had an outing planned, I'd fret about it. If there was a bill due and I knew it would be tight but there would be money there anyway, I'd worry. When I was a kid, we moved to Pennsylvania just before the end of third grade. On my first day, I was so worried that I made myself violently sick. I hadn't been in Mrs. Ampacher's class for 20 minutes before I threw up all over the desk and ran out of the room crying.

Looking back, that all seems somewhat foolish. I'm approaching middle age (I can even see it through my bifocals and past my grey hairs), and I suppose that I've mellowed. Things that used to bother me just don't twist me in the wind anymore. I'll chalk it up to love, experience, and faith. It's not that I don't worry about important things; lately, I haven't slept more than a few hours without a sleep aid. No, I simply let the world become the world as it does because I realize that it doesn't bow down to me anymore. Not that it ever did, mind you, but I sure did expend a lot of useless energy.

"Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked for the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being snared." God has my six, is watching my back, is my wingman. Whatever cliché is comfortable for you, have at it. It's true.

Notice it doesn't say 'God won't let bad stuff happen to you.' It says 'don't be afraid when it does because He already has set your fears aside for you.' I oscillate about that concept, that God 'lets' bad things happen to us. I know the Lutheran answer is that He doesn't, that sin and our fallen nature are the bad that we bring on ourselves; it's true. I also know that sometimes random crap drops out of the sky and befouls my windshield of life. Is that an act of God or is it the act of just another flying bird? You decide. I know I didn't deserve it when the bird dive bombed my car (or my hair). 'It' literally happens. And does it mean that, someplace, God is having himself a good, hearty laugh? Maybe, don't know, doesn't matter.

I think of God 'letting' bad things happen to us is a lot like a parent standing by while their child goes off and does something stupid. You don't want them to get hurt, or in trouble, and you repeatedly extol them to refrain. Sometimes, though, it just goes in and out of those one and other ears. Depending on the severity, you might even let them bear all the consequences. For some things there are kind words, for some things there are second chances, and for some other things health insurance is required. Most people don't love their kids any less, though maybe a little wiser on the rebound.

What I'm saying is this: even when He sees our junk happening, He lets us learn our lessons. And it usually turns out for the best. Me, I take that as quiet evidence that God has our backs. I believe he stands at the ready to intervene in ways we don't understand when we're pushed to breaking in permanent ways: ways He defines as those that will irreparably turn us from Him. We can take a lot. And sometimes, yes, 'taking it' means we do turn away from Him. That's a choice, and not a bad one. He's always ready to welcome us back and equip us to try once more. Personally, I'd rather have the strength to fight again instead of just another ammo clip that will eventually be used up.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 27 March 2010

Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is your power to act. That's the first verse of Proverbs 3: 27-30. It really is the crux of the three verses which talk about being good to each other in four concepts. Don't withhold good, don't be stingy, don't be deceitful, don't accuse. Lot's of 'don'ts' and not politically correct at all.

Of course, it's the Bible. There's nothing about it that's PC, and that's a good thing because it doesn't change with the times. It's the Constitution of all times for all people who would choose to believe it. Whether or not you believe in God and the story of our His love affair with humanity, the Bible, especially in Proverbs, is still chock full of really good advice for man getting along with fellow man.

Especially in this verse, where the gist of it is really is "love generously." I remember when Anthony Edwards died off of "ER." You know, when his character was telling his daughter about things he would want her to know all through her life. "Love generously" was what he said. Those words stuck with me, especially since I haven't been known as someone who does that. Too many times I've been the stingy, deceitful and accusatory one; too many times I haven't done good, or worse, I've wished something bad on someone else. Maybe even worse than that, too many times I've been one who wished for what he didn't have, who ignored the blessings in front of him and thought "it could have been different." How sad it is that, for things to be different, all it takes is accepting and then living some very simple principles.

This verse, then, is a call to action for people like me. It really isn't a bunch of 'don't' negatives. The do-not's are couched in doing something wonderful. They're there in the flip side of the things it tells us to not do. Do not withhold good; instead, be good by loving generously. Do not be stingy; instead, love generously when your friends need you. Do not plot against people; instead, love generously and open your heart wisely. Do not accuse falsely; instead, love generously by giving trust that we may earn trust. When my son wants my time, give of it freely. When my neighbor needs help hauling trash, pitch in. When there is someone to serve by getting out of my comfort zone, fly freely out of it and know that my safety net is held by the Almighty. Most of all, do all this good when it is within my power to act, which if you want to shake off the blues, really is just about any hour of the day.

It's so easy for me to get wrapped around the axle of the details of life and lose sight of the fact that, while my life is made up of them, it's the sum total instead of the individual terms that matter most. Along the number line, you can move positive or negative, but where you end up you only find out after you calculate out all the terms. Not a bad analogy for life, I think, and I didn't even really like math in school.

But it's true. It's so easy to forget to love generously, as I live my life along that line, and instead, allow myself to keep focused on things that don't matter much in the long run. It's how much you love, not just who you love or even in what way, that God wants us to always live out. How much is enough? There is never enough where love is concerned. But when loving generously, giving out all we have with no expectation of getting it back, enough is just the starting point. Here's to loving others generously, however we're equipped to do so.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 28 March 2010

Some thoughts at the end of a hectic day.

Do not envy a violent man or choose any of his ways for the Lord detests a perverse man but takes the upright into his confidence. How can anybody envy a violent man? Is it a guy thing to like what other guys have, or do, or the way they act?

The simple answer to this one is "I agree." Why is it that some of the simplest ideas have such complex tails waving behind them? Is anything ever that simple though? Probably not.

It's true confession time here: I've envied violent men. I was one of the kids who got picked on in school and I used to envy the jocks who I thought had it made: even when they were the ones picking on me. It took me years to understand they didn't have it made and I let it happen. I'm not uncommon, too, in liking the smash-up, beat the heck out of them, violence in movies. Every once in awhile it really feels great to watch one of the bad guys really get the crap kicked out of them. I mean, go Jack Bauer! Hardest of all, I've envied violent men for what they had in their lives, what wasn't mine. Even when it was not mine to want, I did, and even when given freely in love, it brought disaster on many houses.

So maybe that's why the proverb says this. It's more than just the common sense idea of not bothering a rabid dog. Or even the idea about biting off more than you can chew. I think it also has to do with the idea of not playing God. Violent people take that role for themselves, that playing God part. They try to overpower, or to control, or to dominate. Too often that just results in disaster.

Mind you, there are times when I believe violence is just. If someone threatens the people I love, they must be prepared for my violent response; may heaven have mercy on them because I won't. When I've been confronted with it in the past, I've willingly returned violence and am always prepared to do so now as well. And when the innocent are targeted, someone has to stand in the breach and say 'no more.' It might as well be me.

But that doesn't mean it's something to envy, or admire, or mimic. Indeed, I think that's where the 'perverse' part of the proverb comes into play, that is, if you think of 'perverse' as being misuse or corruption. In that light, to envy violent people is to envy corruption instead of modeling the state of upright divine confidence and grace. Knowing that, perhaps the next time I see one vicious, I'll do best to let that sleeping dog lie still.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 29 March 2010

How hard is it to keep on the straight and narrow? That's probably the dumbest question you'll be asked all week. The obvious answer is probably "pretty darn hard" (or something in that vein). If you're a teenager, I might even get a "duh" out of you.

It seems that everything we learn is designed to keep us on the path of success by walking the straight and narrow. Success in finances, success in family, success in vocation, success in love: all that we learn is designed to set ourselves up for the best opportunity to achieve success. I was reading Proverbs 4 and the end of the chapter talks about doing our best to keep out of all kinds of corruption (the word is actually 'perversity' but I read that as corruption). It talks about paying attention to instruction, always remembering what we're taught, guarding our hearts, fixing our eyes straight ahead.

That's the straight and narrow path. To me, it also means 'keep your eyes on the ball.'

There's something to be said for keeping your eyes on the ball. I mean, watch the NCAA! It's a general assumption that, when a player makes a mistake, it's because he's lost focus even if it's only for an instant. When you play with the best and bring your best game, the best will do the same. So if you take your eyes off the ball, it's all too easy to stray from your appointed path and make msall mistakes that can snowball.

It happens to all of us, doesn't it? I know it does to me, in every way of my life. When I fall short, well, so much for learning for success. So much for using my brains, my wisdom, all I have learned, to do better in serving my fellow man (and, in turn, serving the divine purpose). So much for keeping my eyes on the ball and walking that narrow, straight path. As Jim Reeves said, someone slipped and fell...was that someone you? I know it has been me. Just don't forget that the next stanza of that song said "it is no secret what God can do."

Does that mean we should always walk eyes-front in life and not veer from a single path? Maybe. It probably wouldn't work for me, but I won't discount the possibility that it just might work for somebody else. And, to be sure, there are times in life when we should put on our blinders and move forward without paying attention to the chaos around us. Still, I don't think that refusing to see the world around us is a practical way for most people to live. We aren't the Amish writ large, and even while they live a pretty wholesome life, if you dig deep you'll find lots of strife there too.

For the rest of us, it just isn't possible to turn a blind eye to all the struggles and negatives around us, then do only what we have to just to get by. We all have junk in the trunk; yours really isn't any bigger than mine, and vice versa. I think it's enough that we do our best to always try to stay on the path of leading lives of virtue, understanding that we have a friend to whom we can return for real forgiveness and real wisdom when we fall off that beaten path. Hard to remember, it's true, but it really is the point of the whole exercise to begin with.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 30 March 2010

Free yourself by humbling yourself. Free yourself by being diligent and industrious. Free yourself by apologizing if you have shot off your mouth once too often. I'm no psychologist but I don't think it takes one to see that humble pie, a solid work ethic and sincere apologies are good advice for anyone who finds themselves to be typically human. How hard it is to do those things sometimes. I'm not a very humble guy, my work ethic ebbs and flows, and too often I haven't been apologetic when I should have been. How simple it is, also, that the answer to those particular problems in life is, yet again, the wisdom of divine common sense.

Yet in the same chapter, the proverb then lists seven things that God finds extremely offensive: pride, wanton anger, lies, an unclean heart, evil, people who live by lies, and people who stir up selfish dissent. It says in rather poetic terms how God hates these things. He doesn't discourage them; He doesn't tolerate them; He doesn't object to them: He HATES them. Of them, five are characteristics He hates, and two are the people who do them. The five lead to the two, not the other way around. You don't become a scoundrel without giving in to unsound doctrine; you don't become a cad overnight.

I speak from experience here. Please bear with me one more time while I excoriate myself in print. I'm guilty of exhibiting all of those attributes. My pride has risen to the heights of arrogance; my temper is legendary. The lies, selfish motives and evil I've done in my life have damaged others in ways no good man should ever desire. I have been a destroyer instead of a builder. Think of a sin, of a broken commandment, of a shortcoming and you can pin it to me in thought, word or action.

Guilty as charged.

This week, Holy Week, is a good time for me to admit that, and embrace it. I own it, just as you do too. I don't know your junk, but I'm betting you have some. Come Friday, it's time to lay it down and back away from it. A good friend told that to me not too long ago, and he was right. Come Friday, it's a good time to take account of what I've done in my life, then admit that I've fallen short more times than I've measured up. Come Friday, it's time to kneel in humility and acknowledge that I'm not free as long as those things rule my life. Come Friday, it's time to watch and weep at how it all got nailed to the cross for me who didn't deserve a second chance.

Then, come Sunday, it's time to leave it there and start once more.

The words of the proverb were spoken in love hundreds of years before Christ lived on the earth. But they clearly point to Him in humility, diligence, industriousness, and real freedom. Of all the amazing things that will happen to you today, let this be the one that sticks with you longest.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 31 March 2010

Does not wisdom call out? Proverbs 8 starts that way. It talks about how real wisdom, real truth, speaks out and never in a bashful tone. It is on the heights, it takes a stand, it stands at the entrance to the city, it cries out, it raises its hands and calls out in a loud voice

In other words, it speaks for itself. I get tired of hearing all the false-positives and false advice and all the vocal Pabulum that comes with living in a 24/7 telecommunicated world. Turn on Fox & MSNBC and you get two loud, combative and always conflicting viewpoints of the same story. We find ourselves polarized about so many things these days, whether it's who got voted off the Biggest Loser, the temporary resident of the White House, or the price of gas. So much gets thrown at us that it becomes easy for me to get lost in all the chatter. And, to be honest, you know me: I'm quite guilty of propagating white noise on my own.

But the truth speaks for itself. It isn't relative. It doesn't depend on what "is" means. It needs no adjectives or adverbs. Truth simply stands on its own, and it is positive, cleansing, and the same for everyone whether we agree with it or not. When it stands, it does so without embellishment. When it speaks, it speaks in a clarion voice, without a bullhorn. The truth, God's truth, doesn't need me to scream it out, but it's made for people to scream when necessary. It's made for loud voices, and it's made for the still, quiet whisper as well. I mean, don't forget: Elijah didn't hear God in the earthquake, the fire, or the storm, but he did hear him in the quiet breeze coming by.

Think about how it feels to really grasp a hard truth. It feels like you're holding onto granite, or cold steel. It feels like something that weathers well, and you know you can count on it. It can hurt you, to be sure. The cold, hard truth can crush you if you let it. It can convict, and rightfully accuse, and sting. Sometimes, that isn't a bad thing. Just as it crushes, though, it builds you up as well. It's the starting point, the thing to always fall back on, that point you reference when you don't know which way to go. But don't forget that, when you feel alone or scared, it's also reassuring, like the arm of your dad, hugging you and telling you that everything is gonna be alright. That's the truth. That's divine wisdom.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 1 April 2010

I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence, I possess knowledge and discretion. – Proverbs 8, verses 10 and 11.

I'm pondering a word in that verse: prudence. And why is that particular word used, along with the reminder that wisdom is real knowledge and is discrete, exercises quiet cautious judgment. My Webster's says that 'prudent' means 'exercising sound judgment in practical matters' and 'cautious in conduct, not rash.' That's a definition I needed to read today, and it plays into a story of the moment: a story I'll share now.

For personal reasons, it was determined best that I not lead an event this year. It's something I've led for most of the last decade, but this year, those of us involved in planning the event thought it the prudent thing to do. Nobody wanted to bring discredit or question into it, and it was just thought best that I not take a leading role this year.

I'll admit, that stung, but it was still the right thing to do. Part of me deserved it. God forgives all sins, no matter what they are. And absolutely nobody, from a commoner like me to the pastor of your church, is free of sin. We absolutely need our Savior because we can't be made holy or let go of the guilt without Him. If you don't believe me, look in the mirror, really look, and tell me I'm wrong! The right decision rightfully stung because I wanted the event to be a way for others to have some fellowship and some education. To know that I could discredit something is a convicting thing, and it makes me feel ashamed.

Here's the cool thing about it: we have a truly awesome God who is wise, and whose wisdom is prudent, full of knowledge, and full of discretion. The event will go on as planned and, from all indications, it will be a great success. Only our God could take a time of stinging conviction and turn it into an opportunity. That's what happened. Instead of me moping around – oh woe is me! – I was given the opportunity to teach others how to do it. Now they can take the ball and carry it where I couldn't. Others get enriched who might not have been reached before. Any way you slice it, no matter how it came to be, that is an ultra-wonderful thing.

And I think it's why wisdom is prudent, knowledgeable, and full of discretion. Not everyone knows the back-story; frankly, they don't know the whole story, and they don't need to know it because it really isn't their business. God, in his wisdom, bypasses our self-centeredness and uses His wise knowledge to exercise sound judgment in practical matters. He is cautious in how they are conducted, without human rashness. And He does it in a way that builds up and doesn't tear down in malice. Everybody wins.

Using loving knowledge sometimes rebukes, and sometimes it really does sting. It stings like alcohol cleaning out a wound. Unless the wound is cleaned, though, it will fester and worsen. The prudent thing to do, then, is to scour it out and let the healing process begin. That's what prudent wisdom does. At least it has for me.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 2 April 2010

By me kings reign and rulers make laws that are just; by me princes govern, and all nobles who rule on earth. I love those who love me, and those who seek find me.

Like yesterday, that's from Proverbs 8. Today is Good Friday, though. I can't bring myself to 'bloviate' on the proverb when the proverb was written to point us each to Good Friday. Today is about heroism.

To me, heroes are people who commit their all to something bigger than themselves. They sacrifice. Heroes give up things they want for what other people want, or they give up what they want for what other people need. The idea of a hero is a Greek idea; you know the concept. A man of great courage, noble character, bravery. Usually the stories had someone overcoming their fears and temptations, then sacrificing of himself for some greater good.

That fits today because of Good Friday. If Jesus Christ didn't die the most heroic death of all time, then the definition of a hero is way out of whack. The ultimate sacrifice that only he could make, the completely selfless death in the face of an overwhelming foe, the courage and bravery of being persecuted for every evil you never did on behalf of people who don't deserve your sacrifice. Heroic.

All that happened today, so today's the obvious day to remember it. But how about we do it in a different way. Neither you nor I can offer ourselves up as atonement for someone else's sins. But how about something we can do? Who are the heroes around you? Yeah, I know: firemen, policemen, soldiers, great statesmen, rescue workers, big shot athletes. I agree with those; they're obvious. There are others, though, and they're everywhere:

There's the teenage boy who doesn't understand anything about his studies yet keeps on trying his hardest. And there are people who work to make animals comfortable when they're scared and alone in the shelters, and the man who fights for custody of his young son in a vicious divorce. How about the friend who listens when you're down, or the parents who stay up for hours doing homework with their kids? What about the lady who shows up to work early and always greets you with a kind smile even when things aren't going well for her at home? The minister to the homeless, the man who helps you change your tire, the father who works the long hours to provide a living for his family, and the girl who stands up to the ridicule and tries again after she's been humiliated one too many times? Or the frightened mother who gives up everything in the life she's always known to defend her children from the violence of an abusive husband?

Heroes. Every one. They weren't nailed to a cross...at least not one we hear about. But they carry crosses not too different from the way He did for all of us. They commit, they sacrifice, and they devote themselves to others. Sometimes, they give everything they have even up to their lives. They're heroes. They are you and I at our best.

Today, think of those people, and thank them. Be thankful for them. Say a prayer for them, and for ourselves too. We all need those prayers, and they are always answered even when we don't always understand what the answer means.

I love those who love me, and those who seek find me: words spoken from ancient days for the heroes who give up everything so that others may have something. Blessings on your Good Friday. No matter how you celebrate it, think of a hero, pray for her or him, and remind yourself that Sunday's coming. After Friday, the welcome light of Sunday is going to feel like victory.

Magic. Orlando Magic. Magic Kingdom. Magic Johnson. Magic Man. Criss Angel's Mindfreak Magic Show. We like magic. We like to be entertained and fascinated by it, and we like to ask ourselves "how did he do that?"

Easter morning seems like the biggest magic trick of all. Ultimate sleight of hand you might say, slipping death up his sleeve and defeating it forever, the God-Man kept his promise and came back to say the ultimate "yeah, baby, I am." Big time magic trick. In public, in your face, in the history books.

Except...

...except that it wasn't a trick and it wasn't magic. It was a divine promise that He kept because we couldn't. It wasn't court jester hocus pocus or some dark art. It was God with man, Immanuel, and it made all things new and all things possible. From the beginning of human history, He promised he would do it, and he gave hundreds of clues concerning the how & when. Then he did it. Game, set, match.

To the 'wise of the world,' it must have seemed like a parlor trick, something you could explain away by plausible means. It was a myth, a story, something ginned up by his friends to make themselves seem important. Just a magic trick. The professors and the nay sayers and the reporters on network TV have more than enough 'proof' to show that it really was just a bunch of bunk.

Sell that someplace else: I'm not buying. It was the central action in all of human history, and it can't be explained away. You believe it or you don't. I believe it, and of all the atheists, agnostics, and pagans I've ever known (and there have been many), I believe in my heart that they want to believe in something too. They want to understand this hope. Jump on in, folks, the water really is fine! But let's chat about that another time.

What's also for another time is what comes tomorrow. Tomorrow is the hard day, like the day after Christmas, and like the day after you start school or start a new job. The exciting part is done and tomorrow comes the let-down. Tomorrow is the day when we get to go back to our normal lives and put today into practice. Today will be family time, and ham dinners, and long talks, and board games, and dyeing eggs, and glasses of wine. Tomorrow is when the rubber meets the road and tomorrow's going to be the tough day. Sorry to rain on your Easter parade, but tomorrow is only a few hours away. Here in north Texas, it's already drizzling.

Tomorrow, I could really use a magic trick.

Here's the cool thing about it. We don't need that magic trick. Resurrection isn't about sleight of hand and it isn't about trying to fool somebody's eyes. It's not about bar tricks and it's not about deception. Today is about tomorrow because today is about living a life in real love, in real wisdom, the real love of the ancient God of Abraham, Issac and Jacob...who's my God and yours as well. "I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began." Before there was a tomorrow - heck, before there was time - God planned out that he would pour out his overpowering love into each of our hearts because He really does love us that much.

Today is about tomorrow and not about simple tricks. Like the Proverb says, from eternity, before you or I ever hauled our load of crap before him, God destined that he would love us and do whatever he had to do to demonstrate that love forever. He let himself be murdered on Friday to defeat death; He brought himself back to life on Easter to ensure life forever for anyone who would believe it was possible. And he did it today, so that tomorrow would become something to share with Him and with others.

Magic. Christ did quite a few miracles during his short time on earth and they must have seemed like cool magic tricks...until the stone was rolled back. The real miracles, though, have happened because of what he did, and ever since He did it. Tomorrow is about remembering that, and putting a smile on your face because your beautiful heart has been

filled with love. Tomorrow, we get to do something with that. Have a happy Easter, my friends, and may you bathe in the vital, forgiving, hopeful and way too cool love of the living man from Nazareth.

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I like wine. If you know me, that's no surprise. Lately I've been into pinot noir and malbecs (though last week I tasted a REALLY GREAT Bordeaux blend). It's a good thing I like wine because I like to read Scripture and find wine all the way through the Bible. I get a chuckle at the people who use Scripture as a way to speak out against drinking alcohol of any kind. Drunkenness I can see (though that's one vice I've been prone to more than a few times), but to use it as a hammer to discourage all drinking of any kind? Give me a break. Books and chapters all the way through Scripture refer to good wine. Christ's first miracle was changing water into wine, and it was one of the last things he ever enjoyed. Proverbs 9 talks about wisdom preparing a place of loving knowledge with wine, and of enjoying that knowledge as if it were wine at a banquet.

Now, I'm no wine snob. I like the \$100 bottles and I like Two Buck Chuck (but only in certain company). I really don't know all the in's and out's of how to tell what makes a good wine from a bad one. I know how to stick my nose down in the glass and sniff in the bouquet, and I know that swirling it in the right kind of glass really opens it up so that the flavors present just right. But I couldn't tell you the first thing about what years were good years, or the subtle differences between vintners, processes, casks and such. It's not that I don't find those things interesting; I'm just not that educated about it.

Yet I know what I like, and like even the most obvious taster, I know a good wine when I taste one. Some wines just taste great and some I can pass on. So, while reading through Proverbs 9, it occurred to me how very much like wine God's wisdom really is. The verse is one that just tastes great on its own. It sits well in the glass, and has that enchanting hue if you hold it up to a light and look through. The taste is pleasant and has a good finish, and when you've learned from it, you think back to yourself and remember, "hey, that was really good." I'm sure there are people who could describe it using many more adjectives than me, and there are Biblical connoisseurs who could describe in more educated terms what makes the Word what it is. I just know what I like, and I'm not that difficult to please.

Get to know me and you'll learn that one of my favorite things to do is open a bottle of wine, then just sit and talk. I enjoy that more than almost anything, whether it's a good red or a 25 year old bottle of sake. I very much hope to get to heaven one day and crack open a bottle with the Almighty and sit on the rock wall of some heavenly meadow, drinking our wine out of Dixie cups like two old boys would do. Like wine, the Word gets better with time, and yes it can give you a headache when you delve deeply into it. But it always satisfies and usually leaves me wanting more.

Proverbs 8, verses 35 & 36. For whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the Lord. But whoever fails to find me harms himself; all who hate me love death.

This is gonna be a tough one to write.

If your life moves in a direction that you didn't see, and if doing so takes you in a direction that you didn't plan for, and it doesn't jive with things you've always believed, does that make you damned?

I've had arguments in my life where I've been accused of turning away from my faith. Sometimes it was said in hurt, sometimes it was said in malice; sometimes it was said in love and was right. At times, I've said and done things that, for a believer, are hypocritical. I'm a sinner and I know it, and I daily confess that over and over. I know there's a seat in heaven for me, even when I'm caught up in the consequences of my actions down here. I've been forgiven, "not because of who I am, but because of what You've done."

So what does this proverb mean? Because, in my life, in my life right now, I've been struggling with decisions that go contrary to what a devout believer would ideally do. What is impossible for men is possible for God, and I've struggled with that. Jacob wrestled with God; I don't think I've wrestled in the flesh but my soul has been made weary with emotionally wrestling the angels and demons of today.

Through it all, I have prayed and sought God's wisdom to make the best choices I could. Sometimes I've made good ones, sometimes not. I'm human. But through it all, I've prayed for the wisdom to make them and I believe that prayer has been answered time and again. I have looked for God, and sought him out, and when I've fallen, I've sought him to empty out my heart to him that He might fill it again.

At the end of that, I have to admit: I have failed to find Him. At some times and some places, I have failed to find him. I honestly believe that, at the times when I feel most despondent and alone, God is actually right there beside me, in my heart, working to win me back and encourage me even when I shut my eyes so I won't see it. I harm myself when I do that, and only when I open my eyes to Him do I see how He was there all along, beckoning me back. The undeniable truth remains: I have sought and I have failed.

Does this mean I hate God and love death? Does this mean I'm damned?

I think not.

The more I read this, the more I think that it's speaking about an attitude of the heart. I read & re-read it and think it must be speaking to someone who hardens their heart to God and willingly turns away from him as an attitude, as a way of living, as a condition of their heart. I'm not that person, at least not yet, and God help me that I never will be.

And yet I struggle still with making some critical decisions in my life that will have long-lasting impacts. Some of those fly in the face of the example that we, as believers, should strive to be. Some of it just is the way it is, and my heart has churned over these things for so long now that I have feared anything I decide would become disaster for someone no matter what I decided. Does this mean I'm damned, that I have given up seeking God, that I have come to love death, and reject Him?

Again, I think not.

What it means to me is that, like everyone else, my head and my heart have been at odds, and they have been warring for control of what I would do. Both have had my best of intentions in mind, and both have wanted to do the right thing as we've been given the light to see what right is. And people do get hurt when real hearts are involved.

Reading the proverb at the ripe age of forty-three I see that, no matter what I do, I should still always seek God's wisdom and never give up on searching for it, even when things I do seem to run contrary to that wisdom. Knowing and understanding that He wants the best for me, and that sometimes I will fail to live up to the example He sets for me. In the good times and that bad, God is still there beside me, helping me up, beckoning me forward, and welcoming me home. He's holding my hand and saying "don't give up on me, Dave. I have great things in store for you." Knowing that makes the struggle a little bit easier to bear.

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Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you. Proverbs 9: 8.

The last time I was rebuked, sharply rebuked, was this morning. It came through a small, still voice that whispered to my heart when I awoke. Last night, I was sure of what I needed to do. That still voice whispered to me this morning and threw that out. It stung to hear it say "are you sure this is what you're supposed to do?" It felt like my conscience was accusing me of not giving up control, of not giving in to being broken, of not fully giving in to what God wants me to do. It spoke to my heart with calm daggers and pierced my resolve like a cheap kid's balloon. What I'd been resolved to do only the day before now was in question.

I'll quit being so nebulous. As of yesterday, I had resolved to move out of my home because I just don't have it in me anymore to fight it. To feel like the heel of a dirty shoe, and to feel like I have failed in all I try. You just reach a point where you don't have any more to give. I put down money on an apartment for myself and my kids, and I decided. The decision itself was tough; if you've been through this, you know what I mean. On the way over to the apartment, I felt like I was living in somebody else's life. I felt nauseous, and the spinning world felt surreal. It's really a miracle that I could make it through at all, yet at the end I felt some kind of peace. Closure, and even a little excitement at having done something, anything, to inject some positive force into my life. Throughout all of it, I prayed for help, and for some sign, any sign, pointing me along the path God wanted me to take. I don't want all the answers; I just want some help.

Last night, I talked with my family about all this, and through all the hurt, I still felt that, at least, there was something we could work with now. There have been weeks of indecision, of vacillating back and forth. Loving words put me at ease, and I felt convinced in my heart that I was doing something positive. I finally felt that, come what may, I would not be out of God's sight and that somehow things would turn out for best.

Then came that 5 AM rebuke. I got my sign; I got the help I was asking for and oh have the tears ever flowed. If I don't feel hate for the rebuke, then, does that mean I am not a mocker? If I don't feel love for this rebuke, does that mean I am not wise? The truth is that I have felt like a mocker, like in trying to repair relationships I feel like I have mocked God because I feel I haven't fully submitted to whatever it is He wants me to do. The truth is I don't feel wise for having understood and accepted rebuke. And, what I feel about this, right now, is anything but love. I feel confused, and hurt, and alone, and that I have hurt the people I love most. I have let people down, one more than others, and that hurts. When I finally felt surety at what I believed I needed to do, I stepped out of indecision and into forward motion. Then I let that all fall apart again.

Through it all, the proverb is still true. I understand how loving rebuke can make a vain man more vain, and I understand how loving rebuke can make a wise man wiser. I think that, like so much of these proverbs, it speaks not to the condition of a person, but to their attitude; it speaks to their heart. Unhealthy levels of pride do indeed make vanity, and unhealthy vanity does lend itself to mockery. It's easy to mock wisdom, to mock others, to mock God when you think you really are all that AND a bag of Fritos. It's also just as easy to take honest words to heart and learn from them, even when that honesty hurts.

Sometimes, good friends mean well and give you hard advice. Sometimes, the hard advice given by well meaning good friends is indeed good itself. Sometimes that advice is also just a bunch of crap. It is the wisdom of God that speaks at all times, though, telling us that we were not made for indecision or vanity or to be continuously unhappy. It is also that wisdom that plants the seeds of closure, and humility and, eventually, happiness that we couldn't see in the darkest days of our lives.

Daily Proverbial, 8 April 2010

I'm pretty sure you've heard this proverb before, about how fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. I think we've even talked about it. The second half of the proverb (9, vers 10.1), though, is what I'm going for: Knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

I don't understand much lately. I don't understand the current government. I don't understand why precious children in China starve when their nation is so wealthy. I don't understand why, like Sir James sang, I have become one of the people our parents warned us about. I don't understand the BCS. I don't understand how anybody can think human-caused climate change is real. I don't understand why empty milk jugs end up back in the refrigerator. Need I go on?

Maybe it's because these are just simple things, things that are details in life instead of the big picture. If I were starving in China, though, I wouldn't consider it mundane. The exploding Federal deficit isn't trivial, and both Jimmy Buffett and the BCS make mounds of money, and that doesn't seem trivial either. But in the context of my daily breathing out and in, these things are on my periphery. They don't really make my particular world go around, even when they do affect it. Because they don't directly affect me, they're easy to grasp. These are things I 'get.' I mean, I get it. I really do! Though inconsequential in the scheme of things, they are details over which I am a master. That isn't nothing, but it really doesn't matter much either.

So why do I feel so stupid?

The Almighty and I, we talk. We talk a lot, in fact; not to brag, I'm just stating a fact so that you'll know He and I don't just know each other in passing. We be mates. He knows all about me, yet sometimes I feel as dumb as dirt about Him. I read His word, I talk to him on my knees and in bed and on the treadmill and in my car and sometimes when standing in crowds. I tell him things from my heart, without the sugar coating, and I do my best to always give it to him straight. I try, I fail, I repent, I try harder again. That's the cycle in a fallen world.

But I'll admit to Him and I'll admit to you: I feel pretty stupid.

There are things He expects of me, and I fail to do those, or I do them and they're undone and I fail anyway. Sometimes I do them and fail; sometimes I don't and fail; sometimes I don't even know that I'm supposed to do them, and they remain undone but expected, and I fail. The theme seems to be "I do and I fail."

This is where I'll cut myself some slack and just leave it at "I feel stupid sometimes." It's been a pretty rough week already.

You see, I don't feel I understand much about our Creator these days. I'm pretty sure I'm in some 'Footprints' moments, and I'm pretty sure my sagging spirit is being carried by someone much tougher than me. But I don't understand it. And because I don't understand it, I don't feel I know Him very well, and then I feel very stupid indeed. That's especially acute because, when you boil it down, God really isn't that hard to understand. Sure, He's all complex and Master of the Universe and all that, but He's also someone who created me just to love me: just like He did you. I don't understand that, and I guess I feel stupid about it because I don't deserve it. I haven't earned it, and if anything, I've spat on it when I tried.

Those are the moments when He really says "Hey, Dave, don't sweat all that. I really love you anyway. Don't worry about that whole 'learning' deal; it isn't yours to worry about. I redeemed you. You aren't stupid at all to me. You matter."

And when I remember that, I remember that even remembering is evidence of knowledge, and maybe even understanding. Maybe it's the only understanding I need to remember. And then maybe, just maybe, I'm not so stupid after all.

Proverbs 10, verse 8: the wise in heart accept commands, but a chattering fool comes to ruin.

Permit me the editorialist's prerogative to skip around in the Bible if I so choose. Skipping ahead a few verses to one that is speaking to me today.

I've prayed for a sign. I've been praying for it for days. I've been a doubting Thomas in the week when the real Thomas doubted. For a few days now, I was on the fence about whether or not to move out. All my human reasoning had deduced that my marriage was over. Done; finished; finito; au revoir, stop CPR and call it. I had decided to move out because I didn't have the fight in me any longer, and I wanted so desperately to feel loved again. I wanted a fresh start, whatever that would mean, wherever that would take me. Most of all, I wanted to love again, real, true, honest love with someone special. Then indecision crept back into my mind and I honestly didn't know what to do. Never the less, I put hard money down on an apartment and decided it was time to go. I had to move in some direction going forward, so I filled out the application and waited.

And I prayed. I prayed for a sign, any sign. It's a foolish thing to implore the Almighty for some token thing because He just doesn't mete them out. I'm here at the crap tables so please give me a sign, Lord! Lord, should I have Heineken or Sam Adams? Lord, which load of laundry should I wash first? Boxers or briefs, Lord? Please understand, there's NOTHING improper in imploring God's wisdom and opinion in every single thing we do. It's what Paul directs us to do, to pray to God in everything we do.

For me, though, I felt different. I was seriously breaking down, emotionally, spiritually, even physically. I was dying a little bit at a time, and I needed God's help. I seriously needed God's wisdom because I fully did not know what to do. All my reasoning had failed, all my love was in pain, and I wept naked in front of the world. Two days ago I spent all day weeping; just yesterday, I ran a hard workout, then went to the car and wept uncontrollably just because I heard a particular song. I was devastatingly stuck in the indecision of 'stay or go.' Either direction meant hurting people I love very much; either direction meant unknowns and struggle; either direction meant pain. I'd boxed myself into a corner and, as is so often our case, I needed help. I prayed for a sign, any sign, pointing me in the direction I should go. All my life I've followed orders, or done what other people thought right and best. Now, when I was finally taking action on my own, I was uncontrollably breaking down and in need of the Father's guidance.

I got it today.

Application denied. Things have been tough at Chez Dave for a long time for many different reasons, none of which will I discuss. I was given the choice of either putting down a security deposit equal to the value of a human kidney, or not moving.

Said Bill, "here's your sign."

I had a choice. Yes, I could find the money; it's just money and it's not hard to get even by legal means. Or, I could stay. Stay and fight when I don't have much fight left in me, when there is contention and strife and open wounds that have hurt much longer than any of you know. I chose door number two because, as the proverb says, the wise in heart accept commands, but a chattering fool comes to ruin. Was it a command to stay? You be the judge. I read it as a sign. Would I have come to a fool's ruin? Well, I may be a fool anyway, and I may not have come to full ruin, but alot of ruin would indeed have happened. Either way, it meant a bunch of good and bad things happening to everyone I love most, and I took the sign to mean that the Almighty had weighed in.

For the first time in a long time, I felt steel in my backbone again, and the arm of a friend helping me up.

Just like Easter Monday, now comes the hard part. But back up a day before that, to last Sunday morning, and think about

walking up to that empty tomb. The hard part I can do so long as I follow the saving wisdom of the man from Calvary, because any wisdom I get won't be of me but of Him. I don't deserve it, but I have been given one more last chance by a God who redeems me and a family who love me for reasons I don't fully understand. Staying doesn't mean I am yet wiser in heart, or that it will be easy, or maybe even that things will all work out. The world is very much against it. For the first time in a long time, though, I'm really opening my heart that it might be filled with that wisdom. I try, I fail, I repent, I try harder again. That's the wisdom of the proverb and the cross that overshadows it.

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Proverbs 10: 1: A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son grief to his mother.

Memories of my Dad are hard for me to deal with. It's not just because he's gone now. No, he kept a lot of himself to himself. When I was a boy, we didn't relate very well. As I grew older, our relationship became better. Dad lived a good life, and one of his own making, but it wasn't easy. He was a good man, not aggressive, not loud or rude, not overbearing or macho or petty; I must have picked up those qualities elsewhere. He was a believer, and while his faith was strong, especially towards the end, it wasn't something he wore on his shoulder. Still, there were demons that tormented him, things from childhood, or his first marriage, or choices he'd made that chipped away at him over the years. You could say that about any of us, I suppose, but I think it really applied to my Dad. He bottled things up and didn't like to discuss them in front of most other people.

Over these last months, I've thought about Dad a lot, really wishing that there were some way I could talk with him. In the name of love, I did things that hurt people desperately, driving them to do things I don't think they would have otherwise. It takes two to tango, sure, but I'll accept my share of the blame. These writings of ours, you and I, they've been a constant for me, a way to share things that I think I would have liked to talk with my Dad about.

Could I say that the things I've done lately have been a joy to my father or have brought grief to my mother? "Both" would likely be the best answer. I think Dad would not have approved of why I was planning to leave, and that certainly couldn't have brought joy (and it did bring grief to my mother). Perhaps he would have told me to ask how deep is the love. I'm thinking he would have said to judge my feelings against what God wants us to do, and then act accordingly. And he probably would have said "don't beat yourself up too much, Dave." Maybe just a little because your conscience is talking to you for a reason, but don't make this the centerpiece of your life and don't let it defeat you.

My own kids aren't perfect either; nobody's are, even though each of us really does truly, honestly believe that our kids really are the best ones on the entire planet; I know mine are :). It's hard to admit to yourself "they bring me joy" when they fight with you tooth & nail over why they can't have their phone back, or "you punish me way harder than you do X," or when they dive deep into the mud wearing their Sunday best white shirt.

Yet bring me joy they do, and often because of their loving wisdom; like Mr. Paisley sings, I live for little moments like that. They happen when your son has dinner with you on the night your heart is breaking, and he tells you stories of his day and how he really is going to be a millionaire before he's twenty. They happen when your daughter has it out with you, then goes away to cool down, and comes back home to tell you, in her own way, how much she still loves you even when you mess things up. They happen when your daughter calls just to cheer you up because she knows how very down you're feeling. And they happen when your daughter's boyfriend lets you know how much he cares too, even when he knows the whole score and shouldn't care at all. Those things are actions of the heart, and they cry out divine wisdom to me stronger than any tears I've cried this week.

They bring me joy. I think about that, and it helps me to push out the other thoughts of things said in hurt, or the petty messages sent to twist the knife a little more. Their love is wise in ways I know I never taught them.

Hard subject to deal with on a Saturday, so you may want to put this one off for another day. If I don't deal with it now, it will fester.

The first few chapters of Proverbs talk alot about adultery. It's a subject I know something about. Yes, I will spare you gory details; tune into Maury Povich for what they could look like. Let's leave it at my saying unfaithfulness is a subject I understand.

The author of the Proverbs continually warns about fleeing from unfaithfulness. Unfaithfulness in marriage, in relationships, in sexual purity, and mostly unfaithfulness to God. Someone reminded me that adultery starts in the heart, that you turn away with your eyes first, and then in your heart long before you may do anything else. Those things can make you feel just as guilty as if you actually do the deed. If you do the deed itself, well, you've added a whole new dimension to how bad you can truly feel once it's time to pay the fiddler. And if you give your heart when it isn't yours to give? Game, set, match. Welcome to a typical day in Brokenheartsville.

The writer of the Proverbs knew this, yet, being a man in an ancient patriarchal society, he continually used the example of "the adulteress" to make his argument. He doesn't talk about just the abstract thought of infidelity. No, he talks mostly about things like "flee from the adulteress," and "her house is a highway to the grave" and how "in the end she is bitter as gall." "The adulteress" is beautiful, with honey lips, and enchanting eyes. She is seductive, and alluring, and offers you all you want and don't have because, in reality, she is all those things. Proverbs 5, 6, and 7 all implore men to stay away from the adulteress because her way leads to broken hearts and calamity.

No comment.

So let me put a different spin on it, segueing off of something they did in my church a few months ago. Wherever I see 'the adulteress, she, or her,' how about I put in 'Dave?' Even if you've never done something remotely unfaithful, I dare you to try the same exercise. Substitute in your name, then read those passages. It's pretty damning. It makes it easier to understand that the verses aren't just talking to sons or men: they're for everybody.

And it makes it easier to understand that there is a reason why God made unfaithfulness a forbidden thing. He knew how it would devastate our relationship with Him, and with each other. It tears at the very fabric of the love we all yearn for because everybody wants to love and be loved, especially when you haven't let yourself truly experience it for so long. Sure, there are a hundred other good reasons to never touch anyone other than your spouse; I'm not discounting any of them. More than this, adultery puts yourself in God's place, and it's really a form of idolatry; it says "yes, it is all about me." Just knowing that it rips apart the wisdom of real love is, for me, the most damaging reason of all.

I'm learning that each of us has to rely on God individually in order to be a whole person for somebody else. I can't fix someone else's junk anymore than they could fix mine. For once in my life, I'm trying to get my own collective stuff together, and I can only succeed in it if I have the Word, and even the Proverb, guiding me. And the support of people who truly love me and want the best for me. Yes, even those of the opposite sex. Let's just finish this one, then, at fully understanding now how it feels to wear such an ugly term and to make it your own. It's my hope for you that this will be as far as you need to go.

Ill gotten treasures are of no value, but righteousness delivers from death.

Simple enough: don't steal, don't cheat your way to wealth or power, don't connive, don't swindle and, yes, don't cheat with another man's wife. Cling fast to what is right.

Simple, but not enough.

Once upon a time there was a man and a woman who fell in love. Neither of them were really free to do so, but both of them wanted so badly to be loved that, when they met someone who was genuinely interested in them, it didn't take long for acquaintance to turn to love and then more. Giving what wasn't theirs to give, before they knew it, they were in way over their heads. As it always does, hurt and disaster followed. The happy ending they dreamed of hadn't quite played out. Not to say there wasn't happiness, but life didn't take them down the path they hoped for. Things were much harder, and what they had only seen in love quickly cost them dearly. If only they had clung to righteousness and simply let it ride to see where God would take them anyway. Forgiveness was always there from God, but when the heart is so desperately hurting, it seemed so hard to grasp it.

I'm David. This is the very real story of David. It really happened the way I just told you. It is the story of desire, and honest love, and sin, and repentance. It is the story of two good people who did things in the name of love that weren't fully in the name of love. There are consequences to the things we do, which is why Solomon's proverb cautions that anything worth having is worth waiting for and trusting in God to obtain.

Kind of ironic, don't you think, that Solomon should write that when it was his father whose story I just told. King David, not me David.

Yet it could be many peoples' story, even my own. I think that's why the proverb was given to us: to guide us in learning from others' mistakes, to impart God's forgiving wisdom to people who always need it. Someone reminded me yesterday that David was a man after God's own heart, even after he did what he did. I'm not in the same league as the king of Israel, but I do know that seeking God's righteousness is the greatest journey in my own life (and the hardest to travel). To be after God's heart is to seek that deliverance from the death-guilt that would plague us forever. I'll start out this week by remembering that even when the journey is tough, the righteous reward both here and later is worthwhile.

Lazy hands make a man poor but diligent hands bring wealth.

Or, as Dr. Franklin once said, "Employ thy time well, if thou meanest to get leisure.

This one is pretty easy to understand, don't you think?

It follows logically that the next one says "He who gathers crops in summer is a wise son, but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraced son."

We all want to teach our kids the lessons of thrift, self-motivation, and independence. We strive to teach them the innate value of hard work. As a parent, I'm most complimented when I see or hear how my kids have succeeded on their own.

I used to be a hoverer, one of those parents who does their kids' homework for them, just to make sure they get the A. I would do homework with them for hours and fret if they didn't do it right, eventually doing it for them (and this was in elementary school). Sure, sometimes they really just needed help, but most times I was doing it for me. I didn't see how, for a number of reasons, they didn't understand the concepts, and they weren't learning the intended lessons. I also used to be a parent who obsessed over worrying how they would ever get by on their own. I mean, how could they possibly succeed if they didn't get those coveted A's and how could they possibly get by without me there to make it all happen?

Those kinds of things will eat you up if you let them. Wait till they move out and you get to find there's truth in the Beatitude that God provides everything, even for the birds of the field who don't sow or reap.

No, I won't pile on a bunch of self-righteous garbage about how rosy everything became when I gave up those things, or how wonderful I feel because of that. Life won't get rosy on its own, and after this weekend from Hell I'm not feeling too wonderful. I will, however, go back to the 2 proverbs and simply say that they tell us, in common sense wisdom, that the Almighty wired us so that hard work pays off in the end. There is purpose in the journey, in the climb, that the goal is BOTH the A and what it takes to honestly get there. When we apply both of the hard work and the esteem-boosting success, we are wise, we are not disgraced. Sometimes the wealth that results is tangible, and sometimes you get it by being able to wear an honest smile that says "I did it."

Give it a try, though. That way, when your kid struggles so hard to pass his classes, or your daughter pushes through past so much adversity, or your other daughter works three jobs to succeed, you'll be able to sit back and easily say "I'm proud of you kids. You did it!"

The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked. Proverbs 10, verse 3.

According to my Concordia, hand in hand with this proverb goes a set of verses from Matthew, chapter 6, in which Jesus talks about us not worrying. He doesn't say, "give up the worry you fool!" or "you're damned if you do & damned if you don't." No, he says, "give up the worry because I've got your back."

To me, that's not so different from the proverb. When you read the proverb, I think the key not misconstruing it is to NOT put the silent 'self' in front of 'righteous.' I translate the proverb to mean, "God helps those who faithfully strive for right to be satisfied. Those who consciously turn from that are frustrated." In all things, God provides what He believes we need to make good choices. Yes, that really does sound sort of elementary schoolish. It's supposed to because I think this is one of those back to basics proverbs.

He wants us to rely on his love and wisdom in everything we think, say and do. So, he makes His wisdom available to us 24/7, through his word and (hopefully) through our conscience. In the small decisions and the life-changing actions, we are psychologically and spiritually wired to seek guidance and pray for it. In doing so, we can then make the best decisions we can at the time, and be able to live with the consequences of them. We're also wired to not let that seeking turn inward, allowing ourselves to get all wrapped around the axle about could, would or should. Instead, we are reminded that our seeking won't go un-rewarded.

That's hard. I take special notice today in noting that the proverb doesn't say "rely on God and it'll all be rosy." Some things are meant to be difficult; a preacher friend of mine said "if you're nervous, that's good, because that means it's important to you." In these times, God is imploring us, smiling with us, gently guiding us to not let worry and anxiety over choices consume us. Through everything, the good choices and bad, He is there providing what we need at the time. He doesn't leave us in the emotional desert just to hurt us, or without some kind of lifeline to get us through. He puts information and choices at our disposal for good reason, then gives us the freedom to use them.

And in that, we then get to remember, as the minister said on Sunday, that we are blessed to be blessings to each other. The struggle is never for nothing, and if you have faith, things really do turn out for the best in the end. When God turns on the blessings, he doesn't turn them on like a trickle: they flow like a fire hydrant. The results of what we think, say and do, if faithfully done, are never in vain.

So what about 'the wicked?' Don't we all allow ourselves to worry about certain things? Aren't we all wicked from time to time? Sure, and that craving of the wicked could be anything, I suppose; anything that turns us from relying on God for help in making our choices. Food, sex, power, internet, envy, booze, television, obsession: you name it. Any of those healthy things could turn against us if we allow it to consume us. Psychologically, I think anything that negatively consumes usually turns quickly into frustration. I worry about gaming the system, or 'what if this happens,' or the impact of my decisions on others. Take it from me, from long term and very recent experience, that kind of worry will hurt deeply and always results in anguish for you and the people you love. Yet even a chancy decision is better than no decision, and if you or I have taken it to God for guidance, then I'm willing to bet it's made with a clearer conscience and a clean heart. Then, the craving is satisfied and the hunger sated.

That's not easy to live. Another friend told me yesterday "Nothin' in life worth doin' is easy" (big Lonesome Dove fan there). It isn't easy to learn to ask for help with your decisions, but my friend was telling me that the struggle, the effort, the work and the climb are all worthwhile. My task is to remember to take the big things and small ones to my God and ask for his guiding wisdom. I hope it's yours as well.

Daily Proverbial, 15 April 2010

Sorry folks, nothing on April 14th. Took the day off.

The memory of the righteous will be a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot.

Gee, that's a really nice thought on a pleasant, sunny day like today.

If you died today, for what would you want to be remembered? Would it be for your friendships, or your faith? For the good work you've done? For the time you drank Mitch under the table at Fiddler's Green? If someone said, "remember Dave Terry," what would you want to be the first thing that came to mind?

There's that saying, "what's in a name." If you're an ancient Egyptian – heck, for that matter, an ancient Any Civilization person – everything because there are very few references to Joe Schmo, the camel poop scooper, or Fred Jones the guy who carved out pharaoh's name into all those rock walls. It's true that both men were required for the ancient civilization to be remembered, but only the person whose name was of lasting repute is recorded. What's more, it's the way they lived their lives that is remembered. We can probably each tell a lot of what Ronald Reagan did but would somebody please, without Wikipedia, give me an off-the-cuff list of Millard Fillmore's accomplishments (no offense to New Yorkers of relation to the little remembered president)?

My point is that people who live decent lives are, by and large, remembered for that whereas Stalin, Genghis Khan and Saddam won't be remembered in 500 years for all the little children they loved. Good begets good, and I just can't get it outta my head that we are really, truly intended to be both blessed and blessings to each other. That, and not the machinations from Washington, is what really makes the world go around. A good name is remembered well. A bad name is remembered like Paris Hilton.

If I died today, I'd want you to remember me for being an honest but vocal friend. Better yet, for being a safe harbor to whom you could return in a storm. I'd want to be remembered for having professed faith in various constructive ways. I would want people to say "that Dave was a hoot" instead of "that Dave was one argumentative SOB;" let's be honest on that one, though. It could go either way. I would want people to remember that I tried my best and worked my hardest and loved generously. And that when I stumbled and fell, I prayed and was forgiven and pulled myself back up. I would want people to remember that I loved my kids, and that I did my best as a father, and yes even as a husband.

So the way to help that happen is to start living out my days remembering how important those things really are. To live accordingly, and to clean up my act where it needs cleaning. And to put all the dust of the past at the foot of the cross, then leave it there forever. It really isn't that hard to do, and it really does make that 'living for life' approach both possible and real.

Daily Proverbial, 16 April 2010

The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out.

Straightforward and true.

I'm a hypocrite if I tell you I'm always a man of integrity. Today especially, I'm a hypocrite if I tell you that I have been honest, upright, and true in the things I've done in this world. If the road to hell is paved with good intentions, I've walked that road before. I have loved and loved honestly and deeply, and I have tried and failed, and I've had choices. And in doing all those things, I have both gained and lost integrity along the steps of my life. I simply know, now more than ever, that you can't hide from the truth. The truth is what it is, and it is something to embrace even when it crushes you. The truth is neither friendly nor hostile, and it is both convicting and exonerating.

Walking in ways that don't line up with the truth is, as the proverb says, the crooked path.

I'm a hypocrite if I tell you that I've always been true, and I'm honest if I tell you there are things about which I've been untrue. Today, the proverb means to me that God wants us to strive for integrity, to always deal with each other truthfully and honestly, even when it hurts, and to face up to our wrongs to overcome them through Him. I believe that, even when we have integrity, it's easy to walk on a crooked path, and that there are things in the world that can trip us up. By clinging to Scriptures, to the love of the people who love us most we can best preserve our integrity against the chinks that are going to dent it through just living our day to day lives.

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Daily Proverbial 17 April 2010

He who winks maliciously causes grief, and a chattering fool comes to ruin. Proverbs 10: verse 11.

When was the last time you said something you wish you could take back? When was the last time you said something designed to hurt somebody else because they'd done the same to you? Not long ago, my spouse and I had a vicious argument, one of those where you quickly lose sight of what you started arguing about when it degenerates into a yelling match. You say things that are tender to you; you say things that you know will sting. She says one thing to hurt you, you respond in kind. Before you know it, you're trading words not out of love or even to try to resolve the real argument but, instead, you're saying things just to hurt them because they hurt you.

That's how I read 'winking maliciously.' That wink is the look she gave me when she threw a well placed barb because she knew it would humiliate me. That wink is how I glared at her when I responded in kind because I knew it would cause her anguish. It went on like this for an hour or more, each of us hurling invectives at the other because the pain is so fresh and new. Neither of us bothered to remember it at the time, but we really were becoming chattering fools because only a fool would try to demean and hurt someone close to them just because they hurt in return. I quickly lost sight of trying to find out what her thoughts were, instead, trading that for the choice to 'give as good as I got.'

Sometimes, I suppose, you have to fight back just because you're in the fight. Usually, though, Christ's example is the better one: turn the other cheek because anything else isn't done out of caring. That, and because the arguments of chattering fools are destined to come to ruin; ours did. Our argument degenerated into hostile silence, and we were eventually left in separate rooms asking ourselves, "how did it ever come to this?"

In the course of our relationship, and even at this tender time, we haven't fought much. And when we have, we've always been able to eventually resolve things. After arguing, we've always been able to come back to common ground that let us remain kind and friendly. Now more than ever, I hope we can remember to do that. Through the advice of this proverb, I see that being friendly, being selflessly kind, emulating His example, is what God wants of us. Even when there are irreconcilable differences, he wants us to seek His wisdom first and deal with each other in selfless kindness. I hope we can do that. I hope you can too.

Daily Proverbial, 18 April 2010

Hatred stirs up dissension, but love covers over all wrongs. Proverbs 10, verse 12.

Isn't this one so true? You're having a terrible argument, calling each other vicious names, saying anything you can think of just to hurt the other person. Maybe you get in her face to intimidate her; maybe she throws a glass of something all over you; maybe she calls you the name of someone whose character you loathe; maybe you respond by comparing her unfavorably to someone she despises. You can see the veins bulging in their forehead, you can feel the blood of anger surging in your veins. Tears and anguish result, and you're so much farther apart now than you were when you started arguing.

Hatred stirs up dissention. Your heart is moved to feel thoughts of malice, jealousy, anger, anything to let the other person know that, whether you started it or they did, you're hurting so badly.

And then there's love. Love for everything you shared together through the course of your relationship. Love for the other person even when you're actively working together now to end your marriage. Love that you feel, once you brush aside the white noise chatter of the hatred, because you've been friends for most of your lives. Love enough to have tried all you could think of, then enough to let go so that healing and happiness can happen. Most of all, love through faith you share to know that, when all this is over, the faith you each share will only get stronger even though you'll be apart. It may not be the love to keep you together forever, but it is the love that will see you each in forever. God's love. God's miracle love beyond anything we can understand.

Love covers over all wrongs. It doesn't say "wrongs committed on Friday night" or "wrongs except just this one" or "wrongs except for X, Y or Z because they really hurt me bad." Love covers over all wrongs like a blanket warming out the cold, like soothing medicine restoring the body, like the comforting words of one dear to you, like a pillow of clouds covering the sky to bring nurturing rain, and like the hands of a Savior hugging you when you're so down just to let you know that He believes in you even when you don't believe in yourself. Love always covers over hatred. In the end, at every end, love wins out. No matter what the wrong is, love covers over it at just the right time and in just the right way.

It doesn't mean that it stays the same, or that the status quo is preserved. But love always covers over hatred and returns balance to life. We were meant for that balance, and we were meant to love our brothers and sisters, especially our families. And when those families dissolve, we are still called to choose to love them for who they are even as they are exiting the lifestyle we know. We're called to encourage and support them, and to give selflessly because we were loved like that by God. We're called to choose love instead of hatred no matter where our relationships carry us. In that way, love overcomes and lasts even as it evolves in ways you never planned for.

Daily Proverbial, 19 April 2010

Wisdom is found on the lips of the discerning, but a rod is for the back of him who lacks judgment. Proverbs 10, verse 13.

Oh to be discerning! My dictionary says that 'discerning' means 'to be keenly perceptive or shrewd,' and to discern is to perceive or recognize clearly. It's much easier to understand the whole 'rod for the back' for people like me who lack judgment. Most of the time, I pride myself on being someone who doesn't lack judgment. I can tell right from wrong, and even in the middle of marital dissolution, I can say that for most of my marriage, I didn't lack judgment. What got me here is, in part, how I used that judgment. Uncontrollable crying and watching your family move away are the rods I constantly feel on my back these days as the consequences for things that have happened when good judgment wasn't at work.

But to be discerning! How I long for, and anticipate again, the days when I will be discerning. In a few hours, I'll be walking through airports again, back on the road, traveling for work. When you travel, you have to be shrewd. Vendors, strangers, customers and sometimes even friends will try to stick it to you in ways large and small. That's not pessimistic to say: it's simply the truth. People look out for the best interests of number one, and if you're in the way of that, you're an obstacle they'll try to get through or around. You have to be shrewd, you have to be clever, you have to learn to discern. I'll put my game face on and walk eyes-front through the crowds again, back in my element like an animal in the tall grass.

Yet that's not the discernment I really long for. I long for, and read here in the proverb for, the ability to discern God's word and intentions. I seek His wisdom for what it means in my life today, for how it always soothes and corrects, rebukes and embraces. God's word is never wishy-washy. It is a constant, even when you interpret it differently from one day to the next. That evolving interpretation I understand to be how He works on us through His spirit, imparting love and knowledge to us in the ways we need at the time. If you've ever read something, then interpreted it differently than you did before, you know what I'm saying.

In other words, He imparts wisdom to our lips so that we may be discerning in the world.

These days, I feel more like the fool who lacks judgment. I know that all these things happen for a reason, and that even after divine forgiveness that we all have, there are human consequences. If you love someone truly, you do whatever is necessary for their health, even when it means watching them walk away. It makes you feel small, and it's devastating for everyone involved. Yet in it, I pray for God's wisdom to sit on our lips and for us to be discerning in the world. I pray for that on my trip this week, and as my wife and family venture forward, and as we move into a new phase of our lives. And I pray for it for you too, that you would know that wisdom which is real love and understanding, in everything you do today.

Daily Proverbial, 20 April 2010

Wise men store up knowledge, but the mouth of a fool invites ruin. Proverbs 10: verse 14.

Ok, be honest here: how many times have you heard (or read) me spewing out blather like a fool? How many times have you read this blog and wondered just when I was gonna shut my pie hole? The mouth of a fool invites ruin. Notice, though, that it doesn't say "it causes ruin" or "it is ruin." No, the mouths of blathering fools invite trouble. Careless words, rash thoughts shared without thinking stir up trouble. And, don't I know, they diminish you in the eyes of your peers. The mouth of a fool doesn't speak in wise terms, and it doesn't speak in words of love. I will admit: it's something I'm working on.

Then there's the opposite: those who store up knowledge. Learners. More than that, though: wise people. This is the point where I think back on what I've learned in writing these things and I remember that 'wisdom' equates to 'divine love.' So, doing the old substitution thing, I re-read the proverb and it says "loved men store up knowledge."

Wow! Be careful to not let yourself get overwhelmed by the simple beauty of that.

I've said before that I value learning, that I love the learning process. It never gets old. In light of this proverb, I now see it really is a gift from above. God loves us and WANTS us to keep learning. He wants us to keep acquiring knowledge. He desires for us to not live in ignorance, and He intends that we make our world a better place for it. Knowledge and love make the world go round. We are wise, we are loved by God, when we learn. And please don't misunderstand me here: I'm NOT talking about just schoolwork. I loved Mrs. Pickens' classes, but I value the learning outside the books even more now. Learning comes from travel, and from giving my kids a kiss goodbye before I head to the airport, and from seeing things in a light I never expected, and from admitting when you're wrong, and from each of you. Learning is loving, and it's what happens, I believe, both in and out of the words, but never apart from the Word.

What's more, it's something we store up like treasure, like what you sock away for a rainy day. It's investing in our future, and like an investment it both grows of itself and it does so by spreading itself around. We're wise when we learn, and we're wise when we contemplate that. We're wise and we are loved. We're loved when we acquire wisdom. We're loved when we love our brothers and sisters, and we're loved when, like Mary, we treasure these things and ponder them.

That's the light in which I'll see today. Loved women and men store up love, and we avert ruin when we share it. Then, as we were told from above, when we send it out it never comes back empty.

Daily Proverbial, 21 April 2010

The wealth of the rich is their fortified city but poverty is the ruin of the poor. Proverbs, 10, verse 15.

I thought I needed the study Bible to help me understand this one. The study notes say that the proverb is just an observation about wealth and poverty, that wealth brings friends but the only real security is in God. It also says that poverty has no influence or friends. A fortified city is strong, full of secure wealth, while there is ruin in poverty, where the poor are overrun and not secure.

How true.

But here's how I relate this one to my world today. I think it's a proverb about friendships, and ultimately love.

The fortified city in which we live is the city of love, and love is a gift of God. It's the place where we know there are friends and loved ones who care. Consider this: the richest man I know is the one with the most real friends. I think about "It's a Wonderful Life." It's just near the end of the movie when Harry Bailey comes in and toasts Jimmy Stewart saying, "To my big brother George! The richest man in town." You just know he wasn't talking about money even with a pile of it sitting right beside him. Just about that time George sees the Tom Sawyer book in which Clarence the Angel writes, "No man is a failure who has friends." Yes, it's sappy, but I like that movie and it makes my point.

The richest person I know is the one with many friends who sustain and encourage them in times of good and in times of need. We've all gone through times of change when we felt alone. It's so easy to feel beaten down and sad in those times. It feels like you don't have a friend in the world, and that there's nobody who could really comfort you or understand just how bad you're really feeling. It's a poverty of the soul, and it does indeed feel like never ending ruin. But it's an illusion, you see. It's designed to try to defeat us through the crafty wiles of one who's been doing it for ages.

From recent experience, though, I'll tell you that the encouragement of loving people and good friends gives you the strength to persevere, to try again, and to keep on keepin on. The people who love you far outnumber the people who don't. When you're hurting, the man or woman who loves you most always reaches out to you, even when you don't let yourself believe it and you push them away. There are others too. In the darkest moments of my recent past, I reached out to a group of good friends, some close now and some not close for many years, just to let them know what was happening. The outpouring of support and love I've received back gave me the strength to try again, and to start considering small victories each day instead of seeing those days as major defeats. That's friendship, and it is love. And it made me feel like the richest man in town.

I'm betting it's the same for you. There are people who love you who won't let you down. They come and go in our lives, but their love always remains whether in memory or in person. To me, that's a fortified city in which I can ride out any storm with the wise, friendship love of people I cherish.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 22 April 2010

The wages of the righteous bring them life, but the income of the wicked brings them punishment. Proverbs 10, verse 16.

My natural inclination is to contrast this one with the verse from Romans where it says "the wages of sin is death." Nothing wrong with that contrast; it's natural and it's correct, especially in that second half of the sentence.

Are wages and income the same thing? I think of a wage as something one earns, whereas 'income,' well, comes in. It's still a kind of fiduciary recompense, and it's still something earned, but I think of it differently from, say, the image of a construction boss doling out money to his workers at the end of a shift. And yet, in my own example, I receive wages and income for the work I do, even though it's online and sometimes doesn't even seem like work (though this week I might beg to differ). A debt is still incurred, in this case a debt owed to an employee for services rendered, and that debt is satisfied through monetary payment.

There's more to it, though.

There's that whole 'righteous' thing. And the proverb speaks to doing something.

Righteousness isn't earned, it's given. It's freely given by God through His grace to people who didn't do anything to earn or deserve it. And yet, we still 'do things' in life, we still live our lives and act. A person living their life in righteousness brings glory to their creator, and praise for the way they comport themselves. Accolades, honor, deference, awards and a host of other really great things happen to those who keep their noses clean. Positive outlook and love for your fellow man become constructive self-fulfilling prophecies. For the person who lives out a life of faith, the reward is even more meaningful. That reward is like a wage, something tendered for a life well rendered, even when it's not something we 'deserve.'

Sic semper tyrannis, then, that the opposite is true as well. The tyrant, the one who lives out life in the opposite of righteousness, receives due punishment as well. Guilt, shame, scorn, you name it: we reap what we sow when we turn away from living as we were intended to live. Just like the self-fulfilling prophecy of good, so can it be that negativity, anger and the like only breed more, and turn us away from the goodness in which we could better live out our lives.

So what? So does this mean that I can be all self-righteous and pat myself on the back for trying my best to be a good man and hurt as few people along the way? Um, no. Does this mean that I'm also to blame for all the problems that go on around me, whether they're those in a failing relationship or all even the things I know about over which I show little concern? No again. Yin and yang, we all do a little bit of both of them in the course of our daily lives. Perhaps, at 1 in the morning or 1 in the afternoon, the lesson is that good things come to those who do good, while bad things come to those who do bad.

Maybe I just need to get more sleep. Or maybe I need to lay off the things that give me heartburn and wake me up after only a few hours of shuteye. Maybe, though, maybe I need to constantly give thanks for the many blessings in my life, sharing them as an expression of that thanks to the one who blessed me. Maybe I need to spread the wealth and put a little love in the hearts of the people around me as a way of living out the love given to me. Even in the middle of the hardest times, or even in the middle of the night, that's always the right way to bring life.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 23 April 2010

He who heeds discipline shows the way to life, but whoever ignores correction leads others astray. Proverbs 10, verse 16.

This verse is especially poignant to me given the events going on in my world today. This very day I stand on the edge of change that will last forever, and while I know in my heart that good always comes of life, I'll admit that this is tough. The last few months have been times of correction and discipline, and there have been times when I've wondered just where God is leading my family and I. Today wasn't the day we set out to live over twenty years ago, yet today is where we find ourselves.

If I've ignored correction along the way, I ask forgiveness for that. I know I'm forgiven for the wrongs I've done, and I know too that beating myself up over things that aren't all my doing is a fool's game as well. But you can't live through a day like this one and not look back to ask yourself what you could have done different. I find myself looking for that path again, wherever God is leading us. Up ahead, the woods look deep and scary, but looking back, while some of the fields were fertile others were dark and barren too. It wasn't always a bed of roses, but it was the best we could do.

And I can't say I've heeded discipline either. Friends, counselors, pastors, and others have given their best advice, and none of that has been in vain. Hard things have been said, some needed to be said. Most of the time counsel was given in love, but not always; a few of the people to whom I reached for help were self-serving. It's all good, though; it's all part of the blessings of life. Through it, I've felt the hand of God sometimes guiding me, sometimes against me. But it's always been a loving discipline, and if I've not heeded it well at times, then I pray that in moving forward alone I can become that much wiser.

Finally, for leading others astray, I ask forgiveness for that as well. There's really no way you can excuse when you hurt the people you love. Real heartbreak really hurts. But when I've caused others to hurt, or led others where they did not want to go, and where I've so hurt the people I love, I can only apologize from my heart and vow to be a better man starting today. I put that hurt in the hands of Him who I follow, and ask for guidance to do better from now on.

If I've said 'I love you,' it's my privilege and honor to do so, and I thank you for doing me that honor. If I've not yet said it to you, then I promise you're on my list anyway.

Past today, there will be a tomorrow, and it will be a day of good things as well as tears. God has given us many wonderful blessings, and I'll choose to focus on them and encourage my kids to do the same. Tomorrow starts a new chapter in life. It will get better, I know. Up ahead, past the struggles are days worth working towards, and a life worth living. I ask for your prayers and thoughts for the people I love, and for the strength and encouragement that we may all move forward in serving honor.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 24 April 2010

When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise. Proverbs 10, verse 19

Guilty.

Nobody I know has been more rightfully accused of suffering from diarrhea of the mouth than yours truly. I'll confess: my lack of brevity occasionally gets me in trouble. I sometimes don't know when to let an argument go, and I have been known to talk down to people. People have rightfully called me cocky, and I can't say I've always acted or said things in love. And sometimes I just don't know when to shut up.

When words are many, sin is not absent. I'm guilty of that. Guess, then, that I haven't always been very wise. But I'm not a bad guy. Verbose, spastic, emotional, moody, tenacious and sometimes even arrogant, yes. But I am trying my best to improve myself by turning things over to God and letting Him work through them. Even on days like today when my world has changed forever, I know that I'm not alone, that the Lord is always at work in me. He's giving me good counsel to learn to speak softly, and to learn to watch my words, and to watch how and when I say them.

Tonight, I was at a gathering of friends who went to China last fall. I was part of that mission trip last October; check some of my earlier Facebook blogs and you can find the whole story there. We were recounting how we couldn't speak openly of our faith there, and how genuine opportunities to witness Christian faith were almost non-existent. I recall that the entire trip was a time of wisely holding our tongues, then letting works of practical Christian humanity speak for God instead of ourselves. My life changed because of that trip, both in good ways of strengthening my faith, and in other ways that led to the demise of my marriage. Through it all, God has been at work, and he has not been disinterested in the conduct or the outcomes in the lives of the people I love. Sin has not been absent, that is true, but neither has silent wisdom. For me, the best I can say is that I'm a work in progress, but I'm working to hold my tongue and let loving wisdom do the talking in its own good time.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 25 April 2010

The tongue of the righteous is choice silver, but the heart of the wicked is of little value. Proverbs 10, verse 20.

There's that tongue again. I know that, in ancient language, it's a fancy way of "the words" or "language" or "what you say." I have a hard time picturing all these people in robes and sandals, though, talking like this. It would seem like you had walked into a commune of hippies who DON'T all sound like Shaggy or say "man" or "dude" but, instead, say "hold thy wagging tongue, thou villain."

Whatever. Guess I need sleep again. No matter, the thought of the proverb is still valid if you play the old word switcheroo game again. "What the righteous say is choice silver" makes more sense to me; maybe I should switch Bible translations? And it's not just any silver. It's choice. Not full of impurities, not roughly shaped or cheap. Silverplate wasn't around thousands of years ago, so it would be pure metal, pure silver. Something valuable, beautiful, and worthy of a place of honor. I do all the silver polishing in our house; always have. We didn't have much, but what we did have I liked to see shiny and polished. Polished silver on a finished table or the wooden hutch looks elegant.

How about this, then: 'what the righteous say is valuable, beautiful and elegant.' Kind of puts a different spin on the thought. And, of course, there's the yang with that yin, saying that the heart of the wicked is of little value. I immediately zero in on the word 'heart' and notice that the previous part didn't talk about the heart...except, you know, that it really did. Because the words we say, if carefully and wisely chosen, are contemplated from the heart: see yesterday for some thoughts on choosing wise words. What we take into our heads or hands we take into our hearts.

And if what we intake isn't rightly focused, it's of little value. It's prattling, won't stand the test of time, and is little remembered (unless you're on reality TV). I take note, too, that the sentence is practical, because it admits there is SOME value to wrongly focused things. Christ said "apart from me you can do nothing" and that's a natural segue to this verse. Apart from divine love, we have nothing except to serve as an example for others of how not to live our lives.

I suppose it's no coincidence that these proverbs are closely located. They complement each other. What the righteous say is valuable, beautiful and elegant, while if it isn't focused on God's wisdom it is of little value. Good advice to take into the day when you begin the week, when you begin anew, and when you begin to pick up the pieces of a life left behind and leftover.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 26 April 2010

The lips of the righteous nourish many, but fools die for lack of judgement. Proverbs 10, verse 21.

That's me. No, this won't be maudlin. But let me just get it out there, right out of the gate, that this verse describes me. Both sides of it nail me right to the wall.

These blogs are a blessing. In the time when my marriage was falling apart and I needed to turn to God in a way that could be read by others, they have been an outlet for doing so. A pastor of mine gave me the idea; he didn't even know he'd done so at the time. They help me pour out my heart, and feel purpose, and speak of things of which we should speak more in this world of complications we call the 21st century. My deepest need has been to be needed, and more than that, to be understood. This helps meet that need and I thank you for that.

I didn't fully realize it at the time but you were reading. So many of you have posted wonderful things, thanks, compliments for our time together online. Over the weekend, I learned of fans who I didn't even know had been reading. It's my sincere hope that they will share them, repost them, and pass them around. Not for the sake of Dave's vanity or needs, but instead that we might all take God's word deeper into our hearts and ponder and talk about it.

If this is 'righteous' it isn't of me. I won't take that much credit. But I'm proud to say it does nourish many, and for that I look forward to our time every day because, more often than not, I have felt like the fool who is dying for lack of judgment. In the dissolution of my marriage, and pondering the affections of another, in watching - even helping - my family walk away from their home, in battling this black depression that wouldn't lift its cloud from me, in struggling to make ends meet, and in a hundred other ways I have been foolish. I find that the Proverbs use that word, 'fool,' quite often to be the foil of the more positive example King Solomon was trying to make. My dictionary says fools are windbags, sillyh, simpletons, jesters, dupes, tricksters, deceivers, people who squander and meddle with.

I've been those things, because I've done them to my friends, my children, and the woman I love. Maybe you didn't know it, but in nourishing many - perhaps in being nourished yourself - you were being nourished by a fool who is guilty of wanting to share God's love in many ways but exercising bad judgment in others. At some point, an honest man admits these things to himself, seeks forgiveness, and lets them go. As Alan Jackson said, "that aint no big thing but it's a gold star for me."

Please know, then, that my words going forth are from someone like yourself. No, I'm not poking my finger at you, and I'm not into name-calling. When I look in the mirror, I see someone with a deep need to be forgiven, both to forgive myself and to truly know the forgiving touch of the Savior. I see a flawed sinner in the same face of the nourishing man who works hard to be a good man, and is one to many. I suspect the looking glass shows you a similar person. That's your business, not mine, but, brother and sister, I'm right there with you.

Alone I can do nothing about it; with the help of Him who can forgive, then all the foolish bad judgment of life cannot make me fail. It's a personal thing, you know, something between you and your creator. I'm not an altar call kind of guy, but if that works for you, then have at it! However you get on the path to forgiveness is your path in life, and it's a good one to be sure. I'm thankful that these words can encourage you along the way, maybe giving you some nourishment and strengthening you to stave off the bad judgment of the fool trying to pull you hither and yon.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 27 April 2010

The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it. Proverbs 10, verse 22.

Upfront statement here: this is not a Joel Osteen moment. I have seen him on the tube, and I think he's a charismatic guy. I don't really have a bone to pick with him because he isn't on my radar. If his 'God will bless you with riches' philosophy draws you closer to God, good for you. I have no comment on him except to say that he should never film a Pepsi commercial for fear that his hair might catch on fire.

The 'wealth' I'm contemplating today is more than just the material stuff in this best life now (ok, thanks Joel...). All of us want that, a best life now. We want to have our needs taken care of, we want to be successful, we want financial wealth, and we want to feel important. Want, want, want; that's both the craving and desire want, and the deficiency of necessities want. Both and, not if or. We're human, and capitalism as a system is both fair and it works. We want those things. Is it fair that some have such ostentatious wealth while we struggle to pay our bills? Is it fair that some people get away with their wrongs while others are plagued by guilt?

What is 'fair?' God doesn't deal in fair. He justly deals in wisdom that is love. Fair is a human construct that helps us cope with our frustrations.

So let's be honest: God really does provide all that we need. It is a mercy and a gift, and really is the 'blessing' of which the proverb speaks. For some, he provides more, for some less, but it's always a blessing and it always brings 'wealth.'

Think about midnight. While there are so many midnights when you and I can say we didn't get everything we wanted, can't you honestly say that you did get exactly what you needed to get you to that point in time? I believe that's God at work. It was him in your life, putting both blessings and frustrations in your path to get you through the day. Whatever we needed at the moment to get us through our choices and keep reminding us to turn to him. I know I don't always consider it myself how God enriched me during the day, especially now that I'm alone every night. Yet he met every need I had, even those I didn't know I had, to get me to that random point we call midnight. And, at 1201, at the start of the new day, he was there still.

That's the kind of wealth I read from the Proverb today. Wealth of love, wealth of the spirit, wealth of friendships and support, encouragement, and wisdom. People from Joel Osteen to Rush Limbaugh to maybe even your father in law will tell you "do what you love and you'll be successful." I believe that, because God blesses us with the inner wealth from which all success in life springs. Having love, an encouraged spirit, and all the others sure doesn't guarantee material success, but it does guarantee the foundation on which to live a life of peace, repentance, and understanding.

What's more, he adds no trouble to it. He doesn't allow hurt into our lives to tear us down without building us up; he doesn't randomly target us with the negatives either. Not long ago, someone and I were praying for the path of what to do. We had a life-changing choice to make. Should we do one thing or another, not realizing that one of the things we were praying for was anathema. At the end of our prayers, we sided where we should have started anyway, aligned with a Biblical choice. The story hasn't had the happy ending we hoped for, but it was still the right thing to do. God added no trouble to it, and he didn't bring trouble into our lives. He lovingly gave us choices, and consequences, and encouraged us to come to him for guidance. Then, like a cagey chess player, he was there to meet us at every move, offering redemption instead of domination because love really does buy back all wrongs, and love really will get you through anything.

I'll go to the gym here shortly, and I'll do my daily run and situps, and I'll start into the day as I normally do. Today, though, I'll keep trying to remind myself in each moment THAT each moment is a blessing that is being used for my good and the good of the people I love. God blesses those moments, making me healthy, wealthy, and wise, and bringing no trouble into my life because of them. May it be the same for you in realizing that, material or otherwise, this really is a best life now.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 28 April 2010

What the wicked dreads will overtake him; what the righteous desire will be granted. Proverbs 10, verse 24

There are so many conflicting thoughts with this one. It talks about self-fulfilling prophecies. It seems to insinuate that depression and anxiety are wicked things. It says desire of an upright heart is a healthy thing. It talks about how good things come to those who wait. It contrasts, it simplifies, it expounds as all of Solomon's proverbs do.

I'll take one of those points, the one about depression. You know that I've been seriously depressed for awhile now, and many of you have sent me encouraging notes and calls in this hardest week of my life. Since last Sunday, my world has fallen apart and to say that it has me down is something of an understatement. This was not all by my choice; some of it was done to me by others. Yet it is I who am responsible for my life and my actions, and I can't beg this off on somebody else. I have to deal with it.

Depression is a wicked thing. If you haven't had this illness, that statement could be difficult to understand. It is a malady, and when it grips you it completely devastates your ability to cope and to reason. If you find yourself in the middle of crisis that only piles on, those crises seem to amplify themselves. In truth, it's actually St Elmo's fire; it's unreal even though it seems real. In ages past, people thought this form of mental illness was demonic, and having faced it, that's a diagnosis with which I have difficulty disagreeing. It feels wicked, and what it does to you sometimes feels evil. Sure, medication, talk, understanding, diet, exercise, and routine help to combat it.

What helps most, though, is love. Simple love and caring from people like you, people who responded to my need. I thank you for that. When love goes out of your life, it's heartbreaking and it can be devastating. In the darkest moments, though, simple expressions of kindness and love pull you through. They are, to paraphrase the psalm, a lamp unto your feet and a light for your path. Love turns everything around. It is the start of wisdom. It is the end of all goals. Love is the thing we all desire most because everybody simply wants to love and be loved.

Most of all, it is the beginning of righteousness. We of ourselves aren't righteous, but we are made righteous by love given freely to us from above. When a heart is moved to love, it grows and shares, it gives and it sacrifices. It does so without expectation. You can't make a heart love somebody, and you can't make somebody un-love either. Sometimes, even with the best of intentions, love can't survive, and seems like it simply isn't enough. I don't agree with that but in the face of reality it simply is what it is. But when you do love somebody it becomes undeniable and unstoppable in its desire to be shared. What love passes between a man and woman, between friends and family too, makes every day worth celebrating, and the dark days worth enduring.

That kind of love is a gift from God. A friend of mine told me that, when God turns on that love, it doesn't flow in a trickle: it's like a fire hose. That kind of love helps to douse the cold fire of depression. That kind of love becomes the way back out of the black, and it gives you hope to sustain yourself through hard days today and yet to come.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 29 April 2010

When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone, but the righteous stand firm forever. Proverbs 10, verse 25.

I'm taking a different spin on this, so please indulge me, though the verse fits perfectly in the moment.

Today is my wedding anniversary. Twenty-one years ago today, Kim and I said our vows. Some of you on this Facebook page were there. As in every marriage, very little turned out exactly the way we planned it would. We were people from different backgrounds with different expectations in a different time. Who we are today, and where we are today, is not what we'd envisioned we'd be because storms have swept by in our lives, some things are gone, and we're having a tough time standing firm forever.

But there's an old Roy Clark song that said "If I had to do it all over again I'd do it with you." Alone in our house, that's how I feel. I can't just cherry-pick my life and keep what's good while chucking what wasn't. Despite the affairs, despite the financial troubles, despite the emotional trauma, despite the bickering, despite the sacrificed dreams and despite the separation in which we're living, to have the blessings that we've had I would do it all again with Kim. To have our children, to have memories we do, and to have faith includes all the tough times as well as those good things.

As a husband, friend, and man, I've done my best and I've done my worst. I stand before you and God and say that I've given all I could for much of the time we've been married. I have not been a terrible husband, and many of the sacrifices I've made were of things I held dearly. We didn't know it at the time but our souls were married on this day, and I was loved and loved her to do so. Only I own the things that I have done but we've all paid for the consequences. The bad things I regret, and I'd gladly take away the hurt I've caused if only I could. How sad I feel now to write that, in order to preserve our souls, those things have forced us apart now and we don't yet know just how it will fully turn out.

Kim could and should say many of those same things. Ask her. She could rightfully tell you she gave all she could, that she sacrificed, that she loved with her soul, and that she did what she had to do. That this is a sad time in which she's working hard to stand righteous with a smile. And she is correct. As a partner and friend, she was good, and there is nobody like her. She has been a blessing to me and those around her. I would give anything to heal her heart that I have ravaged.

We've been friends most of our lives. Even now, while we struggle to heal and to find our way across terrifying, unfamiliar ground, we remain friends. Since the storm began, good people have told us what we should do: that we should break things off, that we should drop the other, that we're enabling, that we're dragging out the inevitable, that there's too much water under the bridge, that we deserve so much more, that we should x, y and z. It's all advice given with the best of intentions, I know, and to be honest those are all truthful options on the table. Wherever the separation takes us, I believe in my friend because I know who she is deep inside and she's worth more than gold.

Tonight, we'll commemorate the day. I can't say we'll 'celebrate' it because what once was has changed. But she invited me over for dinner with our son, and I gladly accepted. I'm sure it will be awkward, and there may very well be tears. Yet God is active in our lives this day, and he isn't a disinterested participant. He is moving to work all these things, these storms that have ravaged our lives, for the good of his realm and the people who love in it. He is prodding us, healing us, loving us that, however we stand, we would be able to stand firm forever. We didn't fully know it at the time, but he was at work on that day at Tulip Street as well. Because of that, Roy and I can sing that same song together.

Thank you, Mick, for doing this today from all those years ago. No matter what happens, it is still ageless and evergreen.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 30 April 2010

The prospect of the righteous is joy, but the hopes of the wicked come to nothing. Proverbs 10, verse 28.

Have you ever wanted something so badly that you were willing to give anything to have it, only to find out that what you wanted wasn't really yours anyway? Not long ago, I got involved in a relationship that cost me everything. I make no excuses for it; you've seen me accept responsibility. It felt like much more, but now seems to have been based on two people who were lonely and needing in bad circumstances; it was the storm that swept through our lives. We hoped for much and planned for even more, and it came to nothing because, when the chips were down, one player folded in the most unloving way. I was loved, used, abandoned, and cast aside. That left me angry and bitter, hurt and terribly confused. I endangered my people, gave up my family, sacrificed my dignity, and lost my self-respect. More than that, I became a hypocrite to the faith that has grown and sustained me. A wise friend told me that people come into your life for a reason and a season; mine happened in the winter of our discontent.

It felt like a hope of the wicked that came to nothing.

Now, on the other side of the changes it wrought, I feel like I'm walking in the dark (especially since it's the middle of the night). I'm learning to handle the depression, but scary changes are all around me. My wife and I are separated, and I am now alone. I look around my collective house and realize spring cleaning is badly needed. My children need a strong father, my best friend needs trust, and everybody's heart needs healing. What I'm looking for is a good prospect in life, something in which I can trust, something that I can love, something onto which I can hitch my star and rise to the skies. Let's be frank here: I am NOT looking for another relationship. That last one was heartbreaking. What I'm looking for is something to believe in.

How amazing it is, then, that the faith which I'd tarnished with hypocrisy gets wiped clean yet again by the love of God, given on a cross, creating a prospect of joy. It doesn't say "assured" or "guaranteed" or even "promised," though I think promised comes the closest. No, the Proverb talks about the prospect of joy for the righteous. And remember, we ourselves aren't righteous, but we can be made righteous because we're forgiven. We get to stand at the cross and cry out our bitter, confused hurt, and have Him speak to our hearts that we might know we are forgiven. What's done is done; we leave it in the past. Then we move forward to be righteous with a prospect to feel joy. The table is set and we are free to enjoy the promised meal. Whether or not we allow that to happen is still, in many ways, up to us.

It's equally amazing that the belief, the prospect, and the righteousness were there all along. They always are, free for the taking, and once taken they always set you free.

Now we're picking up the pieces. My family is establishing a new normal. We have details, finances, and routines to work through. We are getting used to living separate lives, and I'm understanding that alone means only in the physical sense; perhaps even that would not be forever. There will be up's and down's but it will get a little bit easier every day. Whatever 'it' is, I'm worth it. God is working in our lives to repair damaged bonds, and to forge new ones from shattered pieces. I know we aren't the only ones who are going through this; it happens to so many. Yet somehow, in some way, by clinging to the prospect of joy for those made righteous, it will all work out for the best.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 1 May 2010

The way of the Lord is a refuge for the righteous, but it is the ruin of those who do evil. Proverbs 10, verse 29.

It's the climb. You've probably heard the Miley song, especially if you have tweeners (or a seventeen year old who, in her candid moments, isn't as grown up as she pretends to be). It's not just the goal in life that matters, it's how we get there; it's not just the mountain, it's the climb that counts as well.

My read on this proverb is that the journey in life never in vain. In it, we find solace, comfort, joy and peace. My faith disowns works-righteousness, meaning that there's nothing you or I can do to earn your place in heaven. That's already been granted to us, through faith, by Christ. Yet all through the New Testament, and apparently here in this part of the Old, there are verses imploring us to live lives of good faith as evidence of that faith. They advise and chasten us to live out what we believe because our lives matter to others. We don't want to serve as stumbling blocks for the people we love, and it's given out of love when we give of ourselves that others would know that solace, comfort, joy and peace. And fun. Don't forget the fun!

To me, a life lived like that counts. It spurs one on to a life of kindness, to living out the Golden Rule. I very much like the Buddhist precept of living a life in harmony with others that our lives might encourage and bless them. I think that's a great practice to embrace by people of any faith. What we do, what we say, the way we act: these things do matter because others see them, model them, talk about them. The way we live our lives does matter because the climb matters. In times of trouble - like when you're grieving, depressed, and alone, and when you realize what has happened - taking comfort in knowing you've done your best is a great refuge indeed. Especially when you wrap it in prayer and the kind words of good faith and friends who won't abandon you when you need them the most. You realize you didn't earn their love, but to you they freely gave it. They're climbing too.

Yet we've all met people who wreak havoc in our lives. They're friends, family, loved ones, strangers. Sometimes, they are us. They come into our lives and, whether they intend to or not, they bring chaos. For their own devices, they take what is not theirs and ruin at will. What they don't realize is the emotional ruin they bring on themselves in doing so. I don't like to pity people because I don't like to be pitied myself, but I sometimes do feel it for those who do this. In light of the proverb, I wonder if they're not struggling against the climb, finding so little peace themselves that they rail against what you have just to bring you to their level. Is that evil? Yes, in its own way, it is. I pity those who knowingly do that evil; for those who cast away what is right in favor of what is not, I feel even more of it. I think the best way to shed that pity is simply to pick ourselves up, get back on the trail, and keep climbing.

Lately, each day seems like a mountain. I'll admit that I'm tired and I'm weary. I listen to probably the most eclectic workout music on the planet, namely old time Gospel music. One of the songs talks about 'peace in the valley;' you've probably heard it at some point. My time isn't done, but I will admit I so want peace as I journey through the valley because I feel such a lack of it. And I see more mountains just up ahead. How good it is, then, to know that on my climb up the daily mountain, the path I take, the steps I take, and the way over and past it isn't in vain. Each day may seem like a mountain, but each mountain is also a good challenge. Today, let's climb it together.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 2 May 2010

This is for Dillon.

The lips of the righteous know what is fitting, but the mouth of the wicked only what is perverse. Proverbs 10, verse 32.

I'm very proud of you for what you're doing today.

Today, my son will be confirmed into the church. It's been a long & difficult journey for him. Three years of DTX (Discipleship Training Experience) confirmation classes, weeks of opening up to friends and strangers about intimate thoughts, and doing lessons that he didn't understand because learning disabilities have made reading anathema to him: all those culminate this morning. Through that time (especially here at the finish), drastic changes have entered his life; changes over which he has much influence but little control. His world has been turned upside down and he's still re-forming a place in the new one. He has learned well both selfless love and intense hypocrisy from his family, friends, parents and pastors. Like Jacob, he has genuinely wrestled with the spirit, and it has left him marked for all time. Dillon likes to share himself in his own ways: through his music, through being all young man, through his artwork (and through LOTS of texting). He is fiercely independent and doesn't like being told what to do. And he's probably gonna be miffed that I'm posting all this.

So, to compel him to stand in front of hundreds of people to share his personal testimony is like offering him the choice between death by torture or death by Lifetime Movie Network (choices that aren't vastly different). This morning, he'll do it. He will do it not because he's forced to, but because he has grit. Because he's deeper than people give him credit for being. Because he wants to both please and express himself in a way that can be understood. And he'll do it because he believes. He genuinely believes. I don't expect him to give a rhetorically flourishing speech that will be remembered for ages...but we'll remember it. And I expect he will stammer and run-on because that's what most teenagers do when they speak in front of a group.

But I do expect that what you hear will be from the heart. He'll be honest because, when you chip away his fourteen year old facade, he's really a tender, honest, and caring teenager who is doing his best to grow into a man of integrity. From Dillon, I know that today we will hear words from the lips of one made righteous, and that will be fitting. There's enough perversity in the music, the pressure, and the garbage that bombards him the rest of the week. For today, in his own way, he'll share the short speech that he wrote and it will be righteous and from the heart.

I love all my children, and now that they're older, I find myself regretting that I didn't appreciate them better when they were younger. It's water over the dam, I know, but in the middle of all the hard times, those regrets are real. Today, for a short while, I'll put them aside and focus on the overwhelming pride I have for my brave and good son. I'm very proud of you, Dillon, and I think you're the greatest guy on Earth. I love you. God speed your journey in Jesus, my son, and never give up.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 3 May 2010

The LORD abhors dishonest scales, but accurate weights are his delight. Proverbs 11, verse 1.

What a thought to start Monday morning: facing the scales. I'll admit, I face it with a lot less trepidation having just shed 40 pounds. I've been striving for that goal for nearly five years, and now that it's done, I'm not as afraid to face the scales as I used to be.

But that isn't what the proverb is talking about.

Judgment. God abhors, hates, despises, loathes dishonest judgment. In all things, in all ways he wants us to rely on his wisdom for our judgment. That's judgment of our actions by others, and judgment of others actions by us. It's how we deal in word and action with others, and how they deal with us. It's what we think and say and believe, and those things that are thought, said and believed about us. He wants us to be completely honest when we open our mouths, when we conceive our thoughts, and when we share them with him or anybody else.

He wants our A game and he wants us to always bring it. I'll admit it: I don't always bring my A game, and I haven't always been honest. Not long ago, I lost my family. My wife didn't move out just because of our emotional separation, financial disasters or infidelity. No, she moved out because I wasn't honest. She'd been trying hard to reconcile and I wasn't bringing my best game to our marriage. I was drawn to someone else, and I'd abandoned our relationship. I hadn't pulled myself away from that and I still loved this other woman. I had been dishonest. When I finally came completely clean, it broke us and well it should have.

I don't blame her. My wife did what she had to do to get emotionally healthy. Wouldn't you? I was untrustworthy and I'd proven it. I had been dishonest. It was abhorrent; I had been abhorrent.

Now, please understand: I'm not here to ease my conscience. What's done is done and I've more than taken my share of responsibility. My point in saying all this is to personalize it: what I did was dishonest and it was something the LORD abhors. My judgment was dishonest and nobody likes or trusts a liar. There are consequences and more than just me is stuck with them.

I'll admit: it felt cleansing to completely come clean, even when it meant that our marriage was irrevocably ended because of the truth. A week or so later, the relationship with the other woman finally, painfully ended. To say she did it in an unkind way understates the meaning of the word unkind. We all react badly under too much stress, I suppose. How strange it is, then, that the LORD should delight in this.

But think about it. Think about the cleansing nature of the truth, and how even when it is like alcohol on a fresh wound, it is also cleaning it out. When you finally tell the truth, you start to rebuild trust. You start to be genuine again. Forgiveness becomes possible and healing can begin. God wants that truth in all our dealings, from the smallest thoughts to the most far reaching actions. He knows that dishonest scales weigh us down and chip away at our integrity. It's natural that he would delight in our straight thinking, and in the life that comes as a result of it.

My wife has moved out and we are working to overcome the shock and become friends. The other woman is where she chose to be. And I'm moving forward as well. But the whole truth finally came out and healing has begun. That's for the best, and in moving forward I'll be glad to know that the LORD is delighting in it and working to help that healing along. That's a good way to start a new week.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 4 May 2010

When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom. Proverbs 11, verse 2.

I'm proud. We've talked about this before. I'm proud, cocky, confident and sometimes you could call me arrogant too. I'm proud of my kids, of my achievements, of three college degrees, of my service, of my writing, of my friends, of my niece Courtney (who is herself graduating from college next week...plug there for ya Cork), and of a great many things that I've done, seen or heard. I'm proud to be a conservative American and I'm proud to be a Christian.

Of those things themselves, there's NOTHING wrong in being proud. It's healthy. Where the disgrace comes in is when we take that to an extreme, and believe me, it isn't that hard to go to that extreme. It doesn't take much to go there. I do it all the time, and probably you do as well.

Pride is what leads us to think we can have it all. Pride is what makes us think that cheating is ok as long as you have 'tried everything.' Pride is what makes us believe we can get away with 'it,' whatever 'it' is to you. Pride is what separates us from God, and what separates us from God is called 'sin.'

Unhealthy pride. It takes baby steps to walk from being righteously, rightfully proud of who & what we've done and into thinking we're all that AND a bag of Fritos. Think back on things you and I have done and it is probably a gray area to you (and I) wondering just where we stepped from being in the right to being in the wrong. Good intentions, caring, white lies, even sacrifice can all lead us into taking those small steps that grow into something unhealthy.

Oh Lord it's hard to be humble...we'll let Mac Davis finish the rest.

It IS hard to be humble, but that's the ticket as well. Judicious thinking, walking away when our conscience pokes us, logging off, "talk with you later," even fleeing; whatever makes you tick so that your healthy pride doesn't metastasize into something unhealthy, something that will lead you into disgrace. Wisdom comes from listening to a love-guided conscience, one that submits pride to humility and submits to being led by divine love. I agree: that isn't easy, and it usually isn't popular, and if you're single, it probably means you end up sleeping alone at night...let's not go into that today, though. Let's leave it at 'so be it.'

On this one (like others), I'm a work in progress. I bet you are too. But, come to think of it, that's something to be proud of.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 5 May 2010

The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity. Proverbs 11, verse 3.

I know all about this one. Just read a few of my previous posts and you can learn about my recent history and just why I say I know all about it.

Unfaithfulness never comes to a good end. Real people really get hurt when real feelings are really involved. Whether we're talking about sexual infidelity, or cheating on your taxes, whether we're talking about shaving off time from the time clock, or telling your kids that you're too busy to play a game (when in reality you're caught up in Facebook), unfaithfulness never causes a good end. Whatever it is that causes you to be unfaithful to divine love & wisdom, someone always gets hurt.

Like the proverb says, it's duplicitous. It is saying one thing while we intend to do another. It is a lie, and it destroys. It destroys trust, it destroys hope, it destroys integrity.

I think about that Harry Chapin song, you know the one about the cats in the cradle. They grow up just like me. That's a fate I'd like to spare those who come after me. I'm not a bad guy, but in the areas where I haven't been faithful to my belief in God, or I haven't been a faithful servant, worker, parent, husband, friend or even a complete stranger, I am not a good example for them to follow. I've done things that have destroyed trust, hope and integrity, both mine and that of others. Have you? Is that really what you want?

Yesterday, I posted a Facebook blog about my grandfather. To me, he was an upright and honest man. He was my role model, and he was the man I wanted to be when I was growing up. Today is his birthday, so he's very much on my mind. Yet in writing his biography I came to learn he made mistakes too: grave and serious mistakes in his life. Just like me. He prized honesty and integrity because he had compromised his own in several ways. He learned from that, and his attitude never became "do as I say, not as I do." He simply turned and tried to do better, and gave it his best effort to live an upright life. Father Julius still serves as an example for me, twenty eight years after he died. He's still my role model today.

Turning from that unfaithfulness isn't that difficult to do. Don't cheat, and if you do, confess and work through it even if it means the end. Be honest in your relationships. Be honest with your time. Be honest with your family. Notice a trend? Be honest. Yes, when you're mired in whatever has you being unfaithful it seems hard to do, but the fact is it really isn't that difficult. It takes resolve, and sometimes that resolve is hard to summon. But it's worth it, especially when that resolve stiffens your backbone and you realize you can once again walk in the ways of the upright.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 6 May 2010

Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death. Proverbs 11, verse 4

I don't know about the day of wrath, but I'm ready to skinny down right now. Since my wife moved out, I have been cleaning house. Literally. Moving really stirs up dust and reveals how dirty things really get in the house under furniture that doesn't get shifted around very often. The day they left, I spent most of it frantically organizing, gathering trash, and doing general cleaning. If I hadn't done that, not only would the house still need it but I think I would have lost my mind.

Since then, I've been re-acquiring a few things, mainly beds and a new sofa. Craigslist. I'm fairly judicious and I don't like a lot of junk, so the things I've gotten are all clean and in good repair. Think I've paid a grand total of \$20 for a new white sofa and 3 full size beds (one of which my daughter brought back). The kids needed beds in which to sleep since theirs left in the move, but if you go look in the rooms of my house, you'll see that they're still spartan. Very minimal. Since I grew up in a house full of collectible clutter, right now I'm ok with that because I'm cleaning house. In fact, there are several closets, an attic, and a garage that are soon to be gone through in my effort to get rid of things I don't use or don't want anymore.

I can't say this is a very righteous thing because I don't feel very righteous these days. But it is a blessing to be able to do it. And it's a good time for me to take stock of what I have & who I am to decide whether or not a bunch of the junk I have sitting around is really worth keeping. Over two decades, one of the things I did learn from my wife's family was that 'stuff' is just stuff. You can always get more. Sure, you should be a good steward of what you are given, but if you don't need or want it, you don't need to keep it. Lots of things take up space, and if they're going to cause me angst or trouble, then I'm at a point where I'm all for giving them away. I know that, in our consumer society, the accumulation of property is 'wealth,' and in defense of capitalism, that's not all bad. I simply have a lot of surplus stuff cluttering up my collective and I'm undergoing a change where I've been given an opportunity to do something about it.

Are we talking about sticks & bricks, or are we talking about something more? You decide.

I know that righteousness - something blessedly given and not acquired - does indeed deliver from death. If it takes me doing some housecleaning to prepare the ground for that to happen, then so much the better. I can't do it alone, so to have that righteousness I'll need help. I think it's called 'faith.' And faith is something to which I'm clinging more and more these days. Faith in God, faith in love, faith in my kids, faith in my talents and faith in knowing that I can do this.

When it's all done, I'm hoping to have a place in which I have some of what I want but at least what I need. There is a place for everybody to sleep now and there is bare space on the walls as well. At this stage of my life, I'm looking at that space and thinking that it's delivering my sanity from feeling overwhelmed and allowing me to make changes that are worth making now.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 7 May 2010

With his mouth the godless destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous escape. Proverbs 11, verse 9.

A lot of Proverbs 11 seems preachy to me, and I'm not in a preachy mood this morning; yes, I know, that's a first. Much of the chapter contrasts the wicked and the righteous, both of whom are each of us. I'm keying in on several things, the first being the concept that 'with his mouth' a godless person destroys someone else. Duh. Everything we think, say, and write affects somebody else. The more I post online, the more I have to remind myself that others read these posts, as well as the casual responses that I flippantly post on various pages. Sometimes, unintended consequences hurt just as much as deliberate ones. That's another big 'duh' there too. I don't intend for peoples' feelings to be hurt, and I'm sure you don't either. It happens, though, and I know I need to keep working on that.

I think it's also significant that the verse says 'destroys his neighbor' and not 'harms' or 'affects' or 'causes trouble for.' Destroy. Destruction. Nobody I know wants to be destroyed. In fact, I don't really know any people today who are malicious enough to go out of their way to want to destroy anybody else. I know, however, that there are people in the world who make it their purpose to cause destruction in others' lives. One time, years ago, I was working at a client site and one of my co-workers made it her business to get into everybody else's junk. You couldn't tell her anything personal because she would turn it around and use it against you. She would do it with innuendos, or by a casual line dropped in conversation, or by injecting herself into your business with your supervisor. She's about the closest I've ever come to knowing somebody who reveled in destroying others. I just don't know anybody these days who I think would do such a thing, but I try to remember that they're out there whether I know them or not.

I think it's also significant that the verse talks about the righteous escaping. It doesn't say that the righteous will be unharmed, just that they'll escape. And they'll do so through knowledge; we've been down this road before, the one about divine knowledge and wisdom. I think it's interesting that the verse is realistic enough to promise that stuff still happens, that grief and trouble and the words of those godless still affect us. "I never promised you a rose garden" was the kitschy old country song, but there's truth in that. Even if we try to live upright lives, even if you live a life by the Golden Rule, and even if you honestly try to do what thou wilt but first do no harm, the verse realistically says that trouble will still happen. When it does, by living through a knowing heart, it also promises that escape. Doesn't mean that we would be unscathed or even that we'll make it out alive. It simply promises that we'll make it out. After all, life really is a one-way death trip. And, no, I'm not going into Wicca here, thank you very much.

Every day, I'm both godless and righteous. Every day, I both cause destruction and save others from it. Every day, I both wade into the muck of hurting my neighbor, and I escape from what my neighbors say and do about me. Going into the weekend, I'll do my best to keep these words in mind.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 8 May 2010

The righteousness of the blameless makes a straight way for them, but the wicked are brought down by their own wickedness. Proverbs 11, verse 5

Today has actually been a good day. Last night, had a great dinner. Slept well, if only for a few hours. Had a great workout this morning, and a mostly stress-free day today. Dinner is some kind of orange chicken dish with Indian rice, and there's some kind of vegetable in it that's proof you really can burn something to smoking in the microwave. The kitchen and my living room/office (where this computer sits) now smells like smoke. I think it used to be a sweet potato something or other.

Not a very righteous meal, I'd say.

Who's to blame? Me, of course. Nobody else here but little old me. I wish I could blame the Schwan's man. I followed the directions on how to cook this particular entree that was left behind in the move. Me being the frugal (ok, cheap) guy I am, I didn't want to waste it even though it had been wisely rejected by my wife. I'd also like to blame the Kenmore company because I followed the directions on the Schwans box and it still actually smoked in the microwave. Surely something must be wrong with the microwave!

Except...

Except that it really is only me to blame. I put too much time on the dish. I should have paid closer attention to it. I ignored the fact that there was this funny smell of smoke emanating from my kitchen when it really should have smelled just of basmati rice. Dave and only Dave is to blame for the fact that part of my dinner of choice now smells like charcoal. The only righteous thing to do is to look in the mirror and say (through the wisps over-scorched sweet potato), "I did this."

Aint it always the way. Aint it always the way, you know, just like Jasper says in 101 Dalmatians.

When you live alone, you (hopefully) quickly learn that there's nobody to blame but yourself in things of much greater consequence than dinner.

For love's sake I watched my wife and family move away, and I threw away 21 years of care, love, and devotion. It was justice, and it was what they needed to do to be whole, to let healing begin in hearts wounded so dearly. Still, it keeps me up each night. For love's sake, I'm struggling to rebuild relationships with my kids, and it's slow going at best because they're wounded by seeing that their father really is human after all. For love's sake, I let someone I loved move forward in directions neither of us had wanted, and in a way that forced us apart. It was the fruit of choices made, and that keeps me up at night too. And for love's sake, I'm conscious of the blame that is mine in all this. It is what happens when you step back, and pony up, and realize "I'm responsible for some of this" and you accept blame that's yours.

That's how God works, you know. When we see what we've done, He cleanses out the wounds that we create, and He does so to turn us back towards a path that will be a straight way through our difficult lives. To him, it doesn't matter how we became wounded: He offers good medicine no matter what. He doesn't want to see us turn wicked and be brought down by our wickedness. He doesn't want to turn us over to the consequences of what we do. Instead, he gives us one more last chance every time we turn to him after seeing the reflection in the mirror and admitting that we just didn't measure up. For love's sake, because He is all love, he puts an arm around us and loves us back to the straight and narrow. One foot in front of the other makes that a hard path to walk, but the journey is always worthwhile.

There will be a second chance, you know. The Schwan's company, in their infinite wisdom, included two trays of the airplane-food-sized orange chicken melange. Someday soon, I will try again to cook it right to taste just what the cook originally intended. Someday soon, I can brave up and not cause smoke to pour out of the microwave. Someday soon, tonight in fact, I'll keep doing my part to mend fences and be a man of decency towards the people I love. Someday, starting right now, I will keep moving forward on faith and try again.

But next time, I'm cooking the chicken from scratch.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 9 May 2010

Proverbs 11, verses 10 and 11: When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices; when the wicked perish, there are shouts of joy. Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is destroyed.

Of course, since it's Mother's Day, I'll incorporate some praise for moms. First comes to mind the idea that mothers are righteous, and a blessing, and are upright. I've only known a few mothers who couldn't be described by those words. Note to the TV producers: real life isn't Wisteria Lane. Real moms are the embodiment of love, and they are selfless, and they commit, and they sacrifice, they teach and live faith, they are oh so talented, and they give freely of all they have. They are also fickle, scared, insecure, hurting, tired, worn out, frustrated, overworked, used and horny. It takes a mom to exhibit the traits in the first sentence; it takes the rest of us to be those other things.

We all benefit from mothers because each of us has or had one. We can safely generalize by saying that moms are good, and they usually do their best no matter what. That's why they're moms, and that's just one of the many reasons to set aside a few hours each year to celebrate them. Perhaps we should each do our best to celebrate them more outside the confines of a certain day on the calendar.

Here's where I'll take this a step further, though. Parents, in general, want the best for their kids; great grasp of the obvious here, eh? I've said it before that I strongly believe the greatest compliment a child can give to a parent is to be independent and succeed on their own. When they do, when they become righteously prosperous. When they are upright, we are all exalted. The human community is made just that much better. More than this, God is praised just that much more because we've made good use of the talents he's given us. Moms teach us things like how to live and think on our own, and they do it because they love us. They do it because they're living the embodiment of God. We all want the best for our kids because we learned at home. We learned it from our mothers.

Moms also teach us to flee from what is wrong. Most mom's don't want us to come to bad ends; it grieves a mom to see her kids suffer. It grieves moms to see other people's kids suffer. Moms will open their arms and hearts to the little boy whose own mother rejects him, or the little girl who's crying on the front step. Mothers will go from stern to kind gentleness in an instant when they see a teardrop form in the eyes of people they love. Mothers don't want us to perish, and they don't want to see us use our talents for the destruction of others. Moms take little joy in seeing the misfortunes of others, and they hurt when they see how we squander our lives. They give everything they can and they do so because of love, because they learned it from others, and because they love without limits. By and large, because of that, 'the city' is exalted. By and large, the love of our moms makes that city shine on a hill for all to see.

That happens even when we make grave mistakes. Nothing is unforgiveable in a family. Take it a step further and nothing is unforgiveable period. That's how God looks at us. For the most part, that's how mothers look at us. My challenge to the man in the mirror and the person reading these words is to carry that thought forward into the week, then practice it. Whether you're a mom, a single woman, a grandmother, or a man reading here, learn it, live it, love it, and go forward. I learned that from my mom.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 10 May 2010

A man who lacks judgment derides his neighbor, but a man of understanding holds his tongue. Proverbs 11, verse 12.

It's hard to be a hypocrite and write this one. Of late, I've lost friends, both long time and some online, because I've been perceived to be a hypocrite. Just today, I noticed one of my Facebook friends had dropped me, and when I got looking, I saw that a number of other people I've known for years are no longer on my list of friends. I didn't drop them but they did me. It would be very easy to throw the stones back at them and say "well what about X, Y or Z that YOU did, you damn lousy sinner?" Meaningless. It would still be meaningless because, to be honest, I HAVE been hypocritical. I write these words every day, and in the process of writing them expose to you things I dearly believe: all while still living a life of sin. I've cheated, I've lied, and I've deceived. I've let myself wander and stray, and I lost focus on the very things I've been writing about. If that isn't hypocritical, nothing is.

In the words of my sometime friend Patrick, "got skin, got sin." Get it? I own mine and there's no excuse for them. My very nature is disposed to fault and frailty, and I'm responsible for that. It shows a lack of judgment; it shows hypocrisy. I'm thick with it, and to be honest, they are too.

It would be very easy to live in constant regret of the wrongs I've done, and to make a further confession, I do regret many things. I regret hurting my family, and I regret hurting my wife who's been my best friend for so long. I regret letting love slip away, and I regret hurting others while doing so. I regret not being stronger, and I regret not being stronger for someone in particular. I regret failing my children, and I regret not being better at my work because all this has weighed heavily on me. If you dwell on those things, they REALLY drag you down. But they're all in the past, and I still refer back to Patrick's words...

...which is why I hold my tongue when friends slip away. I'm beginning to understand why. Perhaps others find it too difficult to be friendly with someone who egregiously steps over the line. Perhaps we just grew apart. Perhaps they saw my hypocrisy and couldn't abide it any longer. Perhaps the bonds of friendship weren't that strong to begin with. Perhaps there's another reason to which I'm not party.

Perhaps I'll never know, and perhaps that's the only real conclusion that can be drawn from the end of our friendships. I'll seek out the opportunities to repair broken bonds, and to find out how I transgressed to see if I can make amends. If they're your friends, they're worth it. Good friends are too precious to treat in a cavalier manner. Yet I think that not much will come of that because, for any number of reasons, it was simply done with. It makes me sad, but I understand and I'll hold my tongue. I'll also continue to pray for them, and hope they do the same for me. Still, I'll understand and submit to God's plan that good people come in and out of our lives in season for a reason. A good friend taught me that, and for her and that friendship I'm grateful.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 11 May 2010

A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret. Proverbs 11, verse 13

I love to talk. Do you? I have been rightfully accused of having diarrhea of the mouth. That being said, I can honestly say that I don't live my life caring a whit what people think of me. I don't want anybody to have a bad opinion of me, and I don't want to be disliked. For the most part, I don't live my life deliberately thinking up ways to tick off people. And, while I've done things that are both embarrassing and even morally wrong, I don't believe in living life just to cross the line. I want to put my best foot forward and make good impressions.

But I also don't obsess about it, wondering what people will think of me. Whatever I do, I do being cognizant that people could see me. Whatever I say, even when I'm flippant, I am prepared to fess up to it; some things can be defended, some can't. If I post something, I know it's in the public domain and always open to interpretation, and I welcome both comments and criticism. When I say 'I love you,' I mean it because I don't say those words very often. And if I tell you what else I think, well, I mean that too.

I live my life this way because people will talk and it's better to be forthright and honest about it. I've had people gossip about me, especially lately. Some of the gossip was founded in truth; most if it was just crap. Some of it came from surprising sources, from people who only partly knew my situation (and nothing of anybody else's). So be it. People will talk no matter whether they're talking about you or somebody else. We're wired for it, and some people thrive on that gossip. Whatever charge they get, I confess I don't understand it. And while I'm confessing, I'll also pony up that I'm as guilty as you are of letting my loose lips occasionally sink somebody else's ship. By and large, though, I don't like passing on rumors, or starting them, or even talking about them. Someone always gets hurt.

And I keep secrets. It's part of what I do, or did, for a living. These days, I believe it's part of being a good friend. I sometimes feel no more trustworthy than anybody else I know, but if you tell me something in confidence, it won't leave my brain. There are things I know that would rock your world, or at least make your eyebrows twitch. You won't hear me talking about them, however. It's nobody else's business. I'm betting you have a few secrets too, and there are things about which you just won't speak. That can be a good thing.

I may not live my life caring much about what people think of me, but I don't want to be remembered as somebody who knowingly betrayed your confidence. It's true, I've felt hurt lately and lashed out at times, but I don't betray anyone's confidence in doing that, not even the people who hurt me. To do that would be to gossip and to prove myself untrustworthy of the affection shared with me. More than that, it would be a further betrayal of the faith in which I believe. To me, gossip is little more than a veiled kind of lie, and there have been enough lies told already. I've done enough in life to damage trust; it's time to start winning it back.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 12 May 2010

He who puts up security for another will surely suffer, but whoever refuses to strike hands in pledge is safe. Proverbs 11, verse 15.

As people of faith, I thought we were supposed to be willing to give ourselves freely to others, to be willing to lay down our lives if need be, even for strangers. Christ talked about how greater love has no man than someone willing to do that. Isn't that putting up security for another and in the most extreme way?

I suppose that, in a way, it is. I also suppose that isn't what was meant. I think it is talking about trying to satisfy someone else's obligations for them. I've been rightfully accused of taking on people as projects. Twice in my married life I've found myself involved with women whose husbands were violent. Once, I helped put a man in jail to stop an abusive situation; all I ended up with was ashes. My first girlfriend was irrevocably, emotionally distraught and all the love in me couldn't erase her bad memories. I was once engaged to a girl who joined the Air Force to get out an iffy situation at home, then latched onto me because I was a 180 degree difference from what she'd grown up with. I've lent money to wives trying to get home to the States, I've given expensive property to people in need, I've opened my heart to a woman who I thought loved me only to have it crushed because I was just a notch in her lipstick case, and I've taken on other people's massive responsibilities because I couldn't bear to see them suffer. Each time, I thought I could help fix the situation in some way. How wrong I was!

My bad, folks. I wasn't doing those things out of some sense of nobility. It was all about me. There's a certain amount of co-dependency in it. I don't like to see people hurting, so all too often I put myself in-between them and their calamities. In doing so, I take on the calamities themselves. It isn't the same as something heroic; it's not like rushing into a burning building, not if some of the situation is something of that person's own making. There's a time for tough love, and one time for it is when someone else needs to get their own house in order before you can step in to help. That's where I struggle. Too often, I jump the gun and jump in before they ask for my assistance. The end is almost always predictable: I don't help make the situation better, and I suffer alot for it. Let's not even talk about how it makes things worse for them; we'll save that for another day.

EVERYBODY, all of us (or, as Elwood Blues said it, "you, me, them"), has junk in the trunk.

Here's where I'll fall back on the motto of a church I know: it's not about me. That's a motto that I need to remember more often, especially when I'm tempted to take on somebody else's stuff. A faithful friend will open his heart and ears to listen, and will do whatever he can to help when help is asked for. A person who loves you will give everything of themselves if you're in need. In both of these situations, it's a loving and healthy thing to let the person in need realize that need, then decide what to do about it. If, after deciding, they ask for help, then I'm right there to lend a hand in any way I can. If, after deciding, they don't ask, then perhaps that's a good time to say "I'm here if you need me" and step back. Either way, remembering the selfless message of 'it's not about me' is a good reminder that it's not wise to offer help where help isn't wanted, and there's love in standing on the sidelines until somebody asks for your intervention. It has taken some hard learning to understand that there's no security in helping others because you want them or their situation fixed, and the safest thing for every person's heart is to sometimes let it ride

These last few weeks I've had to learn how to rely on myself. I've often thought I was alone and abandoned by the people who I thought loved me. That's a self-delusional thought. I have dozens of friends who have called, emailed, messaged, or shown up to buck me up. My family, even while struggling themselves, have reached out to give me love, and to accept mine in return. And, when there's nobody else in the house, me and God, well, we have good talks. I think He lives out this proverb daily because He lets me stew in my own juices for awhile until I finally ask him for help. Then, I get some kind of answer, some touch to the conscience or comfort on my heart. May 2010 be even an extra five minutes of sleep. The answer rarely comes in a form I expect, but it always comes just the same. It's not that God refuses to pledge his love and security to us. He simply waits for us to open ourselves to it before turning on the fire hose. That love, that unending stream of love, is true security that never makes you suffer, and always pledges itself in truth.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 13 May

A kindhearted woman gains respect, but ruthless men gain only wealth. Proverbs 11, verse 16

A few days back I blogged here about how wealth is worthless in the day of wrath. Jump down several verses and you see this one, where it contrasts women and men, kindheartedness and ruthlessness, and respect and wealth. Interesting comparisons, don't you think, especially that last one.

Men want respect. We strive our whole lives working to prove ourselves in every arena and we do that while trying to earn respect. Behind respect is love and wisdom, of course; they're the foundation of it. But I think that we, as men, are most interested in gaining respect from others. Why? Because respect is what we give to others. Respect is power. Respect is honor. Respect is being thought well of. It's true, that we respect people who achieve. We respect sports figures who perform amazing feats. We respect people who amass great wealth (which, as we just talked about, is a fairly worthless thing). We respect people we fear like the guy who carries a gun, or the mafioso who is little more than a polished thug. And we respect all kinds of things that, like Bogart said, don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world.

That isn't really respect in my book. When you boil it down, respect and wealth really are opposites. One can support the other, and you can't be 'wealthy' without earning respect. But, as goals, they're opposites. I think that we, as men, most desire to respect the women in our lives. May 2010 be there's some psycho-sexual component to it; I'm not smart enough to know one way or another. Freud would probably write it off as being an Oedipus complex. Blah blah blah. Personally, I think that we, as men, desire to respect the women in our lives because we learned it from our mothers, and because they touch our hearts and earn our respect by being generally kind in ways we aren't.

There are a great many women I respect. I respect my wife who hasn't lost her ability to be selfless, even while we've been suffering through this trauma of separation (I even respect her boss, who right now hates my guts, because she's tough and talented). I respect my mom for being independent and professional in an era when the lefty bra burners thought they knew what liberation really meant. I respect my sister for showing me a career path, and examples of kindness at the times when I needed it most. I respect my daughters, who are forging their own lives in a tough world. I respect the single moms out there, who keep doing their best to make life just a little better for the kids they adore. I respect the woman who stands up to her abuser and says 'no more.' I respect the woman who works to make a safe and loving home for her family, often sacrificing her own goals and dreams for theirs.

There are hundreds of examples of women who, through living a forthright and kind-hearted life, earn our respect. Personally, I think women are more wired for this than we men. Even in the midst of making a career, women are intuitive and look out for the best interests of the people around them, not just themselves. Women have an innate ability to empathize and understand, to be open to caring, different from the ability of men. That's not to say that men can't do those things. But, really, when you want a strong shoulder to cry on, men, do you go to your buddies, co-workers, or Hank Hill alley drinkers? Me neither. I don't think it's a feminized thing to admit this, especially since, even while having so much respect for women, I don't think much of 'feminism' as pop culture and the left have defined it.

Just this morning I read a statistic that said, for 2009, female CEOs earned 40% more than their male counterparts. That's a respect-worthy thing, don't you think? So much for that whole glass ceiling concept, at least in this day and age. I believe it, you know, because most of the project managers and directors for whom I've worked in the last 14 years have been women. It's not surprising to me since women are over half the population, over half the workforce, and are especially prevalent in the health insurance industry in which I work. Women succeed because they earn respect, and they earn respect because they commit, and care, and throw themselves fully into the fray. There's a lot that we men could learn from that, especially if we want to seek 'wealth' that lasts.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 14 May 2010

A kind man benefits himself, but a cruel man brings trouble on himself. Proverbs 11, verse 17.

Who among us doesn't want to be kind? I mean, sure, there are people out there who thrive on messing up somebody else's world. There are people who will use you for their own purposes; sometimes we are them and they are us. And there are people in the world who do cruel things that are nothing more than reactions to the circumstances in which they find themselves. Again, sometimes we see them in the mirror; I know I do.

For the most part, though, I believe that most people want to be thought of as kind. We work to become kinder to the people we love and the people who we find in our circle. It's a pleasurable kind of work, a kind of work that doesn't take much effort, just love. Even the gruff old grandpa can melt at a granddaughter giving him dandelions; even violent and abusive men have soft sides and were once men of integrity. I believe in people, and I believe that, deep down inside, most people want to be kind and loving. Sometimes, we build walls around our hearts, usually out of necessity, usually when they've been broken. Get past those walls, however, and I believe everybody just wants to love and be loved.

That's a benefit. Sure, love breaks your heart. You give it to somebody and you do so freely. In my life, love has happened by accident, when I didn't expect it. It really is the only thing worth dying for. And it feels like dying when it is taken away, or, worse, when you let it die because the relationship is poison or the person you loved was poisonous. Yet there's that whole idea of "better to have loved and lost;" you know the poem. Love makes us kind, and both kindness and love are beneficial. They help us grow, and they help us grow others.

It's interesting that that writer of the proverb says "cruel" when contrasting love. It doesn't say 'unkind' or 'mean' or even 'unloving' though I believe those are all part of cruelty. No, 'cruel' is the word. It's a cruel thing to feign love, or to string someone along because you can't let them go, or to only give half of your heart. It's a cruel thing to not love. It's also true that you can't make a heart love somebody, and it isn't right to force one to love where love doesn't exist. But it's a cruel thing to not love, to not be kind. And that cruelty always brings trouble. Whether it's intense regret, or realizing you've settled for half a love, or living a life of lies that you never envisioned, trouble pervades your heart and spills over into what you think, say and do. You become somebody you don't know; you do things you wouldn't otherwise do. You bring trouble on yourself.

I'd prefer to avoid all that. It isn't that hard to not say an unkind word, or to refrain from sarcasm and glibness (though I struggle with that). It's an easy thing to give a compliment, and to tell somebody "you look nice" or to give a hug. Even better, to give them a kiss. It's easy to say something encouraging instead of something that tears down. And it's easy to smile instead of frowning. It's easy to be kind, and I think I find it takes effort to be cruel. That's an effort that just isn't worth your time if you want to be loving and kind.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 15 May 2010

The truly righteous man attains life, but he who pursues evil goes to his death. Proverbs 11, verse 19.

If you're a believer, this is the essence of the gospel: that we're made righteous and have attained life through that. That if we don't believe, we are not righteous and are eternally separated from God. That we really aren't 'truly righteous' on our own but can be through faith in Christ. If you want to know more, read Romans and find yourself a good church. I'm going to pursue this from a different angle.

Let's segue on the previous theme of being kind versus being cruel. We reap what we sow; the verse immediately preceding this one even mentions that. Kindness begets kindness; cruelty begets cruelty. When we live with a positive outlook, through kindness and love we can move forward and deal with all the cruelty and death that oppose us each day. People of every faith, even of the atheist 'faith,' understand this.

Some examples. When you fall in love, you're reaping what you sowed. You open your heart and give to another, and the blood of love flows sweet through your veins. She's everyone you could ever want, and you'll do anything to be with her. That's the feeling of forever, the only true feeling worth living for. When it hurts, though, it hurts terribly. Life feels like death. When love is absent, hurt, regret and pessimism rule your days.

What about fighting, arguing? Sometimes, I'll admit, it feels cleansing to get my dander up and let go of angry emotions I've kept bottled up. Sometimes, you feel you just CAN'T back down. ALL the time, however, it feels like death. Yes, I know that healthy relationships contain constructive anger and argument. Healthy relationships are ones where we fight in love for the other person, fighting for life, not fighting to death.

And what about the Evan Almighty Act of Random Kindness? Don't tell me that the world isn't a slightly better place because you hold the door for a stranger, or let the other driver merge into your lane when you could cut them off, or you stop hovering over your kids, or you learn to let little things slide when you see that every battle isn't worth the fight. Don't even try to convince me that giving up the 'me first' attitude isn't the single best way to start making a real difference in the lives of people we don't even know. Those acts of random kindness, the ARKs, they are like spring rain on a field of flowers, or sunshine after that rain.

I refuse to believe that living a life of conscious kindness and love, real agape love, is a pursuit of evil. It's the giving that matters, even when love and kindness can get you hurt. We put our hearts in the love-place where we can give kindly to others, then live our lives as evidence of that love. I'm not going to be such a Pollyanna and insist that a kind & positive outlook will cure everything...except that it does. I understand that there is real pain in the world, and some people really do live lives of crushing hurt. There's abuse, and hatred, and people who use us and abandon us when we need them. Heartbreak, pain, selfishness, loneliness, regret, bankruptcy, divorce, separation, disappointment: these are real things and we each deal with them. If we let them, they can lead us to unhappy 'death' long before we go dust to dust.

How, then, do we deal with them? By the kindness that exemplifies righteousness. This too is the essence of faith: living a life reflecting the love given to us. The day we give up that kindness, that love, is the day we surrender to living a life for the pursuit of petty evils. Personally, I agree with Sally Field: I've got this one life. I don't want to waste it on things that don't matter much in the long run. I'd rather live it out with a heart of kindness that puts cruelty in its place.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 16 May 2010

The LORD detests men of perverse heart, but he delights in those whose ways are blameless. Proverbs 11, verse 20.

We're all toast. If this proverb were all there was to Scriptures, then the only conclusion you could draw is that we're all burnt toast. I wouldn't go so far to say that we're all perverts. In our 21st century English, that word gets a justifiably bad rap. BUT (and there's always that 'but'), we do have perverse hearts, especially if you note the definition (from Dictionary.com) that perverse means "willfully determined or disposed to go counter to what is expected or desired; contrary."

I have a perverse heart. I've spent I don't know how many years pining after what wasn't mine. I have squandered good love that was with me all along while longing for the love of others who were absent. I have selfishly put my own wants and dreams ahead of those whose needs were greater than mine. I have been irresponsible with my time, my finances, my possessions, and my emotions. These are just the generics. If you want specifics, I've longed for and worked for the love of woman here who was more willfully contrary than me, only to let her devastate my heart and the lives of the people around me; the really twisted part is that this wasn't the first time, and it's been equally devastating to let her go (even though she used me for what she wanted). I've spent money I didn't have, using my credit irresponsibly, and I've let others destroy my credit rating. I've wasted time doing inconsequential things when I should have been working instead. I've fought with and even despised one of my children. And I've destroyed the heart of my wife, who only wanted to share that heart with my own.

That's just scratching the surface. If it isn't proof positive of a perverse heart, there is no such thing. I am far from blameless and my pride keeps me from taking the blame for things I haven't done, and I won't be held responsible for things that aren't my responsibility. I don't need to: there's enough wrong I've done on my own to keep me busy full time. God must surely detest me. There's no way he could delight in me because my ways are anything but blameless...except...

...except that He does. It's through faith. It's through acknowledging all these wrongs I've done and putting them at His feet. It's through admitting that I AM RESPONSIBLE, even for the things I didn't do because I have squandered my ability to prevent others from doing them. It's through being truly sorry for them, and then letting them go, really letting them go. Faith does that. I've said it before: you don't need to walk up to the altar at church to do that, but if that works for you then go for it! It's faith between you and your maker, between you and your Savior, between you and your Father, friend, and confidante. It's a personal thing as well as a public one.

When we have that daily faith, God DOES delight in our ways. He doesn't approve of our wrongdoing, but he gives us a solution to it. And he helps us to let go of the guilt burden that we take up with those wrongs. He helps us to forgive, forgiving others and forgiving ourselves. God does help us to be better people, and he fuels us with the strength to learn from our mistakes and improve our lives through one more last chance. Only somebody who truly loves us could take something perverse and turn it into a delight.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 17 May 2010

Be sure of this: The wicked will not go unpunished, but those who are righteous will go free. Proverbs 11, verse 21.

Do you ever get the feeling that you're being punished for evil things you've done? Do you ever feel that you're getting what you deserve for the wrongs you've done in life? What about regret? Do you live in regret of having let people down, or let yourself down, and feel powerless to then let it go?

You know my struggles with depression and with the wrongs I've done this year. Through them, I'll admit that I've wrestled with feeling like I was being punished, like I was getting what I deserved for being a wicked, cheating SOB. It's true that some of what happens to us is just consequences; some of what happens is just random; some things are due to other peoples' choices. But much of what we do is our own doing; I know that's the case with me. Through it all, if you let it, a healthy conscience can both help and hurt. It stings when you feel most vulnerable. It reminds you that nobody can live two lives for long and survive. Alone after midnight, your feelings can pile on and pretty soon you feel overwhelmed. In those times, it feels like you're being punished, like God is giving you what you deserve for being such a miserable failure. It feels like your conscience is being used against you. In those times, it feels like this proverb is being played out for the entertainment of a cruel and vengeful deity.

The real truth of it is that the proverb is being played out, but it's not to punish. In the middle of the black spiral, it seems so easy to lose sight of the fact to correct is to attempt to set things right. Only when that happens can we be set free from the past. Yes, my conscience stings me for falling away from my marriage, for loving another, for the terrible language that comes from my mouth, for hurting my kids, and for a hundred-plus other things I've done and un-done. Thank God for that. I believe God speaks to me through my conscience, and uses it as the white lines on my road through life. He does that to keep me on that road, knowing that when I cross the lines is when I veer into the gray areas where trouble becomes possible.

He does it to keep me free. The 'do it if it feels good' idea would tell us otherwise, but there really is freedom in living between the lines. Correcting rules are in place for good reason, and I'm not talking about the law here. Nobody makes you do the right thing when others aren't looking, but when you do you're known for your integrity. Nobody forces you to tell the truth, but when you do you're known for your honesty. Nobody makes you do your best in all things, but when you do you're known as the kind of person others want to emulate. People live their lives in this way live by a rule-based code of honor. They're the people I look up to and I consider them to be righteous.

What's more, they live in freedom. The world tells us that our rights are free, therefore righteousness is free. That half-truth is used out of context by people who don't understand freedom any more than they understand happiness or real love; I'll defer to General Patton for the other things they don't understand. Freedom needs those white-line rules of personal morality. What truly is free is giving up the junk that lead us down paths of destruction. In giving those up, we give up all the bad stuff which results when we hold onto our junk. It's true that misfortune will still find its way into our lives. But when it does, living between the lines, living through moral faith, helps us re-focus and get back to living in freedom.

I suppose I'm not the best person to talk about morality, not after the way I've lived out 2010 so far. My choices cost me my family, my marriage, my kids, and then I lost she for whom I'd put all those things at risk. Through all that God inspired others to pick me up and get me back on the road. I'm a little worse for the wear, but thanks to them, I'm back in the race again. Perhaps I did get some punishment for the things I did, but then again, if that hadn't happened I wouldn't be able to share them with you so that others could learn from my mistakes. And perhaps if they hadn't happened, I would still be stuck in the black abyss of depression instead of believing now that the best is yet to come. That belief is liberating, and it sets me free.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 18 May 2010

As a ring of gold in a swine's snout, so is a fair woman that is without discretion. Proverbs 11, verse 22

Any number of things can be said about this proverb and none of them would paint a very pretty picture. I'm left thinking, "oh man, where do I go with this one," and not REALLY tick some people off! First, let's clear the decks: in my opinion, every woman is fair and beautiful. With some, the beauty also goes deeper. I'm running away from the jeweled pig thing.

So how about we turn it around and sidestep the chauvinism? Let's take a step outside the bounds of fixation on gender and apply this one to all of us. A lack of discretion is an ugly thing whether you're a man or a woman. To paraphrase Kenny Rogers, when love or something like it gets a hold on you, it can make you do things you wouldn't otherwise do. I know that when I've been in love I didn't much care who found out or who knew. In fact, I'd rather be in public and be able to share with everyone how I feel for that someone who owns my heart. I couldn't keep it inside. I've done it, and it's no way to live a life of honor concerning the one with whom you want to spend the rest of your life.

And yet...

...And yet if you love someone you shouldn't, then discretion is the best way for you both to back away from it and fall in love the right way. Take it from someone who knows: if you aren't free to marry, you aren't free to date. Sure, the feelings are very real, but do yourselves a favor and do the right thing. The corny saying about "if it's meant to be it'll happen" really is true. If it's worth feeling, give it time, whatever amount that means, and go through the right steps. You'll be glad you did.

And when you are free to fall in love, then I think discretion is even more important because it honors both the person you love and the feeling itself. A ring of gold is a thing of beauty. It's precious, valuable, rare, worth something. It's something you take care of and cherish, and you want to show it off because you're proud of it and it brings you happiness. You wouldn't throw it in the dirt, and you wouldn't dress up a pig with it. Hmm...that's sort of how love makes you feel. So, when you're first falling in love, how about treating the person with discretion and deference? How about going low and slow and treating that feeling with honor because, in doing so, you treat the other person with honor. Then, when love shows its true colors, they'll fly bold and beautiful.

I honestly believe there really is someone for everyone. We're all fair and we're all swine from time to time; might as well be honest about it. Love lives at its own pace, and despite all the heartache it brings, I wouldn't want it if it didn't because when you're falling in love, even if it's falling again for someone you've known for so long, it's the only thing in this world worth dying for. Discreet patience, then, to allow that love to take us where it will, is perhaps the best course of all to keep what is precious and beautiful out of the barnyard.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 19 May 2010

One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. Proverbs 11, verse 24.

Have you ever held your heart back? Do you love generously? We've all been in love but have you ever really thought about what it would feel like to really, truly, fully love somebody with your whole heart? I have to confess that I get dog tired about all the confessing I do here because it's like looking in the mirror and seeing my face turn uglier every time I turn. I have done some awful things in my life, some of them just recently. When I want to cut someone to the core, it isn't hard to do. When I think of the ways I've hurt my loved ones, the list is too long for me to maintain. It's ugly.

Perhaps the ugliest thing I've done is to love with half a heart. Small beans, eh? Not really, especially when you consider Christ's command that to love God and then each other with all our heart is the greatest commandment of all. I've been in relationships where I had felt wounded and vulnerable. Invariably, I pulled my heart back. When I finally married, at several points, I gave up and pulled my heart out. When I finally did for the last time, I couldn't give it back because I'd already given it to another. You can guess how that turned out. Rich is the man who has friends, and that makes me rich indeed. Yet I must continually confess that I've committed the ugly sin of not giving freely enough, of having withheld my love unduly. Of all the terrible things I could have done in life to cause someone long-term hurt, to me this is the worst.

Grace is loving mercy that's undeserved, and God only knows how much grace is given to each of us every day. It's something NOT due to us, not owed to us. It's given freely, and it's worth more than anything you or I could give each other...except love. Grace is love, and it's our example of how to truly prosper. When we withhold our love, we do so in the way opposite grace. We do so in ways that are unloving, uncaring, and not full of grace, hail Mary or not. We hurt others in ways they don't deserve; we hurt them unduly.

If someone came to you crying, chances are you'd open your heart to them. If a child needed you, chances are you'd try to find some way to satisfy their need. If someone you loved asked you for another chance, chances are you'd be inclined to give it. I'm betting that, if you did any of these things, you'd give of yourself freely. I believe that because I believe most people actually want to do what is good and right. If someone loves me freely, I see it in their eyes and know in my heart that they've gained so much more than they gave. Likewise, I've seen the sad mark of poverty in my own eyes when I've looked deep to admit how I loved with only half a heart. In my own experience, that's the single biggest reason why people grow apart: because one or both of the people in the relationship start to love less than freely. In that same experience, the poverty of depression that invariably follows is worse than not having loved at all.

It's time to put that behind us. Starting yesterday, I love fuller and generously. And I do so freely. I do so in honesty and guarded openness, in trust and shrewdness, and in giving and receiving. Personally, I believe it's going to be a pretty difficult thing to do at first because I'm used to not loving enough. Starting yesterday, I choose to love freely in the hope of being loved in the same way. I dare you to do the same.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 20 May 2010

A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed. Proverbs 11, verse 24.

It's no coincidence that this verse comes after the one about giving freely and before ones that talk about hoarding and seeking goodwill. If you believe the Word of God is divinely inspired, then you reject the idea of coincidences anyway. Things are written the way they are for a reason, even the parts that talk about sex, smiting, and the far-fetched prophecies.

This too will be written for a reason: if I haven't told you lately, you refresh me. I'll selfishly admit that writing these things every day is refreshing, and it's given me purpose and clarity during the hardest time of my life. Running like a madman and losing a bunch of weight has been refreshing, and the results are finally beginning to show. And faith is always refreshing. I'm starting to sleep well at night after praying for people for whom I'd said I'd pray; we're supposed to pray, too, for those who persecute us, you know. It's extremely refreshing to do something for somebody else, even when they don't know it. Mostly, though, hearing from people who care, who are friendly and interested, is the most refreshing thing in my days.

That's the point of the proverb, don't you think? That we should demonstrate how we care and, in doing so, refresh each other? Stop by my house and I'll share at least one cold beer with you (although it'll probably be a light beer). Stay awhile and we'll chew the fat (and maybe have dinner). If you need a place to crash for a few nights, I have extra room. And I'll support you in any way I can (and maybe a few I can't) no matter what happens. We're supposed to encourage each other. We're supposed to support each other. We aren't supposed to play games with other peoples' emotions, or jockey to win at all costs, or to love in a half-hearted way. We're supposed to use our lives in praise, refreshing and encouraging and building each other up. That's what you do.

Yes, it's true that there are times to walk away. There are some relationships where we just can't win, or we just can't be together and we just can't refresh. Maybe it's because of choices we made, or one or both of us have issues; who knows? In those times, it doesn't matter how you feel: they just can't be helped. Best we can do is to pray for them and step back. By and large, I believe that's not the case. I believe that, with living out faith and a kind demeanor we can indeed continually refresh each other.

A friend of mine said that Facebook is a mile wide and an inch deep; that quote has stuck with me because social networking sites really can seem superficial. That is, except for the brief notes of encouragement that you send me now and then. Some may seem shallow, but just knowing somebody cares in the dark moments helps enormously. The weekend when they blew up Texas Stadium was agony (no, not because of the stadium); the weekend when my family moved was worse; the day I finally accepted the whole truth (of what had been said all along) was hardest of all. Every day in-between, I stared at the mirror and saw what I didn't want to see, and I felt used, alone and depressed. Through those times, your words and prayers gave me strength to persevere through the suffering. They refreshed me, and I hope you are refreshed now in knowing it. I hope you're prospering, if not just in the pocketbook then at least in your heart. Your generosity never goes unnoticed.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 21 May 2010

People curse the man who hoards grain, but blessing crowns him who is willing to sell. Proverbs 11, verse 26.

Even in light of all that I aired online yesterday, this is still very much on my heart as well. Hope you get something good from it.

Share and share alike. I spent this week in Nashville, job-shadowing a configuration lead to learn how this new company does software configuration. I've done this business for ten years now, and I've come to think most companies do basically the same thing in slightly different ways. The team with whom I've worked here has been very forthcoming. They've shared both their time and expertise with me who, while a very experienced consultant, am still a novice with the actual system itself. For the most part, I've blended into the background, taking notes and keeping quiet (and keeping quiet is a difficult thing for me to do). They've shared well and in private I've shared back my observations. At the end of the day, the lead and I were talking and she invited me back to do perhaps join the team at some to be determined future time. That's great news, especially since I really like Tennessee and I really want to do the work.

In the proverbial sense, that team was willing to sell their grain. At the start of the week, I was a complete stranger, and they took me under their wing. They had a stash of grain in their client and system knowledge, and they willingly opened their store to me. I bought what they were selling, and they were blessed by being able to do it. So was I by being able to 'buy.' Years ago, I ran a small project in which I had to learn a new software development tool. I cornered one of my company's software experts who then taught me what I needed to know. His name was Rick. At the end of the sessions, I offered to buy Rick lunch or get him a small bonus. He responded by saying, "no need for that. Just take what I taught you and teach somebody else."

Those profound words have stuck with me over the years. Rick's posture was that of a man who had a storehouse of grain but blessed others by selling it to them. It's the same for the Nashville team this week. That's the kind of man I want to be.

Each of us knows people who run around playing "I've got a secret." Likewise, we all know people who are misers with their knowledge and they make us feel very small when we ask them for help. I've always admired the people who were 'smartest' in a group. They're the people who become leaders through their own talents, their own wits. Those are the kinds of people I try to emulate, yet rare is the middle-level leader who acts as a mentor. Even rarer is the insecure know-it-all who doesn't mind helping others learn. I suspect most of us fall into the "I've got a secret" group, and we belittle the people around us. We're each a work in progress, I know, because our tendency is to hoard our grain.

These days, I'm into self-improvement. One of the many challenges I'm facing is to get past the hurt (that I've caused and has happened in my life too) and still try to live in that posture of share and share alike, of rising to Rick's challenge to pay it forward and share what I know with others. Maybe it's your challenge too. In that spirit, I'll keep reminding myself that we're moving out of the winter of discontent and into the summer made glorious, not by a son of York but, instead, by the opportunity to sell our grain and be blessed, to share and live out the wise proverb through a greater and much more loving Son.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 22 May

He who brings trouble on his family will inherit only wind, and the fool will be servant to the wise. Proverbs 11, verse 29

Inherit the wind. We aren't talking about evolution here. We're talking about deliberately seeking out trouble and finding it, then being left with nothing to show for it. The second half of the proverb then talks about someone who brings trouble being foolish, and having to learn from that foolishness by submitting to divine wisdom. How true. No argument from me, especially since it's biblical. I have zero credibility in arguing that.

In my own experience, having brought my share of trouble onto my family, I can say that at first I thought I only inherited the wind. In the times when I've brought trouble or disrepute on my family, I thought I was without a friend in the world and that I'd brought only calamity on everyone around me and was left with nothing to show for it. Yes, in part, that's true, especially in the short run. And, yes, it's true that God smacks you upside the head to teach you a valuable lesson and, in doing so, points out the foolishness of your actions. He did so to me, and continually does so because I continually keep messing up. Daily repentance is the key to recovery.

Yet let me float something that I hadn't considered the first time I read this proverb. The wind blows in change, and sometimes it blows in clouds to cool things off, or rain to make things grow. Sometimes it destroys and sometimes it is blessed air conditioning. Inheriting those things isn't such a bad thing. They happen when you bring trouble on your family. The wind blows away all the cobwebs of the wrongs that we've done. They sweep clean the decks and fill your sails with the energy to propel you forward. Wind generates power, and is a force of nature to be reckoned with. Tornadoes and hurricanes are both damaging and rejuvenating. It's a bracing, energizing thing to sail with the wind at your back, and to feel the welcome of a cool breeze on a hot, draining day.

What's more, when the wind has blown away all the junk from your past you're free to start again. When you bring trouble and you're corrected for it, you have another opportunity to love again. That's one of the beautiful things about love: it lets you discover it again. And there's no better feeling in the world than falling in love and discovering that special someone to whom you want to give everything. Sure, when love hurts, it really hurts badly. On the flip side of it, though, there's nothing more rewarding than meeting her and discovering she is everything you could ever want. Or he, if you're so inclined.

Finally, there are good things to be learned from having to serve, especially in serving somebody who is wise. Learning in repentance, learning at the feet of a master is precious. I know when my head is clouded or my heart is heavy, I find solace in menial work, and in doing something for somebody else. The most rewarding work I've ever done in my life happened in the ten days I spent in China, doing back-breaking work for others who didn't even know my name. Every day there, I was serving someone else at the feet of the Master, and learning how to put aside foolishness and embrace real wisdom. Months later, that's a mantle I'm blessed to pick up once again.

This isn't just positive spin put on a proverb to which I couldn't find anything good to say. It's the truth. Winds of change bring change you can believe in, not just some snarky political slogan. Next time I sweating it out and I feel the cool breeze blowing I'll let the breeze refresh me and give me strength to persevere through the troubles of every day. I'll listen to it was the breath of heaven and let it blow through me to give me what I need to submit and move forward.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 24 May 2010

The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise. Proverbs 11, verse 30.

I spent the weekend at my mom's house in Oklahoma, visiting with her, my aunt, and my uncle. If you've never met him, I'd like to introduce you to my uncle. He's one of the greatest men I've ever known, and when I think of this proverb, I think of my uncle. I won't identify him by name, mainly because he might read my blog. As long as I've known him, he's always been a kind, open-hearted and generous man. He has a great sense of humor and loves to practical joke. Underneath that, he's also very humble. My grandfather and uncle were in the feed mill business together in the 1950s and 60s, and he learned his trade – agricultural support – at the foot of a master. From his father my uncle learned many of the ways of men: business, honesty, smoking, drinking, the sportsmen's life of hunting and fishing, and hard work.

What he also learned was morality. My grandfather was one of the most strong-willed, profane, hard-drinking and colorful people I've ever known. He was also one of the most moral and devout. He had a set of beliefs that were the concrete foundation of his life, and he did his best to live his life according to those beliefs (except for the ones that mentioned profanity...). Grandpa lived life to its fullest, and he raised a son in that same mold, except that my uncle kept what was good and rejected what he perceived to be faults in his father's life and built his own life on something different.

I think of my uncle when I read verse 30 because he has spent decades dedicating much of his free time to ministry. He is the most Christian man I know, and lives out that faith as a matter of practicality instead of just Lutheran piety. To him, prayer is a regular conversation he has with his maker instead of something to keep quiet about. Scripture is a roadmap to take him through the large and small decisions with which he's faced every day. People are inherently good and want to be so, and they are a fertile field in which to plant seeds of faith, then move on and trust that the sunshine weather of the Almighty will tend to them.

He spends a lot of time with his son in law and his two grandsons, mentoring them in the ways of real men (just as his own father did before him). He doesn't simply talk about trying to solve problems in his church, or in his community. He attends meetings, or volunteers, or writes letters to participate and be involved. He's often told me that he likes people, and if you introduce him to a group of strangers, chances are you'll find he's befriended them within a matter of minutes. Yet he has a tender touch as well, and I've seen him sit with little children to watch cartoon movies just because they asked him to. It's all an expression of faith.

Most amazing of all to me, he is active in prison ministry at a medium-security prison near his home in Minnesota. It's not some superficial thing he does to make himself feel good. He goes into the prison to listen, and to lead Bible studies, and to talk with people whose lives are bereft of hope. What's more, he helps to build a solid foundation in their lives so that they don't become one of the ex-cons who make up an 80% recidivism rate. For that other 20%, he told me that nearly all manage to stay clean after their release. He even told me the story of a man he taught in prison with whom he's now good friends at a young men's retreat they attend with their grandsons. This weekend, I told him I admired him for that because it's a calling so few others would do. He simply shook it off and said "oh, it's an easy thing to be able to do because the men in there need the Lord too." That someone should call ministry among thieves, swindlers and killers 'easy' is a profound statement about the life-changing effects of faith lived beyond Sunday morning.

I have skeletons in my closet; you do too. So, I'm sure, does my uncle. This weekend, I got to see a side of him I hadn't considered before. At 75, he's now older than his father was when Grandpa passed away. Yet the walk is the same, the face is the same, the voice is the same, and many of the mannerisms are the same. I looked up to my grandfather when I was a boy, and to be honest, I looked up to my uncle too. Knowing him as a grown man now, myself being a man who is still very much trying to grow in my own faith, I appreciate him just a little more. Saturday afternoon, we shared several glasses of wine while cooking a turkey on the kettle. After dinner, we took my dog for a long walk and had some time to chat. Our conversation wasn't particularly deep, but I drank in his words and fatherly advice like cool water on a hot day. More than that, I drank it in that he chose to spend his time with me.

These days, life isn't easy for him. His wife is in the early stages of Alzheimer's, and after 54 years of marriage he's looking at how that disease will irreversibly end in the loneliness of gradual loss. Rather than fretting about it, he's reading everything he can find about the disease to better prepare the two of them for its onslaught, and to live quality lives for as long as they can. He is at the age where a man starts to reflect more on the ending aspects of this life rather than the things of looking forward that occupy our younger years. I suspect, though, that he doesn't give that much thought, because he's not one to run from life's challenges. Instead, he lives out his faith simply and without fanfare or seeking praise. In doing so, I think of him as a green tree of life, giving life-air to the world around him, and winning souls for something much better than even himself.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 25 May 2010

If the righteous receive their due on earth, how much more the ungodly and the sinner. Proverbs 11, verse 31.

This is sort of weird to write, especially if you followed "LOST" on TV. I got hooked on LOST 4 years ago. I thought it was well-written and extremely creative. As the seasons went on, it became apparent that something was collectively amiss in the lives of the characters. Were they dead? Were they alive? If they were alive, why did they live on the island? If they were dead, then what was the point of it all? I won't tell you how the series ended in case you haven't watched it or find yourself interested in the future. What I will say is that the theme of righteousness being rewarded plays out as the series drew to a close. Through most of the series, however, it seemed that no matter what crisis they faced, their lot only got worse, almost as if they were being punished for their misdeeds in life.

Does it seem to you that, sometimes, when things get bad, they only seem to get worse? When I have a bad day, it seems easy to see that things get blown out of proportion and all the weight of the world seems to press down on me hard. Negativity clouds my outlook, and small problems seem to be magnified beyond their true size. It isn't like I have any more problems than I normally do, just that they take on a false sense of importance. If I have an inordinate amount of trouble in my life, does it mean I'm ungodly? Perhaps, but I count myself in the church of believers even when some in that church prefer to look down their noses at a dirty sinner like me. I work hard at trying to avoid repeating my sins of the past while also avoiding new ones of the future, yet when I stumble, it doesn't mean I'm "ungodly."

Here's where we'll look at the opposite contrast to what the proverb says. If the ungodly receive their due on earth, how much more the righteous? As with the negatives, isn't it true that, when things are going great, they really go GREAT? It's easy to let someone steal my sunshine, but only if I let them. It doesn't take much for somebody's downer to get me down as well, but only if I turn away from love. I believe the key here is clinging to love, to faith, hope and love. Just like the apostle Paul said, those three remain and the greatest of them is love. The longer I live, the more I see that the 'righteous' of this world are those who live their lives by those three things. When I think of people who are recognized, I think of people who have taken those qualities and made something of them. Couple them with their other talents and, no matter how you measure success, that's a winning combination. They are 'doers' and if you consider faith, hope, and love to be choices we make, then their good choices are ones that pay dividends in success, and more importantly, in others.

What are you prepared to do? That thought has been on my heart a lot these past few days. What am I prepared to do to be one of those who receive good rewards for the life I live? What am I prepared to do to use my talents, and my faith, hope, and love to extend the Kingdom to those who may not know of it? What am I prepared to do to be a godly man who lives out a godly love in service to others? What am I prepared to do for the people I love and she who owns my heart? What am I prepared to do? Anything. I'm prepared, through Him who gives me that faith, hope, and love, to do anything He would have me do to avoid being lost, and to make the most of every day.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 26 May 2010

Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid. Proverbs 12, verse 1.

A friend of mine recently brought me up short. I learned he was one of the people who had 'de-friended' me Facebook, and I asked him why. He told me he couldn't tolerate some of the things said in this blog and on Facebook. Some of what he said seemed condescending; knowing what I do of him I don't believe that was his intention. Some of what he said was only half true because he'd jumped to conclusions without knowing all the facts; we've all done that. Some of it was out of line; that happens. And some of what he said was just plain incorrect. As my grandfather told me, "young men are full of piss and vinegar." I know I was; perhaps I still am because I don't think of myself as old.

But I'm compelled to admit that some of what he said was true. He said there were things I'd posted on my Facebook page that I shouldn't have posted online, things that hurt my kids especially. He insinuated that I was being selfish and needed to be more judicious in what I post because these open forums are places where anybody can both air and exploit your inmost thoughts. We also had a back and forth exchange about failing the Matthew 18 test (verses 15 to 17 where Christ talks about correcting each other). He offered up stern correction for wrongs he perceived I had done, and for wrongs I had indeed done. My friend apologized that his comments were harsh, and I thanked him for his candor and honesty. We each gave as good as we got, yet it was done in the spirit of Christian brotherhood.

At first I was angered by what he said, but it has weighed on my heart since. I've had some time to think about it and I now see a little of how this proverb played out in my conversation. I don't hate correction but I think you know that I've done stupid things and I've acted stupidly in some ways. I don't consider myself to be a naturally stupid man, but it's still a humbling thing to admit my friend's rebuke was partly deserved. We do and say things that are the right things to do at the time they're done. Despite that, I know I constantly find that my words and actions have unintended consequences. What I say in love isn't always interpreted that way; what I do in love isn't always perceived to be; when I've acted in love, I have instead hurt those people whose hearts I hold so dear. Those unintended consequences happen even with our best of intentions and when they do, well, my stupid meter pegs.

Thank heaven for people to correct us when they see fit to do so. Thank God there are people who face us with their concerns and try to address them in a Christian manner. It wouldn't be a Christian thing to abandon a friend when they need you, but it would be to give Christ's love in terms of harsh rebuke when harsh rebuke is appropriate. It wouldn't be a Christian thing to air one's dirty laundry indiscriminately, but it would be to say things in love for the people you love most when everything else you've said has fallen on deaf ears. Through all of it, we learn to accept discipline and to come back to knowledge. That discipline is both the correcting kind that brings justice according to our actions, and it is the courageous kind that steels one's backbone to live the lessons that justice teaches. Accepting discipline is a crucial step in living a life where we apply wise knowledge to all we think, say and do before stupidity sets in.

My friend and I run in different circles, and I believe I have lost him as a friend at least for the short run, but I hope that isn't so. I mourn the loss of any relationship, especially with friends who do their best to do what they do in reflection of the divine love all around them. He showed he loves knowledge, and believe he reluctantly offered his over-stepped (but still deserved) discipline. Who knows what tomorrow holds, and I'm content to not fret about what that could be. Whether in this life or the one to come, however, I hope he knows I still appreciate his brotherhood.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 27 May 2010

A good man obtains favor from the LORD, but the LORD condemns a crafty man. Proverbs 12, verse 2.

Is it any surprise to you that I struggle with some of these verses? I suppose that, if the Word is working on you, it causes strife in your soul. This one does for me because I want to obtain favor but I am, at times, crafty in how I try to do so. I don't subscribe to the idea of earning or doing your way into heaven; 'works righteousness' is a bunch of baloney to me. But I must admit that, sometimes, when I do something that could be perceived as 'good,' I still do it with an eye towards heaven, as if to say "hey, up there, did you see that?"

That's where the struggle comes in. I'm Lutheran, not Roman Catholic, but I think that guilt is one of the areas where the Lutheran church never completely broke away from its Catholic roots. It's framed in terms of "law and gospel." Specifically, it's framed in our awareness that we must constantly recognize our guilt as sinners (the 'law' end) knowing that all that guilt and all that sin are taken away through faith in Christ (the Gospel part). The church spends a lot of time hammering on that guilt; I think a lot of churches do, we aren't unique. And we need to hear it, but it takes a toll on you.

For me, it means that I want to do things for other people without even thinking about the consequences of them...but I rarely do. I'm not bragging when I say I try to offer help when I see help is needed. One of the ways I falter, though, is when I offer help and subconsciously ask myself "how does this affect me?" Or I hesitate to help because I'm worried about what it could do to me. That whole me, me, me thing is what I believe the LORD condemns in this proverb.

Go back to the beginning of time and you see it's there all along. The serpent was crafty, and that made Adam and Eve emulate him. Jacob was shrewd and opportunistic and he was crafty enough to wile his brother out of his birthright. That particular story says as much about Jacob's craftiness as it does about Esau's shallowness. My own namesake was crafty when he saw the beautiful woman and his heart was moved to make her his own. In this book chock full of stories about how to live our lives, the list goes on and on. Crafty equals me, me, ME.

So, relying on that tenet from a church I've attended, "it's not about me." I believe we are better, maybe even 'good,' when we consciously try to remove considerations about ourselves from each equation. What we do DOES matter when it is evidence of what lives in our hearts. Getting rid of that craftiness is predicated on our consciously working to squash our selfish whims. It takes real effort to quell the thoughts of 'what about me' or 'what's in it for me' but it has to be done if we're to be able to honestly live out lives of favored, wise knowledge from above.

One caution, though: even I am not going to be crass enough to say that all self-centeredness is wrong. I'm not God, remember? As a man, I think that it's a wise thing to have some pride, to realize that there are times when we do indeed need to think for and of ourselves. And it isn't all bad to realize there are some things in which we just can't help, that we're more loving if we stand on the sidelines (even when that's so tough). In the middle of all my personal struggles, that's a lesson I've had to learn. It's a healthy thing to remember that you have to take care of yourself sometimes before you can be healthy enough to take care of others.

When that time comes, I'm learning to subordinate the 'me' thoughts and replace them with 'it's not about me.' In doing that, I know in my heart it's the right thing to do and that it'll pay rewards of favor in some way, hopefully in my life, but I'm sure in some other way in the lives of good people I may barely know. That's better by a long shot.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 28 May 2010

A man cannot be established through wickedness, but the righteous cannot be uprooted. Proverbs 12, verse 3.

Wickedness. That word conjures up images of the Wicked Witch of the West screaming "I'll get you my pretty!" Or it brings to mind Hitler and his big brothers Uncle Joe and Chairman Mao. When I think of wickedness, I think of heinous things done to other people, of JR Ewing (who we all loved to hate in greedy envy), of demons, sleazy politicians, and evil...

...And I think those are forms of wickedness that also miss the mark in our day to day lives. I find it easy to forget that wickedness starts small, and that it doesn't take much wickedness to spoil a whole lot of good. When we are growing up our parents teach us that our actions have consequences. So it is with the little bits of wickedness that we're each guilty of allowing into our lives. It's all petty wickedness, and it's wicked awful the way wickedness can chip away at your integrity, and steal your soul out from under you. The silent killer of it is that it is deceiving because a life built on those small bits of evil isn't established on a firm foundation; like the Coldplay song says, I discovered that my castles stand upon pillars of salt and pillars of sand. The wicked little things we do will eventually catch up with us.

It's flipping the bird to the driver who cut me off. It's surfing over porn websites. It's thinking and re-thinking those comebacks to use them the next time you argue with your spouse. It's obsessing over that thing you saw in the ads in last Sunday's newspaper. It's the coarse language I use when talking with my friend who calls me at one in the morning because they've been drinking too much. It's the green envy you feel when you think of someone special you loved now loving someone else. It's using love to get what you want instead of to build up and cherish someone else. And it's letting my temper rule my responses instead of quiet patience.

Yesterday evening, I was working in my front yard when I pulled out this spiny, thorny-looking weed. The darn thing had leaves spreading a foot wide, but when I pulled it out I uprooted a whole tap root system that was over a foot long. If it was a wicked weed, I was certainly able to uproot it without much effort. A weed is a flower; Booker T Washington said that, but I don't think he was talking about the thistles growing in my yard. Those things really are evil and they take hold to squeeze out the good crops and the righteous good grass that I work so hard to preserve.

That's how I think of this proverb. The petty wickedness we each do is like the weeds that grow in the garden. They pop up all over the place, and to keep them at bay requires constant work and vigilance. If you get them when they're small, they're easy to uproot; leave them to take hold and they'll choke out even the hardiest of roses in not much time at all. Righteousness is more like a lawn, whose roots are deep (compared to their grass above ground), and whose roots spread out and to better gather in nourishing water. Or it's like a tree whose roots go deep and wide to anchor it in even the strongest winds. Those things aren't easily uprooted, and they're better able to withstand the weeds that always try to invade.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 29 May 2010

A wife of noble character is her husband's crown, but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones. Proverbs 12, verse 4.

Be advised, all: there is homework involved with this selection. Before you go any further, I ask you to read Proverbs 31, verses 10 through 31. Those verses talk about the wife of noble character, and they complete the thought begun by this one. To understand verse four, it helps to know what those other verses say.

I once dated a girl who very much wanted to be a wife of noble character. She talked a lot about it. She constantly said that to be that kind of wife was her highest ambition. To be honest, she had a lot stronger background in faith than I did, and our relationship didn't quite work out. But I suspected that she would indeed make a wife of noble character to the man fortunate enough to marry her. Eventually, in time, she moved on and so did I.

In the interest of full disclosure, this was really the first time I had really seriously considered the words of the Proverbs as being good marital advice. I simply hadn't heard them preached or discussed much before. Now, after twenty-one years of marriage and in the middle of a cancerous marital crisis, I see even more how the words are true. There's a thing that I want to get on deck before I go any further: in those twenty-one years of marriage, I never had reason to think of my wife as 'disgraceful.' Never once did she do anything to disgrace me or our family. She didn't have to: I did enough on my own. She always brought her A game, even when I didn't.

Instead, in most everything that she did, she was a wife of noble character. Yes, we fought, we cussed, we hurt each other inside, she disengaged in our lives as much as I did, and we had our ups and downs; every couple has those things. Yes, we're stuck smack dab in the middle of that crisis, and as I write this the irony of it is practically dripping off my fingers. At this writing, I can't tell you honestly how it's all going to end, though we're friendly and working to stay close, and we're working together both for our kids and for ourselves in ways we never did in the twenty-one years before all the clouds of doubt gathered.

And despite all that, I see now that the words of the proverb are even truer than when I first considered them. Outshining any negative I could think of, she always worked hard to be that woman of noble character. I believe every man wants a wife like that, someone with whom he can live a life of honor, someone with whom he can build a life really worth living. Men and women have different expectations from marriage, but I think I can speak for every prospective and actual husband in saying that, in addition to someone who is interested in us, cares for us, cares for themselves, is true and honest, and is a tigress behind closed doors, a husband wants a wife whose character is noble. He wants someone whose character lives high on that pedestal, but whose love he can share and grow in his arms and in his heart at eye level.

When we get to that chapter, you'll read my expounding on it even more, but let me give you a preview. A wife of noble character is someone in whom a husband has confidence. She sets about work vigorously. She is shrewd, and nimble; she is loving to strangers and loving even more with those to whom she gives her heart. She is clothed with strength and dignity, and she can laugh at the days to come. All I can say about a wife like that is "wow." Amazing, indescribable, unstoppable, and I'll gladly be yours forever. She'd surely be the crown on this tarnished king's head, but she'd also be the light in which I would gladly bask with every remaining breath I'm privileged to draw.

Someday, when all the storm clouds have passed and the sun is once again shining in my life, I'd like to look up my friend and tell her that she was right. I'd like to tell her that her standard was true, and that I'm grateful to finally, brutally consider it. But more than that, I hope for the chance, no matter how everything turns out, to tell my wife that she surpassed this standard in our marriage and she's noble in character and practice. The standard is true because God set it on paper, and those words never lead us wrong.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 30 May 2010

The plans of the righteous are just, but the advice of the wicked is deceitful. Proverbs 12, verse 5.

A little over an hour ago, I posted (on Facebook) one of my favorite movie quotes. It's from Ferris Buehler's Day Off (which, along with Forrest Gump, is probably the story of my life). You've heard it before: Life moves pretty fast. You don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.

Brother (and sister), let me tell you something you already know but, if you're like me, you probably lose sight of now and then. The world turns on a dime and life moves pretty fast. One minute you're cruising along, the next minute something happens that changes your life. One minute, you're sitting in a restaurant and the next minute in walks the woman of your dreams and you realize you're in love. One minute, you're in class teaching something way beyond your skill level and the next minute you find out that terrorists have blown up buildings in New York. One minute you're married, the next minute you aren't. One minute you're middle aged, the next minute you learn you're going to be a grandparent. One minute you're fine, the next minute you learn you are dying and your fine is winding down by the minute.

One minute at a time, get it? The older I get, the more I believe that prudent people do plan, but they really don't execute their plans more than a minute at a time. They do so because they have learned that doing otherwise is a waste of both minutes and plans. They do so because they don't want to waste those precious commodities. Such people learn that, to execute a plan in righteousness (that is, in order, in advance, in accordance with what they want to accomplish) they should do so just one minute at a time.

Sure, if you're a planner, if you like to have things worked out in advance so you aren't surprised along the way, living like this requires a lot of patience. That's a pretty all order sometimes. In my own situation, we're trying hard to move forward with a lot of patience. We each like to plan and know ahead of time what's going to happen, and I find I'm usually the stick in the mud who says "whoa, let's take our time and do this right." It's the rest of our lives we're talking about, and if we're going to do that justice, then we rightly need to do so according to a plan we live out one decision at a time. We do it one minute at a time. And we do it because life moves pretty fast and we need to stop and look around every once in a while.

To me, anything else would be wicked, and we've already talked about wickedness here. When this proverb says 'the advice of the wicked' I think of that in terms of executing a life-plan confidently yet one minute at a time. The impatient part of me wants to skip ahead three steps and do C before I've done A. The impetuous side of me wants to just get SOMETHING done so I have something concrete to work with. The planner in me nags me to get on with it and just do it for heaven's sake because all this has been in the works for so long, yet the 'righteous' part of me counsels patience and guided wisdom. And that happens because, whether I plan for it or not, life really does move pretty fast. One minute you're in one frame of mind, and the next minute you're in another.

I believe God does indeed want us to execute our lives in ordered rhythm. I believe he teaches us patience, wisdom, listening and understanding so that we can plan ahead and live our lives using our talents. He wants us to live our lives being mindful of the deceit around us, while also being mindful that things change quickly and we need to be ready to act when they do. Our lives change in big ways because of the small things we do, or things that others do that affect us. Living out life one minute at a time let's us stop and look around (so we don't miss it) yet absorb each minute so we can make the most of it in service to something more wonderful than ourselves.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 31 May 2010

Wicked men are overthrown and are no more, but the house of the righteous stands firm. Proverbs 12, verse 7.

Today is Memorial Day. Of course I'll use this column to talk about the sacrifices of the men and women who gave their lives to advance liberty and protect us. I won't guilt you in doing so, but I will try to put a different spin on it. Please forgive my verbosity.

I have a confession to make; that isn't surprising now, is it? You'll have to read on to learn what it is. For now, I'll talk about my father. My dad is buried in a national cemetery. Fort Gibson National Cemetery, outside of Muskogee, Oklahoma. Fort Gibson was, of course, a frontier fort in Indian territory, specifically it was established during the Jackson Administration as the military outpost at the terminus of the Trail of Tears. You've probably never heard of the place, and there are only a few relatively famous people buried there: a few Medal of Honor recipients, a jazz musician, and one of Sam Houston's wives (the one who was his reason for moving to Texas and changing history here).

Dad wasn't famous. In fact, he was a middle grade civil servant. He rose only to GS-13, which is high enough but not as high as his quiet ambition might have taken him had he been a man of different temperament. If you go to the Ammunition School where he taught, you will meet people who worked with him and will tell you, "oh, Ken Terry, I remember him. He was a great guy." You'd get the same reaction from some of the long-timers at the church where Mom & Dad attended in McAlester. A few years from now, those people will be gone and Dad's contributions will fade into memory that can only be accessed through investigation and digging.

I got my love of the spotlight from him because there was nothing my father craved more than attention and having people focus on him. I only saw him speak or sing in front of groups a few times, but when he did he could hold them. He had an incessant need for praise; if you haven't guessed, I sort of have that same need. Being in the spotlight as a teacher, as an instructor, and in a choir was one of the ways he satisfied that need. Proving the point that our lives change on a dime, one evening he stood on stage, a handsome and charismatic man in a tuxedo, performing with a troupe of local singers; Dad rarely just sang, he performed. A few hours later, he was in a hospital having a disfiguring surgery that prolonged his life yet didn't defeat the cancer that eventually killed him: a cancer whose genesis came from service to the country. He had to have the surgery because the medicine of the time made his only choice to be between gross disfigurement and quick death.

It's ironic that a man who spent so much of his adult life seeking adulation should rest for eternity in a common soldier's grave. When he was buried there in December 1997, his was the last row at the cemetery. Go there now and the cemetery is extended dozens of rows behind his. World War II, Korea and now Vietnam era veterans are dying at increasing rates and the national cemeteries are filling with their remains. His marker is but one of hundreds, maybe thousands, of the non-descript white stones that serve as the only earthly reminders of these men and women who gave service to our country. You used to be able to walk across the grass and right to the edge. Now you walk past dozens of white markers, many of them freshly cut marble with the black lettering still unweathered by the elements.

Dad served during Korea, and overseas during the Cold War. He left the Army in 1960, but returned as a civilian in the mid 1970s to work as an ammunition inspector, and later as a teacher of the processes used to inspect and store ammunition. It was a middle-level job in which he got to stand in front of small groups and teach them how to do a difficult but important job, and Dad excelled at it. After the 1991 Gulf War, when other civilians cut and ran from the opportunity, Dad volunteered to go to Kuwait and dispose of the millions of rounds of ammunition left behind when President Bush called a halt to Desert Storm. When men of higher rank and better condition showed their true colors, my overweight, diabetic, middle-manager father gladly stood up and said "take me." While there, it is believed he was exposed to chemicals that grew into the rare form of cancer that killed him six years later; remember those oil well and chemical fires started by Saddam as the Iraqis exited Kuwait? In his own way, Dad lived out the proverb, serving as one of the thousands who overthrew the wicked man's intentions so that the house of the (sort of) righteous could stand firm.

Today is Memorial Day and I think of my dad resting there in the quiet pastures on the abandoned frontier post. For the life of me, I never was able to figure out why my parents chose southeast Oklahoma as a place to retire; it just wasn't my cup of tea and I could never understand why it was theirs. Couldn't understand, that is, until I got to know the people in their lives, and until I saw Fort Gibson. I don't know if Dad would have wanted an ornate tomb or one of those big, fancy granite monuments that serve as eternal testaments to vanity. I suspect that, if it had been free, he wouldn't have turned it down. Yet when he was dying, he one day said to Mom, "Let's drive over to Fort Gibson. It's time and I want to see it." They did, and I think my quietly vainglorious father was impressed by the idea of his marker being a simple soldier's

monument, of resting forever in a long line of men not unlike himself. When the time came, we buried him in section 16, site 1364. Kind of a common, unimpressive way of remembering a man who was, to me, anything but common or unimpressive.

Today, like you, I'll take some time off. I plan to finish some class-work I need to do for my job, and I plan to go to the Frisco pool for a few hours in the sun. My oldest daughter is coming home, and if I know my kids, something unexpected will happen; it's just a feeling I have. The confession I make here is that I've never been to Fort Gibson on Memorial Day, and I've never been there when all the graves are decorated with flags. On the one day a year, for thirteen years now running, I've not yet used some of my plentiful time to drive up there to stand by my father's grave and remember his service and his sacrifice. I'm ashamed of that fact, and this year, like so many in the past, I've said like the wandering Jew at Passover, "next year." For me, next year not in Jerusalem, but in Muskogee, Oklahoma USA. I have no idea if I'll be able to do that next year; life truly does change in each moment. But I make the same vow and hope to be able to keep it to remember what Dad did along with the millions of other common yet extraordinary men like him.

Thank you Ken Terry for what you did for me. And thank you to all the men and women just like you who did the same. Your sacrifices are remembered more than just one day a year.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 1 June 2010

A man is praised according to his wisdom, but men with warped minds are despised. Proverbs 12, verse 8.

To be honest, I'm not sure what to say about this proverb. There's truth in it, to be sure; in my own experience, it's painful truth. People expect things of us, and when we don't act in the ways they expect, we lose face with them. When we slip and fall, when we do things that are wrong, or when they assume that we do things that are wrong, we lose standing in their eyes. I've said it before: I don't much care what people think of me. I don't want to go out of my way to do things that would 'de-estimate' me in people's eyes, but neither do I spend much time worrying about what people think of me because gossip happens no matter what we do.

Still, nobody (myself included) wants to be despised, and when you demonstrate that you're thinking with a warped mind people despise you. Not long ago, I had a pastor, a good friend, pray with and for me, and in the prayer he said he despised me and what I'd done. He was being honest after I had been honest about what I'd done, what I felt. I appreciated that honesty. It was ironic: finally be honest and you get to be despised. I was stuck smack dab in the middle of relationships where my heart was being pulled in several directions and this surely didn't fit in with my friend/pastor's expectations for where his friend and parishioner would lead his life. I had devastated my family and it rightfully angered him so he told me so.

It's in the past now yet I still don't want to be despised. I can't say my thinking then was 'warped' as what I felt and thought then was quite genuine and real. What was said and done was done out of love, even when it was love that wasn't fully mine to give. People said "don't trust your feelings" and I found that very difficult to do, especially when they were the only things that I believed were keeping me alive. After you've felt damaged for so long, to have someone so willingly share their heart felt like wading into a cool pond on a blistering day. But I understand how people could despise me because I was committed to one person yet gave my heart to another. It was dishonest to both of them because I learned if you aren't free to marry, then you aren't free to date (quoting Gary Chapman; not an original Dave thought). I wish I'd learned that lesson before, but wishes are sometimes for fools.

I have strong faith yet acted in ways that were anything but Christian. I saw it back then but didn't want to acknowledge it: acting that way, even when you're in love, makes people despise you. At the very least, they think you have a warped mind, and sometimes you do. When people confronted me with my sins, I felt genuine remorse as well as more than a touch of irritation. When friends started pulling away, I got angry because while part of me understood it – they despised a warped mind – but part of me also thought "who are you to throw stones at me?" Afterwards, I learned to adopt the prayer posture of saying "God, your will be done" and being content with that. I was learning that's the start of wisdom.

The relationship is over. You've read about all the convulsions involved in it so I won't go back into them. Emotionally, the wounds are healing but let me tell you: it hurts; I mean it REALLY hurts and I've never felt this kind of devastation before. All of it cost me my marriage, and we're stuck in a limbo of trying to move ahead and not be hurt any more. Personally, I'm learning to inch my way forward and to be thankful for the small, tender mercies. I've long thrived in the limelight of wanting people to like me, and now that I've actually started trying to 'walk the talk' I find that most people quietly don't give a flip let alone say "hey, you're doing better." It takes much longer to build back bridges than it does to tear them down, even in friendships with Christians. Guess I got what I deserved.

Still, our commonality as believers isn't just that we have a forgiving Savior. It's that we're all filthy with the need for Him, and someone else's junk isn't less ugly than my own. I really don't care about someone else's junk, and to be honest, I still don't much care what they think of mine. And yet, I think the best way to keep those thoughts from metastasizing into something dirtier is to fall back on that same prayer posture and say "God, your will be done." Then move forward from there. I can't say I will ever be praised for my wisdom, or even that I should be. Only time will tell, that is, time spent following a divine will, and being thankful for those tender mercies. For now, that's enough, and it's nothing for which anyone could despise me.

Guess I was privileged to find something to say after all.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 2 June 2010

Better to be nobody and yet have a servant than pretend to be somebody and have no food. Proverbs 12, verse 9.

All through the Old Testament there are messianic verses that point both directly and indirectly to the messiah who was promised to the Jews as both an early ruler and spiritual savior. There are over 600 of them, and the chances of them pointing to anyone but Jesus of Nazareth are beyond astronomical; the math calculates it at one followed by hundreds of zeros that one person, other than Him, would fulfill all the promises. I don't believe this verse is one of the 600, but it's how I choose to interpret it today. If you're a pastor getting ready to debunk my words here, please save yourself the effort and just read.

In my state of frayed nerves and scary expectations about my future, I find comfort in this verse implying that it's better to be nothing special and have a person on your side who came as a servant and nourishes your soul, than to be someone who is special in the eyes of the world and yet have a barren spirit. It points me to the cross because there's no place else to go.

Woe is me, woe is me. I'm nothing special. (A little Joe Biden lingo here for you) "God love ya" if you think different of me, or if you think I'm something special. Don't spend time worrying about myself esteem or my self-image; trust me, they and my healthy ego are just fine. In reality, I still am nothing special. I'm just a man among men, and I'm not someone who would stand out in a crowd (except that I am badly sunburned today), and I'm not somebody who you would remember for very long if we spoke at your local supermarket. I think of myself as handsome, and witty, and occasionally good with the words, and I can be a terrible flirt. I enjoy life and even in so publicly mourning lost love, I love life and I love people.

Boil all that down until you're left with what really matters, and I think you'll find I'm nobody special. I'm just another man among millions who is doing his best to work through life, to love and be loved, and to find peace in a world where there is little. I've been around, you see, and I've seen and done things that most men haven't, and shouldn't, and they have left me scarred. When I turn out the light, that is when I can get to sleep on nights when my subconscious doesn't pressure me with pictures I don't want to see, I carry the emotional scars of many choices made that didn't quite turn out as good as I hoped they would. Folks, I'm simply nobody special. If I live my life in this mode, a potter's field of incognito awaits me.

Yet I believe in Christ as my savior, and that makes me somebody. He serves me every day by listening to my anguished calls, and answering them in his own right way in the time that best serves both me and his larger kingdom. When I'm physically hungry, he provides me with food to revitalize my body (through the talents and blessings He's given to me). When I'm spiritually bereft, He gives me comfort through the mystery of his words and sacraments, and refreshes my strength with what I need to move forward. He listens when I confess and when I open the blood-veins of my inner-most thoughts to him, and the comfort He provides is simply amazing. He nourishes my lagging spirit and teaches me to suffer and persevere so that what character He builds in me may endure into hope. It's always enough, and more often than not, it's much more than I can hold onto myself. I have to share it with others because it's too wonderful to keep as a secret.

I suppose a trained psychologist could say this is just a self-delusion that I tell myself to make myself feel better. And I suppose an atheist could make a reasoned argument that it was only my hard work that put food on the table; they haven't seen me working much lately. I reject both of those concepts because, deep down inside, I know better. I just know it. In the same way you know that someone loves you, I know this. That's why I feel the words of this proverb are true in my life. I really am nothing special, just another Joe Schmo who struggles with some of the same things you do. Yet I really, truly am somebody because I know that, despite my lack of specialty, I am somebody because He makes me so. I don't have to pretend about that. It's simply an undeniable truth.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 3 June 2010

A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel. Proverbs 12, verse 10.

Of course this means more than just “agree with the ASPCA.” Of course this proverb means that we’re worth more than the animals, and we, as made-righteous people, should care for each other even more than we’d care for pets, or farm food, or anything like that. You don’t have to read too deeply into it to see that point.

Me, I’m sticking with the animal angle of this because I like animals. I have three of them (not even counting the three goldfish who have outgrown the tank in my great room). Josh, Sadie and Moo. Simple names; I guess we’re simple people. Josh is a 3-year old Catahoula hound who we rescued alongside a road in Denton. He’s really my son’s dog because, well, they understand each other. What that says about each of them you decide. Sadie was a free kitten who we got as a birthday present for my youngest daughter, but who soon adopted my oldest daughter as her own (mainly because Pookie wouldn’t let anybody else hold her). The cat is now seven and fat. And Moo was another present for my youngest daughter. Moo adopted Sammabalamma but, in reality, Moo just took over the house and forced the rest of us to get in line; she turned a year old this week.

I care for them because they cared for me. Every day, when I sit here at my computer, the cats come and go out of my office and offer me companionship. They nuzzle up against me (usually because they want something), and they talk back to me. When I do dishes at night, Moo jumps up on the bar and watches me like an eagle on a perch. I lean over to her and she leans up to my face and meows at me, then gives me one of those small cat peck-on-the-cheek gestures that cats do when they’re at ease. Josh is a mess, full of way too much energy for a dog who is long since over being a puppy (and who’s been neutered as well), and I get mad at him for wearing holes in my yard. But I treasure our nightly walks around the neighborhood, and he’s been a loving and fun guy to be around, and for such an energetic dog he’s actually learned to obey, sit, stay, come, and not be such a doofus.

I’ve needed them these last few months, especially the first few weeks of living alone when even my kids didn’t want to come around here. I needed someone to love me when I felt left behind by those who did, and I needed someone to love in return so I could share all that I had bottled up inside. God gave humans dominion over the animals not just to eat them (originally we were created as vegetarians but all that changed after that whole flood thing) but to care for them. He created them for a purpose, and mine have fulfilled a purpose in giving me affection.

Sure, they cost a lot of money: a commodity in short supply when you’re maintaining two households. Litter, food, flea collars, shots, treats, boarding: they all cost a lot of money. The cats are especially finicky; they don’t like the generic cat food I bought this week, and have been telling me this in no uncertain terms all morning. The dog doesn’t much care; remember, he’ll eat lawn sausages too. In the long run, though, that cost is minimal, and I love them like they were my other children; I suppose that, in a way, they are.

I’ve always thought, too, that people who are cruel to animals should have done to them what they do to the animals. One guy with whom I went to high school used to talk fondly of drowning kittens they found in abandoned houses; I always thought he should be drowned. Another talked about how he would beat his dog if the dog got out of line; I’m guilty of stern discipline to my dog (especially when I found he peed on the corner of my bed) but never to the point of abuse and always for loving correction.

One time, we got a puppy that had been neglected and abused, who we thought could be trained in time. Instead, she was un-trainable and after being bitten too many times, I took her to the pound. I’ve always felt bad about that because she was really just a product of the neglect in which she lived most of her life. I hope she was adopted out but, let’s be honest, that probably wasn’t the case. Another time, I had a dog put down because he bit my nephew. It was true that the nephew had, time and again, provoked the dog to the point where the dog simply had enough and bit him. But it couldn’t be allowed because once the dog got a liking to doing it, he would always be unreliable. Without hesitation I had the dog put down, and like the other, I’ve always felt sort of bad about it.

Isn’t that so much truer with us as people, and isn’t that really the point of the proverb? We are products of the lives in which we cast ourselves, of the environment in which we live, and we all turn out the ways we do because of that. Each of us is guilty of biting the hands that love us. Got skin, got sin. And God doesn’t give up on us. He doesn’t take us to the pound, or have us euthanized. Instead, he gives us chance after chance because he created us for a purpose as well. We aren’t just some random collection of cells, little more than ape-born protoplasm. We were created to be ‘very good’ and for a good purpose.

A better purpose than the animals, in fact. Right now, the dog is outside, sitting in his yard, looking up at the birds who are perched on the roofline, trying to convince them that he just wants to play. Sadie is reluctantly munching away at her generic food, I'm sure cursing me out in cat language which I'm glad I don't understand. And Moo is just being Moo, flitting around the house from point to point. I think she's chasing a fly. They were put in my life for a purpose, not just to love my family, but for me as well, for such a time as this when I needed someone to love. I'm thankful for that. I'm not righteous on my own, but I'm thankful for it all the same.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 4 June 2010

He who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment. Proverbs 12, verse 11.

These days, I try to never underestimate work. I remember one of my friend Patrick's sermons about vocation. He preached that work is a good thing, that even before the fall in Eden, God gave Adam and Eve work to do in the garden. Genesis says that "God took the man and put in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." Let me remind again: this was even before God made Eve to complete Adam and help with the work, and before the entrance of disorder and sin into the world. During that 'before time,' God saw that everything he created was 'very good,' including work. Maybe, then, work itself is a very good thing.

If you've ever been unemployed, you know this too well. And if you're in search of work now, you may even be thinking "shut up, Dave. This is just salt in the wound." Relax. I understand. I've been there myself. I've been unemployed, fired, rolled off (and just plain rolled), and in search of work when there's little work to be found. I've often said that I'm not afraid to die; I know what's in store for me after that. But I'm terrified of being out of work, and I'm terrified of being unable to fulfill my commitments or lose some of my identity that's wrapped up around my vocation. I'm blessed with a good job right now, but I write these columns and the other things I do for extra income, as well as personal witness and satisfaction. I like to work, and I like the sense of fulfillment and accomplishment I get from work, whether it's work I do for a salary or work I do for other reasons.

In the times when I've been in a work lull, or when I've been in search of work, I find it comforting to know that, whatever task God puts in front of me, it is good work; even very good work. It's true that the Internet allows procrastinators like me ample time to chase fantasies that display a lack of judgment; no, we're not getting all pornish here. Other than exchanging friendships, how else can you explain Facebook? But even that can have purpose. Sharing information, brightening others, exposition, witnessing, testimony, and humor: if those aren't good things to do for ourselves and for others then I don't know what good is. They involve different levels of work, and if done with healthy motivation, I can't help but think that even social networking can be a very good thing.

Yes, we've all been guilty of chasing fantasies when we should be working. I'm the biggest daydreamer I know, and I spend far more time writing and procrastinating than I do plying my other trades. I believe the proverb serves as a white line, as a guide marker saying "keep it under control." The 'yang' of it does so while also insinuating the 'yin' of "a work attitude produces abundance" because God wants us to know that the things he gives us to do are bigger than just us, and bigger than just completing menial tasks.

So I try to never underestimate work anymore. It's put in front of me for a good reason. I get bored easily, and when I do get bored, my mind wanders. I could probably use a little more Puritan work ethic in my daily life, while I also give myself an A for the ability to multi-task. No matter the task, however, I'm learning to step back and see that all things we do as work, whether vocational or maintenance or even recreational, are things put in front of us for our betterment. That applies whether we're employed or unemployed.

One of the things I remember most from Patrick's sermon was that work is something that we have both here and probably in the afterlife. I look forward to that day then when I won't think of work in terms of "I have to go to work" but, instead, as "I can't wait to do my work." Thank heaven for the glimpses we get of that time when we look at something we finish and pat ourselves on the back for a job well done. It's a very good thing, whether we're paid for it or not, and I'll try to remember to be thankful for it more often.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 5 June 2010

The wicked desire the plunder of evil men, but the root of the righteous flourishes. Proverbs 12, verse 12.

"In the end, we all fruit." My Big Fat Greek Wedding. Yeah, I know: chick flick. I like it. Irreverent movie that pokes fun at all of our families. In that particular line, the Greek father is speaking at his daughter's wedding reception, talking about how different both the families are. We're different but, in the end, we're all the same; "we may be apples and oranges but, in the end, we all fruit." This proverb talks about fruit as well, specifically the fruit of our actions (and our choices), as well as the fact that we too, like the big, fat, Greek family, are all the same.

The proverb harkens back to the first commandment. You know, the one that tells us "hey, I'm God. I'm the only thing you will ever want or need." It's about selfishness. I think that's the foundation of all sin & wrongdoing: that selfish attitude of 'me first.' What Adam and Eve did was about themselves. Sure, they were deceived by someone craftier than themselves, and sure they were naïve, even while living in a state of being 'very good.' They were also human like you and I with the same capacity to decide, and they decided 'me first.' In doing so, they decided, just like we decide every day, to accept undesirable consequences for which they were little prepared.

It's also interesting how the first part of the verse talks about desiring plunder, not the state (evil) itself. Nobody wants to be evil. I honestly believe that, even the most evil people we can think of did not want to be that way. To me, evil is like a disease, but it's a disease we allow. It enters our lives, whether we chose it or not, and it consumes us from the inside out. We fight it and we struggle, and sometimes the disease wins. It's the fight that prevents that victory even if it consumes us. By and large, though, when evil wins it is because of some kind of choice we made.

And that choice is all about desiring plunder. We WANT something, not just the lacking or requiring kind of want, but mainly the desiring and craving kind of want. We want whatever it is that choice will yield. Maybe it's a beautiful woman; maybe it's a new home; maybe it's advantage, or money, or revenge, or a cheap thrill, or gratification, or whatever it is to us at the time: we desire something. That desire is what feeds the evil, and what keeps us separated from faithful Providence which has desires as well, His only for love and our betterment.

I know: this is preachy for a Saturday morning. But in the end, we all fruit. The day ahead here in North Texas promises to be hot, sunny, and full of opportunity. It's on my heart to be reminded of, and to share with you, the message from Water's Edge: it's not about me. That's the medicine that will treat the disease of desire. That's the gimmick that will serve as a quick reminder that we're all crucial pieces in a beautiful mosaic called "life." That's the key to ensuring the root of our righteousness flourishes to provide foundational strength and nourishment for the fruit which grows in the sunlight. I can't promise you that every decision I make today will not be about me, and I won't promise you that I don't desire some things that I can't or can't yet have. Only some of what I will say and do will bear good fruit. What I will promise is that I'll try to keep all this in mind as I weave my way through the minefield of choices, then challenge you to do the same.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 6 June 2010

An evil man is trapped by his sinful talk, but a righteous man escapes trouble. Proverbs 12, verse 13.

I am officially getting old. I don't understand the music my kids listen to any more than my parents understood mine. Personally, I think there's a big difference between techno-pop and big hair rock & roll of the early 80s and what passes for the top 40 today. Parents and teenagers have been arguing over what to listen to ever since the radio was invented. It seems to me, though, that deviancy has been defined down a few notches with all the tripe that's peddled to our kids today, and it worries me about how it traps their attitudes and their talk.

Yep, I'm getting old. I remember when MTV used to actually show music videos all day and not reality shows where every 10 seconds you hear BLEEP and the Jerry Springer clones are either stuck in the voyeuristic hell of Steve-O's masochistic exhibitionism, or they're griping each other out over who ate the last Swiss Roll from the community kitchen. This isn't the real world: it's garbage. I want no more to be a prude than I want to be one of the un-evolved apes you see traipsing around the TV screen.

What gets me is that so much of today's music is so angry. In case you haven't guessed, my opinion of rap and hip hop music is fairly low, that is unless you consider misogynistic narcissism, plagiarism, and over-sexed, under-intellectualized hedonism to be virtues. We're all sinful; there's no doubt. And if you listened to Led Zeppelin, KISS, or even Mungo Jerry you quickly picked up that their lyrics weren't talking about playing canasta. Got skin, got sin. Today's music ain't got the same soul, or so said Bob Seger. I sometimes wonder if it has any soul at all because much of it is neither soul food nor fit for Soul Train.

Every day, I listen to the kids' stations so I can get a feel for it myself. The beats are addictive and I think that's what lures them in; it did with me and my parents too. I've been in dance clubs in the last year or two where it is still way cool to grind on the floor to a driving rhythm that practically pulsates through your body. Couple that with Red Bull & vodka and you're looking at one heck of a lot of fun. The dance floor doesn't writhe because they're all uninterested. Get that boom boom pow into your brain and pretty soon you're singing along to what's being said. And you remember it, and it seeps into your language and your attitude. That's the scary part for me because so much of what's said is angry, in your face, enthusiastically profane, self-centered and just wrong.

Sure, if it works for you, stick to whatever genre trips your trigger, that is, as long as it doesn't drag all of us down. It's about choice, you know. As a parent, I see my kids growing through phases in which they'll sometimes listen to things that upset me just for the shock value of it; I expect that, and this too is older than Marconi's singing box. I want my kids to escape trouble, and I want them to flee from sinful talk, especially since I strongly believe that all the reinforcement they get from their music and their TV contributes to the foul language that seems to spew out whenever they get stressed. I'm hoping that too is a phase; I know it was with me (and those of you who know me well know it wasn't pretty). What we take into our ears and hands, we take into our hearts. I would spare my kids the shame of having others say about them "would you just listen to that trash" by imploring them yet again to observe that, if it sounds risky, it probably is. Change the channel, dial a new station, or just turn the darn thing off.

It's true, there's hope. Just last night, I poked my head in my son's room and his big, bad tough guy self was watching I- Carly, which if you haven't seen it, is pretty wholesome fun for tweens & teens. Of course, I think he switched to Family Guy right after that. If you peruse my middle kid's Ipod, you'll find just as many love songs (and even Disney bops) as you do the vomit of rap music. And I think that people today, even in our brave new world of the 21st century, want to still do what is basically right. If it is about choices, then today I choose to try to be a little bit better in what I listen to because the people around me are learning from me. I can do better so maybe they can do better. Eminem, stick that in your ear and crank it.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 7 June 2010

From the fruit of his lips a man is filled with good things, as surely as the work of his hands rewards him. Proverbs 12, verse 14.

I wonder if this verse includes the written word. I suppose a loose translation could include it, so I'll stick with that one because I get great satisfaction out of these daily ramblings. It makes me smile to know that people read what I write and that it does them some kind of good. Years ago, I read a book by Stephen King that talked about the craft of writing, and one of the things he advised was to discipline yourself to do it regularly. Doing these daily columns provides that discipline to me and I find it easier to open up and pen honest output than I did just a few months ago.

There's more to it, though, than just my personal satisfaction. To me, this also speaks of support. The minister at church gave a great sermon yesterday, talking about a visit to the dentist, and why people avoid going (because of guilt over not taking care of themselves, a previous bad experience, and fear). He translated those same qualities into why people struggle with attending churches. Travis really ROCKED with his words, and I was thinking at the time how satisfying it is to say something that makes a great point and to say it well. He certainly did.

That then got me thinking about how I needed to hear just those very words. I'm in the middle of that very struggle, grappling with life-changing decisions from which there's no turning back. Things change, we change, our outlooks change, and we each have baggage we haul around. We all have junk in the trunk. If I put myself in the shoes of someone who feels their junk is just too much to overlook, or that they got burned once before in a church (even when it's something they themselves did), or that they are afraid of what they'll learn if they open up, I don't have to walk very far to know those shoes are pretty comfortable. They're a lot like my own.

Whether you're talking about marital crisis, dealing with your kids, dealing with work, where to worship, how to deal with rejection, or any number of possibilities, I think Travis' point is still valid: that we all carry around guilt, the past, and fear which keep us from moving forward as the people God intends us to be. I'm a lot like you, and I sometimes don't know what to say when someone hits me up with news I'm not prepared to absorb; or when somebody tells me things that are uncomfortable to hear. People we don't expect to are stuck in the middle of divorce; your ideal child tells you she's pregnant; a good kid gets arrested; one of your best friends confesses to you something so off the wall that you wouldn't have thought it possible. The longer I live the more I see that the propensity of people to shock and awe each other is limitless. Usually the shockers hurt. It's difficult to remember, in the moment, that the other guy is dealing with those same three qualities, and the best thing I could do is listen, then maybe walk around in their shoes before ever opening my mouth. Or penning my words.

I suppose this all is trailing from where the proverb originally started. That was talking about what results from what we say and do. Yet, perhaps, what we say and do in these situations, when others need us, is even more relevant here. A real measure of a man is how much he loves the people around him, not just how much he's loved by them. I believe that, in times of others' distress, listening and empathy are just as satisfying (and bear even more righteous fruit) than anything else I could say or do for them. I remember so many times when all I wanted was just for someone to listen, and when they did how it felt like it was just what I needed at the time. That's just as satisfying as sitting back and seeing my words and saying "I'm really proud of that." Or even a sermon that dead-on rocked the house without hammering a point into submission. What's more, that kind of empathetic love is true example of what a Savior wants us to do.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 8 June 2010

A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult. Proverbs 12, verse 16.

Two things have me super-annoyed today; you decide whether or not I'm foolish.

Thing number one is report cards. My kids finished school last Friday and, for the first time that I can remember, they DID NOT receive their report cards on the last day of school. Frisco ISD said they would be mailed a week or more later. You know, this has me extremely annoyed because some of our summer plans are contingent on whether or not one of my kids needs to attend summer school. To be honest, the likelihood of that kid attending SS grows more remote by the minute because they can advance to the next grade without it. That, and I honestly believe that part of the problem in the failed class was the teacher; we (unkindly) nicknamed her "Nurse Ratched" after the One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest character.

Yet I'm annoyed because we did our part and now it seems the school district didn't do its part. We got our kid to school all year, we paid our school taxes, we worked with them on homework, we attended the meetings and conferences, and now when we need something the district fails to provide. We can check grades online but I have no way of knowing whether or not all those grades have been updated, though I suspect they have been in most cases. Am I a fool for now, five days later, staying my annoyance? Perhaps, yes, but that's a label I'll accept.

Thing number two is a bit more disgusting. If you read my Facebook page yesterday you saw that somebody TP'd our house the night before. Lots of toilet paper, a stolen for sale sign placed in front of my son's window and, yes, feces creatively placed in front of the door. I cleaned all of it up, ascribing it to kid pranks...but then wouldn't you know it that three hours later it happened again. This time, more TP and, ick, a pile of steaming feces put in the mailbox. Of course the mailman didn't deliver after that; I wouldn't either. I have an idea who it was, and when I told them that a camera had been placed in front of the house and that I'd called the police, you know, it's funny that there wasn't a repeat performance. Whoever did it is a coward. One shouldn't have to call the police to stop things like this from happening, and I'm annoyed at it. Does that make me a fool? In this case, I won't equivocate: no.

What's my point in this? Getting all bent out of shape over small things is foolish. We all know people who become 'righteously indignant' over even small transgressions (or even perceived transgressions). I think they're drama queens and politicians in the making, and to me, they are foolish. Is it wise to overlook the arrows and insults hurled by such people? For the most part, yes I think it is and would agree with the proverb. The only time I think reaction is necessary is if it becomes malicious. When that happens, real righteous indignation is called for: real, swift, appropriate, and quickly administered...then quick forgiveness afterwards.

I've always told my kids that they would be in a world of hurt with me if they became the kind of people who deliberately started fights. They should flee from fights, not as cowards but just as a matter of not fighting unless fighting is called for. When the fight is unavoidable, though, or when it is brought on them without provocation, I've also always told them then should be righteously indignant; that they should administer justice swiftly, convincingly, totally and without hesitation...then be quick to forgive. To me, such an approach is in line with this proverb. We should overlook the small stuff and not make ourselves subject to fools, but then be righteous in administering justice when said justice is appropriate.

My annoyance is a little better now; thanks for hearing me out. The police haven't found who put the TP and crap at the house, and I doubt they will. So long as it doesn't happen again, to be honest, I really don't care. Perhaps the cowards who did it will realize their middle-school prank only made them look stupid and foolish. My hope is that, at some point, they'll step in what they left behind then realize "gee, that really wasn't funny after all." And I know that teachers these days have a lot to do but that's as far as I'll go in my commentary on it. I blame the district, not the teachers, for a substandard practice that is annoying and, well, just plain wrong.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 9 June 2010

A truthful witness gives honest testimony, but a false witness tells lies. Proverbs 12, verse 17.

Seems fairly self-explanatory, doesn't it? I mean, it talks about honesty, something we all value and the thing on which all healthy dealings are predicated. You can't have constructive conversation or business dealings or pretty much anything at all with someone if you aren't honest with them.

So I'll be honest with you: I've had trouble with honesty. For me, it isn't overt lying. I don't like to lie, and I avoid lying. I don't make up stories to CYA, and my past simply is what it is so I don't make up stories to embellish it or make it sound better than it was. It's true that I am full of stories, but they're of a truthful kind, even the ones that are, well, tall tales. Have you ever seen the movie "Big Fish," which is about a father and son relationship where the father is known for his tall tales and the son feels alienated from that? In a way, that describes the relationship I have with my son, except that we both know how to spin a yarn. But that doesn't mean those stories are anything I try to pass off as the truth about who I am. It just means I like to entertain.

No, the trouble with honesty I've had is in full disclosure. It has been with telling all of the truth at once instead of parsing it out a little bit at a time. Ask me something about myself and I will give you an honest answer...but it may not be a full one, especially if I don't know you very well. I'm all wrapped up in details, so ask me a question about something I've done, or where I was, or to explain myself, and I will give you an honest and detailed answer...but I may not disclose all the details to you, especially if it casts me in a bad light or I think it would hurt your feelings. Do I occasionally tell white lies to spare you something painful or shocking? Though I usually flee from doing so because even a small lie is still a lie, yes, yes I have told white lies.

That makes me a false witness. That means I am not a truthful witness who gives honest testimony. I fail this Proverbs 12 test, and I will confess to you now that this has always bothered me. To be honest, it bothers me a lot, especially where dealings with my loved ones are involved. The people I love most are the people I've hurt most with the little lies and the petty falsehoods. I'm a private man who displays some of his inmost feelings in blogs like this one. I'm a showman who wants to keep his real feelings and his real thoughts to himself. I'm a man in love who still hopes that special someone would bridge the gap between us and reach across to choose me, even while thinking that probably won't happen because too much has passed between us. My life is a constant battle between what to tell and what not to tell for fear I would hurt myself, or get hurt, or cause hurt in the telling.

I'm a false witness. That's me. Is it you as well? This past Sunday, my friend Travis mentioned that one reason people don't come to church is because they're intimidated by Christians, thinking that 'those people have it all together.' HA! What a bunch of bunk that is! You'll never meet a more dysfunctional family than that which you meet in a Christian church. If they're honest with you, you'll never meet a dirtier group of lying sinners who desperately need a forgiving God than the group you meet inside the walls of any biblical church. We're all false witnesses, and we all put up the front that we want people to see. We parse out the truth bit by bit, and there are ways and relationships in our lives in which we only disclose what we want people to see. That isn't full disclosure and, to be honest with you, it makes us false witnesses.

God slices through that like butter. He sees all our lies, he understands why we tell them and he knows the score. What you read in his Word is honest and convicting, and it's always consistent. And the thing I find amazing is that, for someone like me who deserves it, he doesn't use that whole smiting action that he seemed to use a lot in days of old. I deserve a good smiting but, instead, he sees me, and he tells me he cares for me, and he bridges the gap I created between us and chooses me daily. All he asks is a full and honest heart, fully and honestly disclosed to him.

I don't expect that, all of a sudden, some protecting spiritual cloak will now shield me from all wrong doing. I don't expect that, HA!, because I'm a believer I will now have some secret code with which to live my life that will fend off all the petty sin which caused me to lie or stray in the past. And I don't expect that I now have some silver bullet with which to magically slay the vampires of deceit who walk beside me in every step I take. Life just doesn't work that way, especially for someone who is a friend of God and a believer in Christ.

What I do expect is daily, sometimes constant, forgiving reminders that the straight and narrow is really a wide path He designed for you and I to walk. I expect that because it's what he honestly promises and his promises are always true and always kept. He wants us to be true witnesses who give honest testimony to each other in all things we think, say, and do. His word uses our consciences and our minds to remind us when we're straying from the truth, and it offers a

path back. He wants us on that path because it's the path of fully disclosed love. That's a tall order for a warm spring Wednesday, but it's an order I'll strive to keep. In the least, I'll try, and I will probably fail at some point, and then I'll pick myself up at try again. And that's the honest truth.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 10 June 2010

Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. Proverbs 12, verse 18.

Is it funny or is it divine purpose that, when I read these verses, I see myself in them? Or is it similar to a horoscope where the prediction is so vague that it applies to many people, all of whom say "that was written about me" when they read it? I have my thoughts, but you draw your own conclusions. I think honesty must have been on the proverbialist's heart because many of the verses adjacent to this one compare honesty to foolishness, lies and deceit.

So I think it is noteworthy that, instead of it talking about 'honesty' the first clause of the proverb talks about 'reckless words' and how they hurt. I think you could call recklessness a form of dishonesty. It is an action based in illogic, and it's a reaction based in self-centeredness, based in protecting the self by projecting on others. It's self-justifying and, if you strip away the thin layers of that self-justification, I think you find a not-so-mild form of dishonesty.

I've been reckless. I've been reckless and feckless in things I say and in things I do. Just in 2010 I have made snap decisions with which I've lived in regret I prefer to not speak of. I've said things that hurt others in ways I wish I could forget. I've done things that pierced others like a sword and continue to pierce my heart no matter what good each day brings. All this because I didn't hold my fire, because I didn't take time to drop back ten and punt, or because I didn't stop and listen. As always, I forged ahead, matter over mind, without thinking of the consequences of my words and actions.

Recklessness. I hate that this has been a hallmark of my life, a word people can honestly hang on me. Every day I pray for the love, health, safety and prosperity of the people who have been affected by my recklessness, and I pray that I could be used as a way to heal. Even when it means praying for things I don't want, or things that don't involve me, I pray for them. Is that bragging or wise? Maybe it's actually both (and neither), but it's something I can do to help.

And, more important, it's the only way I've found to learn from my reckless tendencies and turn them around to good use. Good words from my lips and my pen can go a long way towards starting the healing, but only when I realize that the good in those words doesn't come from me. I pray for guidance, for help, so that I can be turned from being an instrument of recklessness to a tool of good healing. Even on the hard days like today, I'm learning that turning it over to God and asking for his assistance helps me to stop and listen, hold my fire, and maybe even drop back in the face of an onrushing offense.

Finally, it really is something I can do. It's free and it's cleansing. I'm really good at words (he modestly bragged...). Where my recklessness starts is when I put those words into practice. I'm impatient by nature; I don't wait well. I jump to conclusions, and I crave knowing more (maybe more than I should). It's about the worst thing you can do to me when you cut me out of communication. That's been happening a lot in my life; please understand I'm not complaining about it. It's actually a blessing because it's a reminder that I need to stop and listen, then DO SOMETHING based on what I learn through the quiet. That something has to start with those prayers. Even when it means letting go, letting be, letting alone or letting it ride, it's talking with God and seeking his advice. Then, it's using what wisdom he imparts make the best choices I can. It's tough, I'll admit, tougher with some things than others, even when it means doing things that hurt my heart. But it's doing something good.

If I died today, there would be many who would gladly trumpet "yep, that guy was a reckless so and so." I'm sure there would be other, more colorful words used to describe me; let me admit it here that some of them would be true. I hope they won't be put on my tombstone, though; if I'm buried where I think they'd bury me, I'm pretty sure they wouldn't. It takes time to turn around those perceptions, and I'm thankful for that time. It will let me pray and act in divine wisdom instead of lashing out in reckless abandon. Fifty years from now, when the Reaper finally claims me, it's my hope that better things could be said about me when they bury me under the Marble Line. It's my hope that I will have been able to heal the wounds caused by the piercing words of my recklessness, and turn from a man of hasty reaction into a man who learned to stop, look and listen.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 12 June 2010

Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment. Proverbs 12, verse 19.

I think I need to ponder this one some more, maybe pray that what it really means would be revealed to me. Lies are temporary things. A lie, when found out, can be refuted and the offender then punished. The consequences of lies are hard things, and sometimes, well, it just stinks to have to live with them. Sometimes they're what we deserve. Obviously, the moral of the story is "don't lie." No way to refute that.

The truth is even harder to live with. For months I lived a double life on the fence, splitting my affections and moving away from one relationship into another. When it all fell apart was when I got off the fence. More precisely, I was pushed off. I stopped living the double life, confessed my deceit, and stood up behind the truth.

Nothing was the same after that. My wife moved out, in part because of that deceit. I lost the other relationship for more complicated reasons but, I suspect, it ended too because there was exhaustion with how I'd conducted myself. Can't blame either of them, you know. Since then, I've lived this almost daily rollercoaster of emotions that swing from regret to despondency. The farther I get from that "D-Day" the easier it becomes to accept what I did, to live without the love I'd hoped for, and to move on in a life that sometimes feels like a hazy dream.

All this happened because I finally told all the truth. Of course, the 'better' course of action would have been to originally not immerse myself in my deceit. Flee from it and who knows what could have happened; you might as well debate how many angels dance on the head of a pin. There's just no way of knowing whether things would have turned out for the better or the worse had I simply been honest from the get-go and lay it out boldly what I was going through and how I felt. One thing only is for sure: there would have been no need to parse things out with the truth, or to reveal it bit by bit.

The lying tongue was exposed, self-exposed actually over a number of months, and through many pages of this blog. Those moments didn't last long, but what they left behind does. Separation and loneliness, anxiety and stress, hardship and desire: these are some of the mileposts by which I measure days for the time being. Not a day goes by, sometimes even minute by minute, that I don't think of what was and what could have been. I mourn it, and I pray a lot for the safety and happiness of all those I hurt. That, and these words, may be all I can do at the moment...

...Because, even in the middle of the sometime sadness, I realize that it will indeed only be a moment. That truth that is so much harder to live with can stand on its own; the lies always need support. The truth is independent, and because of this it can last forever. One day when I look back, I believe I will see that this time of uncertainty and repair won't have lasted very long. In the truth, there are togetherness and friendship, peace and relief, and prosperity and satisfaction. Those qualities will endure no matter where tomorrow takes me.

Sometimes I think of what my double life cost and I would gladly pay the price back with interest to take back the hurt, to earn back the love, and to have 'done the right thing' by the people I loved. What is it that the song says though? "The secret of life is there ain't no secret and you don't get your money back." How true. I'll still ponder this proverb more while I'm outside working in the sun. Later, I'll do some long overdue fence building – and maybe fence-mending – and enjoy the blessings of completing a project that has been years in the making. Maybe then some more revelation will come my way. In the meantime, perhaps what I've learned is enough for now.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 13 June 2010

No harm befalls the righteous, but the wicked have their fill of trouble. Proverbs 12, verse 21.

Guilt, shame, and self-pity befall the righteous too. You read my confessions, and I hope you don't walk away thinking "that guy is a real downer. He needs to stop feeling sorry for himself and get up and get moving!" Another confession: I am a downer now & then ; I'm human, shoot me. And I have felt sorry for myself now and then; same exhortation.

Instead, today let me share this tidbit that I'm slowly learning here in the aftermath. Guilt, shame, and self-pity befall the righteous when they try to do the righteous thing. If you've ever tried to keep yourself away from someone you love because you believe they need time to really sort out how they feel, you know what I'm talking about. Or if you've done something hard that you know you had to do but it hurt like crazy just to have to do it, you may be familiar. If you've been separated, lonely, grieving, lost ones you love, lost love, or just wanted another chance to prove yourself in the face of undeserving it, maybe this is your song.

Guilt, shame, and self-pity are after effects. They show up to turn us away from the right and the light. I get those momentary bursts of energy where I know "I can do this" and they last for a little while. When they fade, the big three slowly creep in like a dark fog. They cover my good mood and try to smother it out. Guilt seeks me first. "What have I done" is its calling card, followed by the memories of cars driving away, last looks, how I feel when I think of her and what I did to drive her away. Then comes shame, that recurring shame of re-admitting the forgiven sin of what brought us to 'the moment,' and admitting too that "the moment" was actually many in a very short time. Finally, the self-pity arrives. It twists around the moment and gets me spiraling into feeling how worthless I am, how hopeless things are, how it will never ever change. For me, in short order the "I can do this" moment is all but forgotten in a cascade of "why bothers."

They're a deceiver's subtle weapons, you know. Guilt, shame, and even self-pity are, in moderate doses, healthy cleansers that bespeak of a healthy conscience. They can scour grime off the truth and chip away the scale from the shine. They become those weapons, I think, when we realize that the truth really does set us free, and that she shine is worth basking in; shining in the truth of God's presence in our lives. That's when the crafty old one employs his useful tools and prods us with the old "you know you deserve this" or "yeah, but what about..." or the old reliable "she doesn't really love you anyway."

They're a diversion, you see, and I'm having to learn that if I let them rule my roost, then they lead me into wickedness. It may not be the kind of wickedness that affects millions of people, and it may not be debauchery or anything confrontationally evil or vulgar. No, instead, it's the garden variety of wickedness that I think is more prevalent because it's easier to hang around our necks. It's the cloud that covers our sunshine. It's the needle that pin-pricks, not the spear that skewers. You bleed either way.

And when they happen, I'm having to learn to spot them and put up my defenses so I can watch them, keep them in perspective, instead of letting them in to take over my heart. To fight off the guilt, I confess, sometimes here, more often on my own in private on my knees where it's nobody but myself and my maker. The shame I can fight with bare honesty, understanding that while the cleansing truth is hard to live with, it is also liberating and redeeming. And the self pity, well, I find that's effectively kept at bay by healthy doses of both achievement and faith. Get myself a win, complete a small project, enjoy a good book or a movie, and a game of chess with my boy: all while remembering that a loving Savior is in my heart and at my side, encouraging me towards that win and reminding me that He really does have my back.

I read the proverb again and think it's an over-generalization in the physical sense, but dead on target in the spiritual. All kinds of real, physical harm can befall the righteous; read up on persecution then tell me I'm wrong. More of it is coming than is behind us. And the wicked have their share of trouble but, then again, so do the 'righteous.' I think the verse speaks more to what is spiritual, to the soul and core of a person. The ultimate deceiver has attacked from the beginning. In the past people called it demonic; in our post-enlightened century, we think of it as mental illness, chance, or some other half-truth explanation with which we try to comfort ourselves. Yet the guilt, shame and self-pity are real when they plague you. They happen in varying doses every day. When I remember to let myself analyze them (instead of being ruled by them) they can be healthy. The mirror and sunlight of faith help to do just that and, in doing so, keep an un-righteous me from the trouble that would befall me.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 14 June 2010

A prudent man keeps his knowledge to himself, but the heart of fools blurts out folly. Proverbs 12, verse 23.

I share a lot of my feelings with you. Someone recently told me that I wear my heart on my sleeve here, and there's truth in that. I put things online that I want to share with a lot of people in the hopes that, somehow, your life or your day can be made brighter by them. And I put things online that I don't mind everyone seeing. But that doesn't mean that I don't share only what I want you to see. I don't know if it's prudent, selfish or manipulative, but, believe it or not, I do keep some things to myself.

One thing I usually keep to myself is talking about high water marks. You know the idea: it's the highest point in a flood stage, or the point where the tide is highest. I'm learning to recognize them, and I'm hoping that I've learned some lessons from them, that my heart doesn't blurt out folly from realizing I have been to the high points, and I have lived them.

For me, these are times of contentment when all seemed right, or when I was really on my game. In my family, there was a point early last June just after my oldest graduated. We were all sitting around our table having breakfast, talking, and we were just in the groove. All the world seemed right, and I sensed there and then that I should absorb the moment and remember it because it wouldn't last. I don't know if it's a sixth sense, but I felt big changes were coming, and come they did. And there were times in dating when I looked into her eyes and just knew that I was falling in love and would give anything to be in her life.

Or there were times in 2008, 2002 and 1995 in different churches. In 95, our church was growing and there was this electricity in the group, and it felt alive to be part of something where a message of real hope was being sent out and we were a part of it. It all fell apart in a matter of months because a number of people had to move away and it demoralized the group. It took seven years and new leadership for that to come back, but when it did it was so rewarding and so energizing. That too stalled in time. Then, just a few years ago at our new church in Texas, the growth became exponential, and more than that, the focus and emphasis on ministry became an electric jolt to the system. This too, like me, is undergoing culture shock.

I've seen high water marks at work too. I once led a Tiger Team of experts on finishing an "un-doable" project in California. A system upgrade was badly broken and my boss called the bluff of every naysayer who said "the sky is falling." He asked me what I thought should be done and I told him without varnish or window dressing. Miracle of miracles, he then let me lead the team to do it and it was the most satisfying work of my career. A few years later, in a different job, I trained a group of twelve experts to use a new system and we, as a team, had built a proof of concept demo to show their management that the new system worked. "The Twelve Apostles" did the lion's share of the work and had to do all the briefings and demonstrations. Despite the best efforts of incompetent corporate leadership, they did it and I got the rare pleasure of seeing people I'd trained rising to the occasion and succeeding.

Neither of those situations lasted. The first ended when upgrade moved forward and successfully completed thanks to my team's work, but the larger body of work behind it never completed; I hear the system is completely defunct now. And as for the second one, I rolled off the project four months later, for reasons I still only partly know, and moved on to something else. Eventually, the team disbanded the project failed spectacularly (not due to my absence, mind you) and the company was eventually bought out.

In relationships, when the moment is high and when I feel most in-tune with my love's heart, I have learned I'm watching the high water mark. That, without careful nurturing and normalizing, the high water mark usually threatens to turn into a runaway flood. That runaway flood almost always ends in pain.

I've learned that those high-water mark moments never last. They are fleeting by nature, and they can make or break us, depending on what we do with the memories. I torture myself re-living last looks at women I loved so dearly that I'd give up everything for them, but they are just as gone when I put the memories back on the shelf. I ask "what if" about being involved in rewarding church work of the past while ignoring the bigger question of "what are you prepared to do" concerning that same work all around us today. I devote far too much time reliving glory days at work and not enough honing my current skills to prepare me for better work yet to come. The times of contentment don't last, and maybe God wired us that way because in our fallen state, if we had too much bliss when contrasted with the sadness of the world, we just couldn't handle it. There will be a place in eternity for it, but maybe here and now we would simply fall to pieces. Who knows? I'm just speculating.

But these high water marks are still glimpses of how good we could be, and they are moments God gives us to fuel us, and teach us, and encourage us. High water marks in our relationships, high water success at work, and in our churches and groups and neighborhoods and any old thing we do in this life are the fruit of good faith and work on our part. They are both a reward of a job well done, as well as harbinger of how good our future could be. Successful people capitalize on things like that and turn it to useful advantage. For people of faith, it's called 'evangelism.'

No, I don't put out all my feelings online, and there are many thoughts and memories that I don't share and I will take with me to the grave. There are moments of beauty that are special to me alone, like looking at rays of light which shine through the clouds and you stand there thinking "wow, that is just incredible." I have my moments just like you do, and they're fuel for getting me through this life when everything else seems to want to beat you down. That's a gift of prudent love, and not one of wasteful folly.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 15 June 2010

Diligent hands will rule, while laziness ends in slave labor. Proverbs 12, verse 24.

Lately, I've had a burst of energy. It's been like I'm finally coming out of the dark, out of the fog. In the last week or so, I've installed new fencing in my backyard, turned over a significant portion of said yard and seeded it (which I believe my dog has subsequently killed), built a new garden on my patio, cleaned out a small garden under the pear tree, painted a kitchen shelf, installed new bookshelves, run a 5K, spent about 10 hours in the gym, planted flowers, written an entire chapter in my new book, and kept up with the usual tasks of cooking, cleaning, laundry and this blog. Oh, and I changed the oil in my daughter's car.

Note to self: even if you're Type A, this hasn't ended up in my ruling much of anything except my own roost, and even that is debatable because I have this teenager living here who would gladly tell you otherwise. You could say I am trying to keep ahead of the point where the roost rules me and not the other way around. I like to keep busy; always have.

And yet, I've also found it difficult to focus on other projects that are looming somewhere up ahead. The filing on the desk, FINALLY cleaning out the garage, some painting in the bathroom and hallway, chapter ten, and a few other choice but necessary projects all sit neglected while I focus in other areas. It's not that I don't want to do those things. Instead, it's more like I just haven't found the groove yet to get them done. They're no less important, but they just haven't yet made the A-list.

It's been good self-therapy to keep busy, especially since I've been skirting the edge of the blues again. Money is tight, work is tenuous, I'm on the constant hunt for extra income, my heart is heavy with emotion, and my separated wife and I are discussing serious options as to what we're going to do with the rest of our lives. I've needed the diversion of getting a few small wins, of achieving something to keep the blues at bay and lift my sagging spirit out of the dumps. Perhaps this is part of the 'ruling' thing of which the proverb speaks. I find that when I'm diligent in getting things done, sloth and depression don't rule my life. Instead, confidence and contentment are generally in charge, and I feel better equipped to handle changes as they come along (as invariably they do).

Besides, I have no desire to end up a slave to anyone. I already feel like a slave to debts in my name, to feelings of the recent past, to my Blackberry, to Facebook, and to the tax man. Perhaps keeping busy will enable me to avoid the feeling of servitude that comes with both these responsibilities and the spiraling of depression. I'm pretty sure that always flitting from project to project isn't a long-term prescription for excellent health. Heck, I'm already on high blood pressure medicine and I check my blood pressure daily. It's not exactly low although it's better than it's been. It might do me some good to scale back on my type-A ways and learn to relax. As my friend Rik says, take time to enjoy some scotch and cigars Bubba.

I'd like to do that, but don't want that relaxation morphing into laziness. If you know me, though, there's little chance of that. Before the year is through, I hope to install an entirely new fence in my backyard, build an outdoor fireplace, fill in a pond, clean out the attic, sort through boxes of memories in the garage, paint my office and my laundry room and my hallway and maybe even my bedroom, and do some work on both minivans. And I'll be helping my oldest move home while becoming a football dad again in the fall. Did I mention I'm going up to Oklahoma to work at my Mom's house this weekend, and that I'm taking my son to an audition in Dallas after that? No, there's little chance of laziness ruling in my life. Here's to hoping, then, that I don't let myself get too wrapped around the axle of getting these things done and, in doing so, turn my head away from the true focus of He who rules my days no matter how I fill them.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 16 June 2010

An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up. Proverbs 12, verse 25.

Did you know that I'm the king of anxiety? Maybe you guessed it from reading some of these blogs. In part, I'm wired that way. The people in my family were (and are) worriers, and it almost seems like it's fused into my genes that I should worry about things, or at least be anxious about them, whether they affect me or not.

In my latest set of worries, it has been about love. Giving up love, living without love, letting go of love, moving on from love: some things about love have got me tied up in knots. Without rehashing all of it, I gave love and gave it away, and in short order found myself without it because of things I had said and done. My marriage was in deep trouble because I gave up loving unconditionally and selflessly. When I gave up what I shouldn't have, it didn't take long for another love to fill the void. That new relationship eventually died as well because, in part, we never learned how to love unconditionally.

I pushed people away, and I caused them to flee. It was because of loving and wanting to be loved, and while some of it was misplaced, believe me, it was all true and it was all for real. When love departed, it devastated me. I've never known this kind of heartbreak, or the soul-wrenching defeat that admitting how much you loved someone could cause. For quite awhile, I haven't really known how to move forward. I held onto hope that something could change and that the selfless love I sought would magically appear. I wanted my life back, and I wanted to love and be loved in such a way that it wouldn't ever go away again. I let anxiety, my anxious heart, not only weigh me down but devastate me into black depression and losing my will to go on.

It took more than kindness to get me over this hump: it took love. Yes, that thing about which I've worried, obsessed and had much anxiety was cured by itself. Except that I'm not talking about the love of Eros or the phileo kind of love or even the storge kind of love in a family; Google those words if you aren't sure of their meaning. I'm talking more about the selfless kind of love, that agape love, which is the foundation of everything. It's the undeserved love, the kind that people give you because of empathy and devotion, the kind that puts you before themselves, the kind that really and truly wants to encourage. It is unconditional. In any relationship, the love of romance and sex, the love of friendship and the love of family all vary and evolve. Only the selfless, unconditional love survives and doesn't vary because it underlies the other three and everything you think, say, or do.

Hard as it is to admit, that's the only kind of love God has for us, and it's the kind of love Jesus always gave and gives. I haven't been selfless and I have been conditional, and as a result, I struggled against loving selflessly and unconditionally. We don't always understand that kind of perfect love, yet when we do we really do it changes everything. Not long ago, someone was talking with me about how they were questioning how God could hurt them so much. They'd undergone a personal trauma and it hurt badly. My simple words were just that God doesn't hurt us, but that sometimes the love he gives hurts because our ways aren't God's ways. When you're in pain, it hurts to realize that God does act out of love, and that his love truly is mysterious and unconditional...and that even through the hurt it is always there and ready for us to rely on again when we let ourselves be ready to grab onto it.

I think that's the kind of love this proverb is talking about, and as I said, that was the kind of love that got me through the bad times. Kind words of encouragement from friends are something of that phileo love, except when they really encourage. The calls at all hours, the long email exchanges, the visits from friends, the "let me help" attitude go beyond just friendship. They were, and are, selfless and they convey an unconditional caring and love that mirrors the love God put into their lives. People went over and above to get me through the hard times when I just wanted to give up breathing. They didn't have to, but it made all the difference in the world. From the bottom of a contrite heart, I'm thankful for them.

Just yesterday, it fully hit me how I hadn't loved unconditionally, in an agape way, and I believe that, in large part, that was why I ended up without it in a relationship. I know there were many extenuating circumstances for why my marriage had fallen apart, and we're still sorting through those as we slowly move forward and work to be happy. And I know the reasons why the other relationship couldn't have succeeded either; there were many. I believe that, if I had mirrored the love of Christ as friends did to me, the 'problems' would not have hit as they did because selfless, unconditional love always gives, always corrects, always hugs, always protects. It gives hope where hope threatens to wither. It took me so long to realize I can't have it if my focus is mostly on the man in the mirror.

Realizing that hurt. It really got me down, and just last night my attitude was "I don't give a d\$% about love." Love bites, love bleeds, love stinks. Yes, it does, that is, if it's mostly about yourself. I want the kind of love that is selfless,

that gives without expectation, that perseveres through adversity, that sets no conditions. I disagree with the friend who told me that all the 'heart flutter' and passion aren't love. They are: they just aren't all of what I'm looking for. I want the brass ring, and I'm willing to do, or to give up of myself and do without, if it means preparing my heart for that. It hurts like you-know-what to let go, and to realize what you've let go; it hurts to move forward thinking that what you wanted, what you lived for, isn't going to be yours and that you might just end up alone. Rather than letting the anxiety of it rule my day, I'll be thankful for the kind agape words shared to encourage me through, for the people who give them, and for the insight to see how precious those words truly are.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 17 June 2010

A righteous man is cautious in friendship, but the way of the wicked leads them astray. Proverbs 12, verse 26

Through all the ups and downs of these last few months, you've seen me (occasionally) rant about losing friends, both online friends and those in the flesh and blood. Both nature and affections abhor a void, though, and I found out something that I hadn't expected: my list of friends grew. The list of people to whom I was connected online has nearly doubled without my resorting to "friend collecting." And I've met new people who begin to take the place of the people who decided I'm radioactive. When I thought I was alone, I was fooling myself, or being fooled by the deceiver, because it wasn't true. I just didn't have my eyes open wide enough to see that the people who stuck by me, as well as the people I've recently met, were friends you could count on for selfless support and affection.

Still, one thing I am learning is to start cautiously guarding my affections. Last night, I was talking with one of my agape people. There are people for whom you would do just about anything and, for me, this woman is one of them. We've been close friends for nearly 5 years now, and have stood by each other through some of life's biggest challenges. When I fell to pieces, she was one of the people who talked me back from the brink through kindness, tough love, and support.

We were talking about how some people are poisonous, how there are people in the world who, though caring and well-intentioned, will suck the life out of you if you let them. They can be family or people you love, coworkers, friends, school chums, or neighbors. They breathe out subtle dysfunction, and thrive on creating drama. They want to love and be loved, and they give of themselves only what they want to give, or what they figure they can lose. They are masters of deception. Some are lonely and will do anything to be loved. Some are looking for a person to solve their problems, or to protect them from within and without. Some want you to provide security for them, and some aren't happy unless others are unhappy. And some are just plain unhappy to begin with while others truly are malicious.

In light of that it seems right that one should be cautious in friendship, that is, cautious in letting toxic people get into your head or heart. In reading this verse it seems proper to firewall your heart or, at the very least, to develop senses that red flag such people when they show up on your radar. They're the people who you need to learn to block out or, at least, build walls around so that they can only get 'so close.' Maybe you do so by skepticism, or by not letting out information to too many people at once; maybe you're selective about who you become friends with, or maybe you go silent and deep.

I can't say such people are 'wicked' but whether they know it or not, they can be toxic. That toxicity, however, is a wicked thing because it leads them and others astray. It leads you to do things you probably wouldn't otherwise do. It fosters in your head thoughts that may have been there all along but, like a virus in a petri dish, they didn't grow until they found a host in which to do so. Perhaps that way is indeed a soft form of wickedness, but it's destructive whether it is soft or hard in nature. And the hardest thing of all to swallow is that, whether we know it or not, sometimes we, ourselves, are the ones who are toxic and need to be hidden or pushed away until another time not such as this. I hope I haven't been one of those people, and if I have, there aren't words enough for me to apologize and make right what I made wrong. Know, though, that I do apologize because I'm a work in progress, and I hope I am doing better.

These days are hard days in which to keep the faith. When unemployment, crises, lost love, divorce, dissolution, financial trouble, loss of family members and who know what else enters into your life, it becomes so easy to think you're in this all alone. That really is a deceptive thought, and it's one that can easily be twisted against you whether by the supernatural deceit of Satan or the I-need-you deceit of someone who could be toxic. How rewarding it has been to me to find that, when I ran into the wall of trouble, there were so many out there who didn't de-friend, who didn't give up, or who didn't settle for less than showing their affection and sharing it with someone who needed it. That's the kind of friend I want and strive to be because that's the kind of friends with whom I'm blessed.

Thank you, my friends, for sticking through all this when you didn't have to, for being agape people in your own ways. And thank you especially, Miss Sue, for your righteous friendship, and for keeping me from wandering further astray.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 19 June 2010

In the way of righteousness there is life, along that path is immortality. Proverbs 12, verse 28

I didn't write one of these columns yesterday because it was a very busy day. My son and I took a day to go work at my mother's house in southeast Oklahoma, and I mixed time between my 'work work' and the list of chores Mom invariably stacks up for me whenever I can venture up her way. Of course, she had a long list of mainly outdoor chores for us to finish, and I'm proud to say that we did finish them. We had an Italian dinner (LOTS of great Italian food in McAlester; I challenge you to go try it), then Dillon and I headed home for our three hour drive. As the sun set in beautiful shades, I had time to think about the people in my life.

I thought about my wife. You know we are separated and it seems like every day is a minefield of emotions through which we're walking. It's hard to choose just how to put one foot in front of the other without being blown up or causing her to blow up. She's been my best friend for over half my life, and we've had to learn how to be friends again in light of my indiscretions, her foibles, our history, and that separation. We want each other to be happy, and it's the most difficult thing I've ever done to live in such a way so as to be happy myself while fostering that for someone else so dear to me. We're still stuck in the limbo of just what we're going to do next, or how and when to do so, and it's rough for all those around us, especially our kids. I'm thankful for her patience and understanding, and I know we are nearing an end to this period of indecision. I think about her so much and wonder how we got ourselves to just where we are now. And yet good perseveres and remains.

I thought about my kids, all three of them, all four actually as a new one could find himself in my daily prayers these days. I was one of these guys who didn't want to have kids when we did; I didn't feel I was ready to be a father, and I selfishly wanted to pursue other dreams before I became too old and entrenched for those dreams to turn to dust. God thought otherwise, and he put these wonderful people into my life who give me love, companionship, friendship and someone to mentor and cherish unconditionally. I don't think life has turned out for them to be what they had hoped for, or maybe even wanted. But I'm so proud of them and the feeling they give me is immortal in itself.

And I thought about other people in my life, people I love as friends, family, and women I have loved as the loves of my heart. Mindy, Pam, Jennifer, Mitch, Vicki, Tom, Cynthia, Mark, Liz, De, (and Dee), Lynn, Lisa, Kelly, Rox, Dan, Sean, Katie, Courtney, Julie, Deb, Sue, Boo, Jeff, Melissa & Willy, Tim, Bert, John, Dave, Ken, Rich, my parents and grandparents, Big Carlson and the rest of the China brotherhood, Don, Andy, Skip, Jess, Kathy, Shel, Buzz and Nan, Vera, Eric, Kim (and Kim and Kim; heck, a lot of Kim s!), Peggy, Judy, Lesa, Steve, Herbie: I think of so many people every day and I don't think I could list here the names of all 600+ on Facebook let alone the hundreds of others who have touched my life in most of forty-four years. I think about these people and how I feel for them, and I realize we've woven threads of our lives together into a tapestry of rich color and enduring strength. Those feelings, that woven cloth of life, are immortal as well. Such relationships aren't just the sound of music playing in our lives: they are the music itself.

Know what? I wouldn't change a thing. I've said it before: I'm not righteous, but I know I've been made righteous by believing in a risen God who is. If it would spare the pain (and darn the consequences of it to me) to anyone I've hurt along the way, I would be willing to change anything were it in my power to do so. If I could change anything to make someone else happy that love would rule in their lives, this I would gladly do as well. Yet I also constantly remind myself we can't cherry-pick our lives, keeping what we remember as good and discarding the bad. Who knows how life would turn out if we did that, and what we discard thinking it has little value may be of great importance to somebody else.

No matter what happens, what we don't discard is the love because it is love that made us righteous. That's God's love, not ours, but the love we have for others reflects that love He has for us. I believe love is immortal; I truly do. Have you ever watched "Ghost," with Patrick Swayze (now a ghost himself)? At the end, as he's moving into heaven, he says "The love. You get to take it with you." I believe that with all my heart, because I believe the love that passes between us – agape, phileo, storge, eros – is something that endures beyond us. Time will heal the wounds of marital disunion, the loneliness of death, the heartbreak of lost love, and the discords that plague each of us every day. To paraphrase Paul, "now these three remain: faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love." Love is righteous, and divine love makes us righteous. The beautiful thing is that we get to share it.

Along that path of love is immortality. We get to take it with us, both every day we walk here on this earth then someday in the hereafter where we truly will be loved with such power and beauty that what we feel here will seem pale. Going forward, I'm trying hard to live my life in such a way as to be more humble and penitent, and to always remember the rich

love that God has put into my life. Love is a righteous thing, and it makes us righteous, and from a man who doesn't deserve it, it's the only thing worth living and dying for.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 20 June 2010

A wise son heeds his father's instruction, but a mocker does not listen to rebuke. Proverbs 13, verse 1.

What to say about Father's Day that the Bible verse hasn't already said better? I mean, the verse talks about teaching versus listening, respect versus insult, love versus correction and fathers as opposed to their teenagers. I could fall back on the tried & true advice column, doling out advice on how to be a good father...except that I haven't really been a good father for much of this year, and I hate it when people give me unsolicited advice just as much as you do. Or, we could go to the tear-jerking story of things my dad did for me – and there were plenty – that inspired me to be a better man; if it's ok, I'll keep those to myself for now. I'm not here to beatify my father because he was a man, not an idol.

How about a few things, then, that I didn't learn from my dad? I didn't learn how to be rude, unless you count the fact that Dad really liked Mel Brooks movies (especially that scene in *Blazing Saddles* around the campfire), or the age old man-art of 'clearing a room.' I didn't learn how to be rude from my dad, so I really have no reason to think that my son learned it from me, right? Um, ok. Let's go with that. I don't know where I learned it, but something tells me I learned it well.

I also didn't learn how to swear or curse or cuss from my dad, except that he liked to tell dirty jokes every now and then, and if he got to a particularly hairy part of a home improvement his vocabulary, well, it morphed from its already colorful palate. He said things that I now find myself saying when I become similarly vexed or upset. No, I didn't learn that from him either; must have learned it someplace else.

I didn't learn how to be a slacker in my faith from Dad, even though I thought for years that he only went to church to sing in the choir, or because he felt it was something you were supposed to do on Sundays instead of staying at home or playing golf. True, he could be enticed to 'play heathen' (as he said it) but usually we were out the door about 10 minutes before the start of service (and would have been earlier if it hadn't been for my mom taking her time to get ready). And the inflection in his voice changed when we prayed out loud verses the times when we simply recited the service. It was almost like he was performing, except he seemed so respectful when he did that. Later, when he was dying, he clung to his faith as a way to be strong, and as a way to learn in his mind and in his heart that it was alright to die. I'm pretty sure I didn't learn to be a hypocrite from my dad.

I also don't think I learned how to deceive from him. Dad and I share the ignominious honor of mid-life crises and all that entails. At about the same time in our lives we each struggled with what it meant to both reach middle age and reach a time in our lives when we realized that our dreams were dying and that we'd sacrificed them for others. He and I each compensated for those realizations in similar ways. I can't speak for how he felt at that time because I suspect the depth of our feelings differed, as well as the source of our problems and what resulted from them. But I remember a time in my life when Dad struggled with who he was and felt he had to hide that from the rest of us. When my own times of testing came, I realize that I'm pretty sure I didn't learn how to deceive from my father.

Finally, I'm also sure I didn't learn how to give up things from my dad. For most of my life, I thought my dad was a weak-willed man, because when he and Mom fought, invariably he was the one to get quiet, he was the one to knuckle under. At least that's what I thought. It took me many years to learn that he had simply chosen his battle and decided the point under contention wasn't worth the fight. He never got disrespectful with mom, never demeaned her that I remember, and he was never abusive (because I did learn from him that any man who hits a woman isn't a real man). Yet, when she got emotional or unreasonably upset, he clammed up and put on his armor. Like the learning, it took me years to see that he did give up things in each of those fights, and that he didn't do so out of compulsion or force but, instead, out of willingness. Dad tried to make the peace, even when it meant that others perceived he was being trampled on. He sacrificed things that were dear to him and learned to replace them with other things that became dear. And I can't say it enough: he did it out of willingness, out of love, rather than having someone dictate the choice to him.

What didn't I learn from my father? Not much I suppose. He wasn't perfect, he wasn't a giant, he wasn't macho and he wasn't even always there for me. Instead, he was a man who did his best in life at most of what he tried to do, who tried to do a lot of things that nobody had ever taught him to do, and who did a lot in his sixty-three years so that our family could say "we lived" and experience things in life that most everyone else just dreams of. I didn't learn that dads eat the small French fries so that their kids can have the big ones. And I didn't learn to talk back to the TV even when the TV usually doesn't respond in kind. I didn't learn from my father how to cook or clean or fend for myself when many of my peers are macho slob. And I didn't learn from my dad how to give of my heart, how to love and be loved, and how to commit and sacrifice when necessary. I didn't learn those from my father...just keep telling yourself that, Dave, and maybe one day

you'll believe it. The things I did learn from my father in the years when I was a foolish boy helped me to gladly heed his instruction in the hopes that I could grow up to be as wise as him

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 21 June 2010

From the fruit of his lips a man enjoys good things, but the unfaithful have a craving for violence. Proverbs 13, verse 2.

This morning I notice that the verse doesn't say "from the words" a man says that he enjoys goodness, but "from the fruit." I think that's significant in that it doesn't just talk about something we immediately think, say or do that always produces good things. Instead, it's the result or product of what we think, say, or do that we can enjoy good things. What we think, say and do obviously does matter, because it's by the fruit of faith, not just the faith itself, that people see us and derive their opinions. Faith is what saves; fruit is what witnesses.

And then there are the unfaithful. I have some bad news: that's us. We're each unfaithful to upholding divine commands and the desires of God. He wants us to enjoy good things, and he wants us to NOT crave violence of any kind. Things just don't always work out that way, though. God's standard for us is perfection and we constantly fall short of that. I know I do, and I know that this word, 'unfaithful,' is a word that hangs on me like a baggy shirt. I have been unfaithful in so many ways, even the ones most commonly associated with the word. Not long ago, I gave my heart to another unfaithfully only to have her trample on it in her own search for someone to make her happy. I can't honestly say that either she or I 'craved violence' but we did crave each other and, in doing so, incited something that was akin to violence, mainly because there was so much violence already present in her life.

Yet I found that, when I was unfaithful, I did indeed crave the fruit of that unfaithfulness. Infidelity, untrustworthiness, deceit, lying: you don't set out to do those things but they happen when you're unfaithful. They are a violence against the truth even if they don't involve fist-fighting. They are an attack on the God's plan for us, and an affront to the fruit of acting in a righteous manner. My dictionary defines "violence" as "desecration" and "great force of feeling, passion." Take my word for it: that describes the violence that results from unfaithfulness even if you don't have an abusive spouse thrown into the mix. Yet I craved it. I wanted her in my life because I saw in her all the things that I thought were lacking in my own relationship, and I wanted to invest in us something good and worthwhile to build on. It didn't work out that way.

What's more, those negative things – infidelity, untrustworthiness, deceit, lying – they become your witness and they become a downward spiral in which you find yourself. Friendship and love drew you together, but those other things become the boundaries of your relationship, the things by which you're defined. Those are what people see when they see you, and it's not a pretty sight. That's one of the reasons why my marriage landed on the rocks, and they are some of the reasons why the 'fling' didn't work either. It was contrary to God's plan. I can't say it never would have worked, but I can say that it didn't in the short run.

Letting go of the love that drew us together is difficult. Even at the end of a great weekend spent with my family, I still feel the sadness of loss and the unresolved ache of having been 'done wrong' by someone whose actions I didn't understand at the time. The farther away I get from the last time I saw her, the easier it becomes to deal with. If you talked with her, I think you could get a similar story and in that story, I'm sure I wouldn't be painted in a complimentary light; some of that would truly be deserved. For now, I'm still caught up in understanding why she discarded me to settle for another. There is bitterness, anger, and heartbreak but I'm finding that if I replace them with prayer, patience, and kindness, the original three begin to fade.

Believe it or not, I wish her and her new man well. They had history before I ever came on the scene, and if it took our time together to get her from the unhealthy relationship in which she found herself into one better, then the ways of the Almighty are both good and mysterious. I pray for them, and I hope she finds happiness and what she was looking for with whomever she ends up. As for me, love will find its way back into my life in its own good time. I want peace, and I want to share unselfish love with someone who wants to share it with me in return. I'm suspecting it's waiting for me someplace where it's undeserved and unexpected. Just this morning, someone told me they loved me because "God wasn't done with me yet." What a powerful and encouraging thing to say, and they were words of good medicine to my heart: good fruit borne on their part from love, faith, and generosity. That's the kind of life I want to emulate. I look forward to the day when what I think, say, and do will bear good fruit in the lives of my family and friends, and that people may again look on me and think "he's a happy man. What is it that makes him so happy?" That would then be a chance to tell them.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 22 June 2010

He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin. Proverbs 13, verse 3.

Have you ever said things you later came to regret? Dumb question, eh? Sure you have. Sure I have too. That's what's being talked about here: learning to watch what we say. When we learn to not speak rashly we learn to speak only what 'needs' to be said.

If you've known me for long, you'll note that occasionally I suffer from diarrhea of the mouth (or the pen). I've been known to offer too much, say too much, speak too quickly and speak in ways that are rash. I think I'm learning to be better about it, but I'm also ashamed that it's taken me forty-four years to do so. Especially during arguments, I am learning that silence is indeed golden if you want to avoid the ruin that usually results.

My heroes have always been cowboys, just like Willie Nelson sang. That's because the movie cowboys were reticent, close-lipped men who spoke with what they did instead of just what they said. And look at "Silent Cal" Coolidge: a good president not famous for all the speeches he gave or a bunch of false rhetoric. I've always admired men who could say little but do a lot, and I'm constantly looking for ways in which I can improve myself by modeling them. Perhaps one way is to actually heed this proverb.

Now, it's true, too, that I enjoy good conversation. Some of the best nights of my life were sitting around my grandparents' home, listening to the conversations of the adults. Grandpa had a room he built around a barbecue grill, and it was always a special time for me to sit in there and listen to all the stories the adults told of when they grew up, or things they did. The art of conversation is one of practice, and now that I am known for things that I say, I confess it's an art in which I pursue talent.

Yet I still go back to the verse and am learning that, even while practicing said talent, I need to guard what I say. Feelings can be hurt, misstatements made, and things can be said that I would later wish could be unsaid. Have you ever said something in an argument that you wish you could take back? Have you ever sent an email, even a carefully worded email, that you wish you hadn't sent because you said things you wish you hadn't (or you wish you'd said better)? Have you ever blurted out something that you really didn't mean to say, just to get in a dig at the other person? For me, guilty, guilty, and guilty again. The risk comes in eventually causing ruin and earning consequences that go far beyond what we originally intended. It's true, you can't live your life in fear, but it's also true that we should live our lives in respect of others including their ability to cause harm. One way to do that is to watch what we say.

So, starting (again) today, I resolve to try to be a little more careful, and (as they say) to engage my brain before engaging my mouth. It's going to be a long day here because I'm on a business trip in a new place. My tendency will be to clam up at first, then to speak too much so as to build some kind of bond with my new coworkers. Today, I'll carry forward the words of the proverb and try to watch what I say. Maybe then I'll be able to be a little more like one of my heroes and a little less apt to cause ruin.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 23 June 2010

The light of the righteous shines brightly, but the lamp of the wicked is snuffed out. Proverbs 13, verse 9

I'm skipping ahead a few verses. Please forgive me the jump because a few words about jealousy are on my heart today. I need to let go of some jealousy. I feel a lot of bitterness and anger these days, and I believe jealousy is at the heart of that. I need to let it go of that so I can let go of that bitterness and anger.

The Old Testament is rife with verses that talk about God being a jealous god, and how jealousy is a trait, a condition or expression that He reserves for himself. When you're perfect, that's something you can do. I've never been perfect, so with my lack of perfection must come a lack of the right to feel jealous. At least that's what I thought.

Throughout my marriage, my wife has always said she wishes I were more jealous. In this way I guess I come off as something of a cold fish, and part of me understands a woman's need for her man to be protective and desirous of her. One way to show that is some jealousy. And, it's true: I have been jealous from time to time when other men have come traipsing around her, especially since she's moved out. But I haven't done anything about it. By and large, I try to not let myself get sucked into that particular emotion.

This goes back years. I loved and admired my dad, yet I've never met a man as jealous as him. He wasn't the violently jealous type; he wasn't an abuser and he never once hit a woman; it was from him I learned that any man who hits a woman isn't a man at all. But he was SO jealous of anyone who came near my mother, or anyone whose time took away from his own. He seethed at thinking someone who had chosen him could choose to spend less than 100% of their emotions on him. Because his parents had been distant parents, and because his first marriage had ended disastrously, it seems understandable even if indefensible. Dad's jealousy was cold and calculating, silent and silently divisive. That's how mine is. I learned at his feet.

I put it into practice in the first real romantic relationship I had. The girl and I dated for a few months, broke things off, remained close friends, then a few years later got back together and got serious. Wouldn't you know at the time that someone else wanted to get serious with her as well! Long and short of it is that she ended up choosing him and over the month or two that it took us to split up, I was VERY jealous. It was not only unattractive: it was destructive to our relationship. I was unreasonable and unreliable. I think some of her intent was to see which of us would fight the harder for her, and the other guy won because I lost my cool. In doing so, I lost some of the qualities to which she'd been attracted and that she loved most. I appeared weak and immature.

As much as possible I vowed to never act like this, and I've carried that vow almost to an extreme during my marriage because it's been an occasional bone of contention for us. My wife would have liked for me to show some defensiveness over her, but I remembered how divisive it was. This particular brand of wickedness had snuffed out a relationship that I had wanted to last my entire life, and it had marred the character of the man I admired most in the world. I was determined to not let it mar me or my marriage. Going to an extreme, I tried to purge myself of jealousy and reserve that emotion for God, thinking this was a righteous thing to do.

I failed. The only righteousness I found was self-righteousness, and that wasn't healthy. After my marriage went into separation, my relationship with 'the other woman' also fell apart. I've told you this story before. What I didn't say was how I was insanely jealous of the man she'd chosen over me. While she still professed unchanging love for me, her living condition of choice bespoke something different. I was an emotional wreck and I became extremely jealous. It kept me up for days, further separated my family from me, and wrecked my life. I couldn't function, couldn't even make simple decisions. All I could picture was the two of them together, mocking me. Of course, not all of that was true, but when you're desperate and irrational, it seems different.

If you can think of a better example of the fruit of sin in a believer's life, send it to me. For now, I'm holding up this one for all to see and, hopefully to flee from it. I felt like my lamp had been snuffed out. I really did.

At another time we can go into all the reasons why this was a doomed relationship; in fact, we have. And, please understand I'm not trying to garner your sympathy or approval over something that wasn't right to begin with. My point is that my sin of jealousy helped to poison whatever chance I might have had to move forward with this woman who I had wanted for all time. More important, my lack of righteous 'jealousy' had also poisoned the marriage I should have been trying harder to repair all along. I've had to learn the hard way that it's ok to feel strong desire to protect and preserve a

good thing, especially the one relationship that is put into your life to grow your family closer to God. It's not ok to feel what I did in the other relationship. It was toxic. A friend and I were discussing this very word yesterday, and we said that it's necessary to purge toxicity from your life, both what you cause and what others cause in you. For me, viral jealousy is toxic. I had been toxic.

Today, I'm working to do what I can to keep growing closer to the person who has been my friend for so long. You know the score: still too early to tell if it'll take, but the signs are positive. I have no further contact with the other person. I'm ashamed of my intense jealousy, and I'm trying to put it into perspective. In marriage, I'm ashamed that I didn't feel jealous enough when perhaps I should have. For awhile, I felt quite bitter, but time and distance help that to fade. Ditto with the anger in which bitterness wraps itself. I can't honestly say that my lamp of righteousness is brightly burning again, nor can I say that my lamp of jealous wickedness is completely extinguished. What I can say is that I believe I'm finally fueling (and being fueled by) the right light so that whatever faults I have might not snuff it out in jealous despair.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 24 June 2010

The sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied. Proverbs 13, verse 4.

The Puritan work ethic is, I believe, a uniquely American thing. It's not that the rest of the world doesn't know how to work hard, but I think the 'give it all you can all the time' work ethic is something unique to American culture. We will work long hours for little pay so long as we find satisfaction in the task at hand. We are motivated to go over and above what is minimally required in hopes of a payout that is worth our efforts.

That is, unless you're a sluggard. Now, let's draw a distinction. I am NOT talking about people who are out of work due to circumstances beyond their control. And I'm not talking about people who look for work and want to work but can't find it. I'm not even talking about people who have provided for themselves and decide to take a break from work for awhile. You've heard me say I'm the king of procrastination: I'm not talking about procrastination either.

No, I'm talking about people who have zero motivation and little more interest in finding some. Such people are, I believe, out of touch with that Puritan work ethic and maybe even out of touch with human nature. They're certainly out of touch with this verse. It's possible that they've lost their way, but it's equally possible that they just don't have any interest in work. This verse says such people desire nothing and get it.

I feel sorry for such people because I've been there, done that. I've gone through times when I had zero motivation to work. I've had times when I just couldn't seem to garner the desire to work even when I knew I should. Believe it or not, I think the proverb didn't apply to me then because I did get something for my nothing: I got a spiraling sluggard craving to do less and less, and I spiraled down into depression and self-loathing. My lack of desire became a self-fulfilling prophecy of self-pity. Of course, to understand the proverb, I think there's an unspoken codicil to "nothing" that means "nothing of value." In that light, it's oh so true. Sometimes it's hard to shake that feeling but it's critical that we do so.

The rest of the proverb, I think, is all about that Puritan work ethic. If you have a healthy willingness to work, you're satisfied with working and probably dissatisfied when you aren't working. A friend of mine from church cuts wood in his spare time. He cuts up a lot of it for enjoyment, then he gives it away. The other day I asked him why he does it and he said "I just enjoy cutting wood." It satisfies him (as well as giving him a lot of good cardio). That's a healthy ethic.

Lately, I have been fully employed yet feeling underutilized and sorry for myself. My new job pays well but has taken some time to get used to. I came from a company that was being run in an unhealthy way yet where I was over-employed and underpaid. In this new position, I haven't had enough to do. All that changed this week and I now find myself on a project that promises to provide more than enough gainful work to keep me busy for many weeks to come. Instead of feeling overwhelmed by it, today I feel thrilled. I like to work – I believe most people actually do – and I'm thankful that I've finally found a place where there's work for me to do. I believe my diligence is paying off, and for the first time in a long time I feel satisfied.

Awhile back, my friend Patrick preached about how vocation is part of our calling in life, how we were designed to work, and how constructive and fulfilling work will be part of heaven for us. I believe that. One of my favorite movies is "Dave" which is the story of a guy who runs a temp agency who gets to impersonate the president. Although the main character has a great first name, shun aside the political message of the movie and one of my favorite scenes is when he decides to use 'his' power as president to find people jobs. I like that message, and I like to be able to help people find things they want to do. I once had a job as a resource manager when I got to help place people in to positions with a client. I worked at that for 8 months, and it was the most satisfying part of my entire career because I got to help talented people find places to use their talents to the fullest. We had very few troubles on that account during my time there, and I believe part of the reason was because we had a great team of motivated hard workers who were working to their fullest.

If you're out of work right now, believe me, my prayers go out to you because I've been there too. In a time when people are struggling and the government seems to be against us, it's possible I could be again one day. I hope not, and I hope that if you're in search of work that you find it soon, or it finds its way to you, or both. Don't give up that hope because it's right in between faith and love as one of the three greatest things God gives us. Shun the sluggard ways and keep on the hunt. It's a uniquely American thing to do. Whether you find the perfect job or not, you'll be glad you did.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 25 June 2010

The righteous hate what is false, but the wicked bring shame and disgrace. Proverbs 13, verse 5.

Many of the Proverbs are contrasts of consequence. Do one thing, merit another. Act in one way, result in another. It isn't surprising to me that this one again talks about righteousness versus wickedness, or that it uses contrasts to make its point. But there are several things of note that jump out at me when I read and re-read it.

The first is that "the righteous hate." Have you ever really hated anything or anyone? I can't honestly say I have. When I was growing up I was something of a wimpy kid. My parents instilled in me the lesson of never fighting, and in doing so I took it to mean 'never stand up for yourself.' I was smart and cocky and I didn't realize that my skinny and awkward body – and pacific demeanor – let me be perceived as weak. Especially in my early teen years, I became easy prey for people who weren't weak. For years I harbored grudges against them: grudges that mattered to nobody but me and God. Thankfully time, faith and love helped me to let them go. I learned you have to stand up for yourself, and sometimes that means a fight, but that you shouldn't go looking for a fight; I think that was my parents' point.

Of late, I have clung to bitterness and anger in letting die other emotions, something to be purged from my heart if I am to move forward again. Yet to let that morph into hatred would be to dishonor what I once felt with such clarity. Instead, I know that those same three things – time, faith and love – are already at work to let go of the bitterness as well.

But get this: the verse says we, if we are to be righteous, are to hate. We are to hate anything that is untrue, from simple misunderstanding to out and out lies. We are to not just flee from it or shun it or find ways to tolerate it: we are to hate it. That's an awful strong emotion for something that is such a large part of our lives. It makes sense, though, if you consider how insidious dishonesty really is. The serpent lured humanity to damnation with a simple deception of "what about." In my own time, the seemingly healthy idea of supporting my self-worth can be a seemingly harmless ruse designed to bolster up something unhealthy. We are to hate those kinds of petty and large dishonesties, and to learn from them how to live in the opposite way of righteousness.

Another contrast is that of "the wicked bring." My tendency is to think that it is the wicked who should hate or who should transpire some kind of violent or aggressive action. Instead, they simply bring (or have brought upon them) something undesirable. That seems like a pretty simple thing, to just 'bring.' No fanfare, no elaborate schemes, no self-aggrandizing hatred; just 'bring.' To me, that speaks of consequence. If you relish what is false, you bring on yourself shame and disgrace. You're playing with fire because as sure as night follows day, if you play with the matches of dishonesty, you will be burned. Eventually, everything comes to light. When it does, those who relish what is false, what is dishonest, will be seen in their true light. The negative simply happens because the positive didn't.

Finally, there is the matter of how what is false brings shame and disgrace. I've said before that I don't endeavor to lie even though, through the course of my life, I have indeed 'borne false witness' in ways too numerous to list. My true witness is to say that doing so left me in disgrace and feeling ashamed. On the other side of such transgressions, I see now how disgrace and shame are the tools of a conscience trying to right the ship of my life. Understanding that you are in a state of visible disgrace to those around you induces shame, so that you see and realize that some things you did were wrong. How marvelous it is that a wise and canny God would use things with such negative connotations to prod a wayward average guy to return to the straight and narrow.

I truly do believe in people, and I truly do believe that most people want to do good with their lives. Most people want to do what is right and most usually do. It's true that not all of what is 'right' is actually righteous, but it's always right to cling to what is true. Me, I've spent enough time wearing the scarlet letters of shame and disgrace, and I now know again how truly good it feels to cast off those letters and bask in the warmth of truth. Going into the first weekend of a good summer, I hope this is your lot as well.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 26 June 2010

One man pretends to be rich, yet has nothing; another pretends to be poor, yet has great wealth. Proverbs 13, verse 7.

This is one I know too well because it talks about wealth on a number of levels.

First, the obvious. In my family, we lived beyond our means for far too long. It would be convenient for me to blame all this on my spouse. It would also be dishonest because I'm the one who spent his way out of grief over losing his father. And I'm the one who pushed to buy a new camper when our indications were that we shouldn't. I've been good at justifying spending but that justification still left us with debt, some of which I'm still paying off. I don't carry credit cards now; haven't for a long time but it's still a difficult thing to not want to buy things you don't really need. In doing so, I've pretended to be rich yet come up with nothing, at least nothing tangible (unless you count in the debt).

Then let's talk about relationships. I've always tended to be a loner, thinking I didn't need people and that I was tough enough to get by on my own. I was, I really was tough enough, that is until I ran into serious emotional trouble and I needed people to help me through. I thought I was rich and that I had enough people to care me through, and while I have had so many people who have helped support and encourage me, I still had that same cavalier attitude. Of all the things I'm ashamed of in this life, perhaps this is the greatest. I WAS rich, no pretending about it. I was wealthy in the blessings of friendship yet I acted poor and found out that the acting was false. I had nothing when I acted this way.

What about work? I'm validated by my work, and I take great pride in my work. Give me a way to work and I'll work my butt off, and usually I succeed. With that success comes the big head. I'm very self-confident because I'm confident that my skills are valuable and needed (at least until socialized medicine comes into practice). I have very little patience for people who work only to get by, or people who don't have the same work ethic as me. You guessed it: I act all rich. The truth is, however, that when you're that cocky, you're a turn off. I find that people enjoy working with me...until I get the big head. Then I'm not so popular and I find myself with fewer people willing to work. They're sending me a message.

I could go on and on. If we're in the same groove, I bet you could as well. I think about spending, friendships and coworkers, and I think now (especially after this proverb's reminder) that the warning signs are always there. Too much debt? Warning: you're beyond your means. Friends going silent? Warning: you're taking advantage of their love. Trouble at work? Warning: the big head is a big problem. I know what the remedy is for these things because it's written right here in the verse. It's 'pretending to be poor,' which in my book equates to humility.

Humility is something that I believe I'm always going to struggle with. "It ain't cocky if you can do it," reputedly said Mr. Berra, and that's a quote with which I agree. But he also said "it ain't the heat. It's the humility." I so agree with that too, even if Mr. Berra was joking. I'm learning to keep myself in check, especially with what I say and write. Had I done so long ago, I would think my row would have been easier to hoe. No matter, I still don't believe in 'never.' Better late than never to learn what a wonderful thing it is to be content and humble in all things. In the spirit of the proverb, I think that's the best approach to all things above the dirt. It doesn't mean that I can't be proud of my successes, relationships and financial status, and it doesn't mean I can't aspire to improve. Instead, it means I can keep them in perspective and let them speak for themselves without my egotistical embellishment. That's the example the Proverb suggests, and it's the example Christ set for us.

I'm in the best shape of my life, and I want to be in better; I'll be thankful for having gotten this far and for the opportunity to keep working on it. Throughout this separation, I've paid my bills (though I'm a tense about that summer electric bill) so I'll be glad there has been plenty so far. Good people have freely given of themselves to hear me out and give me shoulders on which to cry. I know now how truly blessed I am because of those people. I constantly see how wretched I have been in most things and how needy I am of forgiveness. Above all else, I'm thankful for one who gives this and who patiently, contentedly and humbly calls me His own.

When he knew he was dying, Lou Gehrig called himself the luckiest man on the face of the earth. Wise words I should be so worthy to echo because they humbly speak through the decades about wealth of the soul. If this is the last day of my life, or if it only gets harder from here on out, I'll be glad to live the part and know how the blessings just keep coming no matter what.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 27 June 2010

A man's riches may ransom his life, but a poor man hears no threat. Proverbs 13, verse 8.

Do you own it or does it own you? I know people who have been foreclosed, and I know people who have declared bankruptcy. In my own situation, I have been in dire financial straits off and on throughout my adult life, and I know how it feels to pay bills on pay day and have nothing left over at all. If you're one of those who's lost so much, or if you've been deep in debt like yours truly, you don't feel much ownership of the things you call your property.

It's a desperate feeling to know you're behind the curve financially, and it makes you feel like a slave. For so long, I felt like I was working for nothing, like everything I made was being paid out for junk, or for things I didn't ask for. I had to get jobs that paid more and more just to be able to finance a lifestyle that I found unfulfilling and for things in which I had no hand. I felt like a slave, like the opportunities usually afforded by higher income were taken away from me because of bad choices. In those times, I understood the meaning of this proverb even before I ever read it: I felt like I had been kidnapped by debt and that it was holding me ransom for revolving credit.

At the other end of the spectrum, I've also known uber-successful and wealthy people who seemed hollow. A good friend of mine spent a lot of his life chasing after the brass ring only to find that it cost him his wife and daughter. He's scaled back considerably and, from all I can tell, is far more content. It's true, I know wealthy people who are quite satisfied (and well they should be) but I can't honestly say that's the rule. It's a tough lesson to learn that money really doesn't make you happy after all.

So is there virtue in poverty? No, I don't think so, and believe it or not I don't think that's what the proverb is insinuating. I don't read it to mean that we should be poor so that we can avoid the heartaches of financial irresponsibility. Instead, I read it to be just a statement of fact, that if you don't have debt to worry about, then you don't have to worry about the negative consequences of having too much debt.

I also read it to be a subtle endorsement of responsibility, that in-between success and poverty is a sweet spot. Too many riches and we run the risk of unhappiness or financial problems; too few and we live hand to mouth and contentment is a lot harder to attain. I read the two opposing clauses of the proverb to be a pointer at the place in the middle where most of us can find satisfaction in enjoying the bread of our efforts.

Finally, I read between the lines in this proverb that we should be humble and satisfied no matter where we find ourselves on the wealth scale. By and large, if you start out poor and work hard you won't be poor for long. On the other end, if you have wealth and don't work to maintain or grow it, you won't have that wealth for long either. I read the proverb to mean that we should find contentment with whatever blessings are in our lives, and that we should be more thankful for the breath in our lungs and the people in our lives than for the Benjamin Franklin's in our wallets.

Of course, this is easy for me to say. I'm still in debt enough to know I'll be paying things off for a few years more. That's ok; I'm in my main earning years and should have enough time to enjoy the rewards that will likely come my way, that is if the statistics hold true and I stay above the dirtline. Even if that doesn't happen, I'm thankful to have gotten this far, and to have some perspective on both wealth and poverty that I didn't have when I was wallowing in the bitterness of the long and recent past. I see now that whatever 'it' is, it doesn't need to own me because I've already been bought back.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 28 June 2010

Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice. Proverbs 13, verse 10.

One of my favorite books is "The Stand" by Stephen King, and in it is one of my favorite sayings: the mother of all sin is pride. Pride is what makes you think you are better than somebody else, or that you can afford to mouth off to your boss, your parents, or the woman you love. Pride, when taken to unhealthy levels, is what drives you to think "me first" in even the small things in your life. Think of some kind of wrongdoing that you've done and, chances are, there's an undeniable element of excessive pride that caused it.

I agree with the proverb that most quarrels do indeed start with some kind of injury to pride. Someone has a bone to pick with me and they argue, or they're offended, or they are upset. Many times, there's good reason for either I've done something wrong to them or something else has happened and they want to feel better. Then ensues the quarrel and we're off to the races. Boil away the skim of what the argument sounds like and I bet you'll find someone's pride is injured.

It's true that we need both self-worth and self-pride. Self-esteem comes from successful achievement of goals, and from knowing we are living our lives in an upright and healthy manner. Sure, you could say there are millions of self-centered people who appear to have very healthy self-worth and are intensely proud of themselves. I wonder how many of them will be around for us when we really need them. Additionally, you can also say there are millions of other people who are beaten down by life and don't know where to start getting the kind of healthy self-worth and pride that will sustain them to healthy self-esteem. That's equally true.

But I also agree with the proverb that the bigger truth is how 'the anti-pride' of wisdom is found in taking advice. Taking advice entails listening: lots of engaged and interactive listening. In order to take advice one must listen for it and to it. Contemplative listening happens for me when I subdue my pride and put something else first. Incorporating that same theme of 'it's not about me' means that I listen to what experienced people have said and done, then I decide accordingly in the best way I can.

That's just common sense; nothing ecclesiastical about it, but I believe it's undeniable that this common sense is rooted in divine wisdom. God doesn't do coincidences: God does grace, and grace isn't a thing left to chance. It is active and loving. He imparts wisdom to us, then leaves us with the freedom of choice to act on it as we will. We are wise when we make the best decisions we can using that divine wisdom, so that even if things don't turn out the way we want (or even the way we expect) we can hold up our heads and be looked on as having done the right thing. Then, surprise of surprises, doing that gives us something to be proud of. At least that's how it's worked out for me.

There's a lot that I have thought, said, and done of which I'm not proud. And my bullheaded Yankee pride has gotten me into more quarrels and troubled more loving friendships than I care to admit. In yet another of my work-in-progress qualities, this too is something I'm working to improve. There has been enough discord and enough fighting in my life. These days, I'm working on listening better, acting wiser, and founding my pride in that rather than just in the man in the mirror. I think even Stephen King would approve of that.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 29 June 2010

Dishonest money dwindles away, but he who gathers money little by little makes it grow. Proverbs 13, verse 11.

Reading this proverb makes me think that King Solomon was a royal capitalist. "A penny saved is a penny earned." "Sock it away for a rainy day." Common proverbs from our own day and time, to be sure, but they're true. Frugality and saving earns interest. Interest compounds and grows. With time and shrewd wisdom, wealth can be earned. That's just how it works; even an economic illiterate like me can understand this.

Now, I've been in tight spots before, just like most of you. I've been in situations (as recent as last payday) where every dime went out the door and I'm left eating mac & cheese until the next payday...when all of that can go out the door too. Like so many of you, I'm frantically in search of opportunities, even small ones, to earn extra income to both pay off debt and have some fluid cash in my pocket. We're in tough times that indicate they will get tougher. I get it.

I think the proverb isn't just talking about dishonest money though, that is, money earned through lying or deception. I read it to include those evil credit cards we use to get things we can't afford. Buying what we can't easily afford is risky, and risk always skirts the edge of wrongdoing. If I can't afford to pay for it in a reasonable time, then the debt owns me and I don't own it. That's indicative of irresponsibility on my part, maybe even dishonesty in that I've lied to myself into thinking I could afford something I couldn't. I've lied to God, and I've even lied to my creditor (who will gladly forgive me while extending my payment schedule as far to the right as he can).

But, Dave, you might say, "debt owed by someone is income due to another. That's part of capitalism as well." Too true. I read the proverb to mean "be responsible." Be a good steward of the gifts given to you. Don't squander them. Instead, use them responsibly because it is through responsibility that God provides for both us and those in our lives.

I cashed in my 401K from my last job so as to pay off debts. It wasn't a huge amount of money, but it was substantial and now it's gone. They were irresponsible debts dishonestly incurred and they had to be paid. I did so and now I'm back at square one, in my mid-40s, rebuilding that nest egg. Most of the money went to paying for debts; some went to living expenses during my separation. It doesn't keep me up at night because I don't plan on retiring for another 30 years (earlier if all you fair readers are interested in the books I will soon be publishing). Yet they were debts I shouldn't have allowed and I did.

Here's the good news, mainly the second half of the proverb, that money gathered over time, little by little, grows. That 401K can start to grow again. Statistically speaking, I have plenty of time to sock away money, a little at a time, to provide for a comfortable and satisfying retirement while still fulfilling my debt obligations and sharing with others who need it more than me. I've ponied up that I've been irresponsible. Thank heaven for the opportunity to do better.

More important than any of this, let's apply it to other things we do in our lives. To paraphrase Warren Buffett, it only takes a minute to ruin a reputation while it takes a lifetime to rebuild it. Haven't we all done that too? You've read about many of my indiscretions. They didn't take long and it didn't take much to chip away at my integrity and make me into someone with a bad reputation. Don't we lose credibility, respect, and standing in the eyes of people who count on us when we say or do even small things that are contrary to living a Godly life? My foremost goal is to live a life of honor in the eyes of God and my brothers & sisters. I want this, and work at this, more than anything else I do, yet if you know me and read about things I've done, you'd think I was the dirtiest man around. In some ways, I have been and I am. Doesn't take much to take the shine off my armor; I'm guessing you're wearing that same suit of steel, complete with its own dull and rusty spots. You, me, and probably everyone you know of, even Al Gore.

Be ye of good faith, though. We live our lives second by second, and in some seconds we do things that are contrary to faith and this proverb. In others – I dare say in most of them – we do things to build up a good reputation. That takes time. I think about my grandfather, himself a man of imperfection and flaw, who lived most of his life learning to overcome those flaws and be an upright man of honor. Think about Michael Milken, who has used his time since Wall Street to raise money that helps millions recover from cancer. Or Muhammed Ali, who was an angry, arrogant draft dodger as a young man yet has lifted up millions with his later-life dignity and humanity. Think about the thief on the cross next to Jesus, who merited his death through the actions of many seconds yet in the most important of them sought forgiveness and became a lesson to billions of people ever since. And think of Christ himself, who did no wrong yet chose to also impart his lessons to us one by one over time instead of just blasting them onto our hearts. Those lessons are the life lessons of real wealth because they are love incarnate.

If you've ever regretted the dishonesty of squander, welcome to the party. I'm right beside you, wading in a pool of sometime-regret about it. We're also wading into good water that washes away the marks of our indiscretions, financial and otherwise, and lets us wade out clean to do better. I'm working to be a better steward of the gifts in my life. Here's to hoping you do as well. In that way, Solomon's proverb means more than just a reminder on the first and fifteenth of every month.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 30 June 2010

Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life. Proverbs 13, verse 12.

And so this is Christmas and what have we done? In about 5 months it'll be fashionable for radio stations to play that song again. I'm not a big John Lennon fan, but I like that one because it's full of both reflection and hope. This is a half year point. The year is half over today. I think it's an appropriate moment to take stock of hope deferred and fulfilled longings.

Just over six months ago I got on the rollercoaster. To say it's been a fast and bumpy ride only skims the surface. My rollercoaster ride actually went back months before, to this time one year ago. Pent up feelings, job frustration, life changes and discord at home all sank me into a black depression. When I finally got a handle on that one, another series of even more serious episodes played out in my life. That's where I've been in the six months since New Years.

I fell out of love with someone special, stood by as my marriage fell apart, fell in love with someone else special, and actively participated this year as that fell apart as well. For so long, I lived on hope, regarding hope as both a wish unfulfilled and a promise of better things to come. What I hoped for most was to love and be loved, and I thought that my wife actually didn't while my new love actually did. It turned out that my wife really did love me in many ways unconditional while my new loved fully couldn't because we hadn't learned to love each other unconditionally. Both of them wanted a stronger, better man; neither of them got one, at least not in me.

At the end, I spent these last weeks and months feeling alone in my heart, still trying to live on hope deferred. I knew better things were yet to come yet I couldn't see past how very much they hurt at the moment. My hopes hadn't turned out the way I wanted, and while I reached out in prayer and for support, I still internalized it, agonized over it. Some who I needed ran away, while others stayed aloof. It was the blackest time of my life, and my heart surely was sick because I was self-absorbed. I'd had an emotional breakdown that was many years in the making and I felt abandoned and full of shame and regret.

My friend, Scott, Twittered this today: "don't allow your mistakes to determine your future. Overcome." When I read that, I knew it would segue into this proverb because I think it's part of the 'longing fulfilled is a tree of life' concept. I made mistakes; we all make mistakes. Overcoming them includes satisfying longings and when that happens, it's a life-giving feeling. It's empowering, liberating, and comforting, especially when you do it by first laying all your cares down and walking away from them. Walking away with a free heart is truly a fulfilled longing because I believe that we all desire most to have a heart freed by true love, then filled (and fulfilled) by it.

Walking away from my burdens was a hard thing for me to do, especially knowing that it would mean having neither a mate nor love in my life. It had to be done, though. I had to let the separation take its course no matter where my wife and I would end up. And I had to let the other woman go because it was the right thing to do. She had moved on without me, and it took time for me to understand that some of her reasons were true. I regret that she and I had done wrong, but not how I felt. I believe more than ever that when love is put on your heart, it is real and it is a gift. To act on it out of marriage as we did, however, only caused heartbreak and hurt for everyone affected: my family, hers, friends.

The longing was fulfilled though, both in knowing I had been loved before and after, and in realizing a few more important things. The love I thought had been abandoned in marriage lay dormant, waiting for communication and effort to chip off the scale that crusted over it. The affection I'd felt for someone else was something real that we both got to keep and walk away with, even when it meant walking through wreckage into an uncertain future without each other. Friends who I'd never known would support me did so even as others walked away. And, most of all, I got to stand at the cross again, and lay down my cares again, knowing that real love, true love would wash away the guilt on my spirit and fulfill my real longings for love, meaning and purpose. I lost sight of it for awhile but that cruel, haggard cross really was the tree of life to fulfill those real longings.

At the half-way point to this year, I now know more than ever that my hopes aren't deferred and that, even through all the hurt that has happened, many of my longings are fulfilled. I've been blessed with more good things than I can ever deserve, and the next few months promise to bring both renewed love and improved circumstances that I couldn't have considered possible until now. I'm blessed with a good job in a new project, a safe home and the means to prosper in it, more friends than I knew I had, and yet one more last chance in relationships and faith to start again. My first novel is nearly complete, I write this daily missal to you (and both you and it are an immeasurable blessing to me), my bills are

(mostly) paid, and my family is moving forward in constructive ways. I've longed for these things for so long, and when I deserved it least, God filled my heart with them and so much more.

God never gives up on us, and though I've railed at the mystery of his ways, I see yet again how good those ways really are. We lack foresight but hindsight is usually clear. Christmas is in less than six months, and while those six months promise more of the rollercoaster ride, I think you, me, and John Lennon will be able to look back and say "we've done well. We did our best." To me, that is hope in action. Today, I look back on this year so far and see I am truly blessed with many more fulfilled longings than deferred hopes. Thank God for that, I say. Thank God and you, my friends.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 1 July 2010

He who scorns instruction will pay for it, but he who respects a command is rewarded. Proverbs 13, verse 13.

By trade I'm an instructional designer. When given my choice, I attended graduate school to earn a masters degree in instructional design. I like to teach people, which is why it's what I'd like to do when I finally grow up. The first time I really taught anyone, I was at sea, teaching a bank of equipment to two guys on my crew who weren't much younger than myself; I think one of them might actually have been older than me. It was intimidating, but we got through it and I discovered I liked the action, the feeling, of teaching someone else something of value. I modeled myself after the man who taught me that same equipment, and I believe I was successful; no missions crashed because of what I did or didn't teach my crew.

Since then, I've been privileged to teach adults software, business processes, coding, and software configuration in a number of different arenas. I've taught Sunday School to tweens and teens in several different churches. My proudest moments have been when I've made connections with people, when I knew from their responses that they understood my message. It'll seem weird but I once taught a group of people that, according to Indiana vernacular, 'pink' is actually spelled "PANK" (thank you John Mellencamp and your 'little pank houses for you and me.'). It was a running joke for the rest of our time together.

I hope you don't think I'm bragging, but if you've ever had the pleasure of teaching other people, then synching in that moment of connection, I think you'll understand what I'm talking about. There's a thrill in commanding an audience, and an even bigger thrill if you can credibly teach them something useful. After teaching groups for awhile, I knew that I wanted to make a career of it, so I pursued the higher education to obtain credentials necessary for both placement and credibility. It was one of the most satisfying things I've ever done.

Naturally, I haven't produced much with it. Where I wanted to design curricula to help people learn better, instead, I've pole-vaulted into the realms of being a software consultant or configuration lead. Life hasn't taken me along the path I'd envisioned, but I really don't regret the choice I made to pursue either this path or the one less traveled. I don't regret it because I've finally realized that every moment in every task is a teaching moment.

That's all the more important because I actually read this proverb to represent both sides of instruction, both giving and receiving. It talks about scorning the instruction, not the delivery method. Isn't it so true that we suffer for what we don't know? Anyone who's ever crammed for a test will tell you that. So will those who (like me) procrastinate. Or how about the parents who try to assemble toys without reading the instructions? If we turn our backs when people try to teach or tell us things they want us to know, then we run the risk of ruin if their instruction actually does happen to be important to us.

As for the second half of the verse, don't be put off by that word 'command.' A command is an instruction, not just a dictate. It is authoritative direction. A command is, if you will, a teaching moment.

My Walter Mitty fantasy is to finish my years publishing books and teaching classes in Bloomington, Indiana (or maybe at SMU here in Dallas). If all goes well, I have many years ahead of me in which to make that fantasy real. There's still much to learn, and much to teach. God grant that there would be time for both.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 2 July 2010

The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, turning a man from the snares of death. Proverbs 13, verse 14.

When I read this proverb, I searched for a good way to express what I thought it meant. The teacher/designer in me wanted to expound on the virtues of learning; how it prepares us to tackle the challenges of life that drag us down into colorful forms of 'death.' Forget all that; something much more important has impressed itself on my heart.

My fourteen year old son just returned from his first mission trip, this a service trip to an Oklahoma Indian reservation. He's been gone all week, working with the Osages north of Tulsa. A whole group of young kids did odd jobs and provided quiet witness to the people there. He hasn't been too forthcoming yet with many details of what happened, but it's an understatement to say that he has changed just a little. One of the first things he told me was "I cried last night," and the tears came to my eyes as well; they're back again just now. He talked about meeting kids from all over the country, and how they all shared devotions every day, and how they worked hard scraping paint, and rebuilding broken buildings, and just doing general work there. He build relationships with strangers, and shared himself in ways he never considered before.

For my particular teen, that's like saying "I just climbed Mount Everest." Not just the work part, or even the devotions part. My son has always had deep, still waters sitting calmly underneath the tough-kid façade. I was moved to hear him share these things without prodding or regret. He had been nervous about going, and when he left on Sunday morning he was full of the typical teen boy bravado and too-cool-for-school act. I'm sure that, in time, those things will return. I suspect, though, that they'll be tempered just a little from the experience he lived this week.

Through most of his life, my son has held faith at arm's length. It's a private thing for him, not something he's comfortable showing in public. Just 2 months ago, he shared his testimony in front of the church and I was struck at the simple, real honesty of the words he professed, as well as the cool calm with which he professed them. Today, I got to see an unknown public side, a side we've long seen in private which, until now, has been hidden away from everyone else. He was a follower this week, a follower and a youth worker among many. And yet, he was a teacher as well, a teacher put into a difficult situation to provide physical witness to the power of Christ in a skeptical and downtrodden world.

This week, in small but significant ways, God used him for good. God taught him the ways of the wise, and turned him from the snare-traps of death that seem to face our teens now more than at any time in our history. It wasn't a cure-all teaching that will set up force fields in his life to protect him from all harm. No, instead, it was a live-all teaching that taught him how service to others, service in the name of the One in whom we're all one, is really what it's all about. And he shared it all without hesitation. That amazes me, especially in light of all my family has endured this year.

His clothes are already in the laundry, washing away the dirt of hard work and hard-won experience. I feel a bit sad that we even had to wash them because doing so washes away a tangible reminder of his experience. I know we need clean clothes; hygiene keeps us healthy. Yet I still feel sadness knowing that even those small, insignificant specks of dirt mean something. They are dirty badges of honor testifying to what he and his group accomplished.

More important, they are badges of honor, like nails in one's hands and feet, that testify to putting service in God's stead before service to one's self. They are real but fleeting. The real badges of honor are now impressed on my son's heart for him to carry around, draw strength, and use in further service along whatever life path he walks.

The group returned to our church just after two this afternoon. When I arrived to pick him up, his group was with one of our pastors, recording a 'mindfreak' for inclusion on a ministry website. It'll be posted Monday morning, and I invite you to go to <http://ablaze4youth.com/> to listen to what they had to say. My son is a teenager, so be advised that the few words he spoke aren't profound...yet in a way they truly are. A week before he would rather have had his eyes salted (or watch 'Mamma Mia') than participate in a youth ministry event. To me, it's a profound thing that his heart was moved in such a short time to do something other than himself, bigger than himself, just to share a few words of Godly wisdom with total strangers online. The world moves a little bit at a time, and I see again how it is things like this, things like this mission trip, that set such movement in motion.

I'm sitting in my bedroom office, writing these words about his experience. He is back in his bedroom, catching up on text messages and enjoying the blessings of air conditioning in 'the man cave.' And you're in front of your computer reading

this small message. It too is a profound thing, don't you think, that we can share these things with each other in this way, that one young man's experience can serve to teach others about a change of heart and a change of habit.

I'm sure that, in the weeks to come, the troubles of life will try to steal from him this moment of glory. 2-a-day football practice starts in a few weeks, and high school shortly after that. Changes already set in motion will add stress to our family, and while I know healing will come from it, it will be stress all the same.

This week he's been fueled in life, in what it really means to truly live, and to live in such a way that his life already has meaning and fulfillment. It's my prayer for him, and for all of us, that we could use that fueling to 'pay it forward' in submissive service wherever it's needed in our world.

Welcome back Dman. I missed you, I'm glad you're home, I'm thankful you're safe, and I'm so very proud of you.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 3 July 2010

Good understanding wins favor, but the way of the unfaithful is hard. Proverbs 13, verse 15.

I'll admit a trade secret to you: in interpreting these Proverbs I sometimes seek help. I read the verses from a concordance, and I sometimes consult the notes in my study Bible. As my verses are taken from an NIV interpretation, I'll occasionally read other versions to see if they speak to me.

The NIV translation says what you see above. For purposes of comparison the traditional King James says, "Good understanding giveth favour: but the way of transgressors is hard," and the New King James says the same thing. A New American Standard translation is, "Good understanding produces favor, But the way of the treacherous is hard." From the New Living Translation we get, "A person with good sense is respected; a treacherous person is headed for destruction," and from the Contemporary English Version there is, "Sound judgment is praised, but people without good sense are on the way to disaster." Go to www.biblegateway.com if you want to see more.

What's the point here? As I get it, I no matter how it's said, good advice is always good. This particular advice was divinely inspired, left by God for us to understand as we would. Hundreds of translations in languages foreign to us facilitate that understanding. Whether we know it or not, that process wins favor, both in God's eyes and in the eyes of the world. It's a matter of sound judgment and good common sense.

Make no mistake about it, though: God's grace is 100% constant no matter what we do. We don't earn it, and all the winning we try won't change the fact that he loves us as a parent and as a creator who sees us as 'very good.' Forgive my audacity but I'm a father, and I don't mind bragging that I am touched when my kids do their best to win my favor. I'm especially touched when they do so without being told to do so. Maybe that's how God feels too; when we get to heaven, let's remind each other to ask him.

Isn't it interesting, too, that the second clause of the verse talks about 'unfaithfulness' while the first one mentions 'understanding?' I don't read this verse just in the context of sexual infidelity but I do think that infidelity of knowledge applies. It's no coincidence that some of the translations listed above talk about transgression and treason because those, too, are forms of applicable unfaithfulness that betray knowledge of what is right. When we turn our backs on striving to understand, things get tough. When we think we know it all, we run into road blocks. When we don't get the point, we struggle. When we give up, it hurts.

When, when, when: it's not a matter of 'could this happen' but 'if' and then 'when.' The proverb says "if or when you don't have good understanding, it's gonna be a tough row to hoe." It is conditional as a function of time, and it applies to any form of infidelity we can imagine.

Again, I go back to my experiences as a dad. I think of the times when I have railed most against my kids' behavior and I see that they weren't the only ones without good understanding. Sure enough, our way of unfaithfulness in seeking understanding was hard. Is that any wonder? Then I contrast that with the times like yesterday, when my son was on fire with passion for mission work, and I think about watching the "Toy Story" movies with my seventeen year old, and I think about the good times my wife and I have had, and I remember sunsets and good times with good friends, and a host of wonderful memories flood my mind and bring tears to my eyes. Then I realize "I get it" and I feel I've won favor in the eyes of those I cherish without really trying. Somewhere, someplace, perhaps God is smiling thinking "good for you, Dave. Hold onto that." Hold onto it I will.

There has been enough treacherous, transgressing unfaithfulness in my life, ninety nine percent of which I've caused. Those ways were yesterday; today is something new. Today is a day to focus on living in such a way as to seek good understanding, to compete for it against the forces of darkness and then to prevail. This day is a good day in which to turn from the ways of pettiness and shabby misunderstanding, and to strive to do better; to allow ourselves to 'get it' again. No matter how it is translated, let's let the language of this verse set the game board for good play today. Me, I'm playing to win.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 4 July 2010

A longing fulfilled is sweet to the soul, but fools detest turning from evil. Proverbs 13, verse 19.

I'm skipping ahead again by a few verses because it's Independence Day and I want to say a few words about that. In church this morning, the pastor reminded his congregation that tyranny, not freedom, is the natural order of things in this world. Liberty is not a natural thing, and it's not something most people in the world know anything about. For over six billion people in the world, freedom is an unfulfilled longing that would indeed be sweet to the soul if ever they were allowed to taste it. Instead, fools rule over them embracing evil and oppressing liberty. My mother was born in the late 1920s and she tells of reading newspapers and seeing newsreels of the 1930s when Hitler was on the rise. Most of her family was German and they all thought Hitler was a buffoon, that he wouldn't amount to anything. Look how that turned out.

Then as today, chaos and tyranny are the norm in this world. Look at Rwanda, or the West Bank. Look at Afghanistan, and Iraq, Mexico, anywhere the Luddites who protest the G20 find themselves. If chaos doesn't rule there, nothing does. As for tyranny, how about China, Belarus, North Korea, Cuba, Venezuela, and most of the nations in Africa? Very few of the people who live in those places are truly free.

So what does tyranny look like? About 20 years ago, I was living in Italy when the Communist government of Albania fell. Overnight, thousands of Albanian refugees fled their homeland. They flooded the coastal cities along the Adriatic, including Brindisi where I lived. I remember driving to work past the dirtiest people I'd ever seen. They all wore out of style clothes that were dirty and tattered, and most of them looked like they hadn't seen a barber shop in months, if ever. And they were all hungry, desperately hungry. I remember thinking "it that's what Communism looks like, no wonder we're winning the Cold War."

Or there is my friend Tatiana. She was one of the first people I met when I started working at MCI in 2000; in fact, she was the first person I'd on-boarded. You'll never meet a smarter, sharper (or prettier) person in your life and over the years she's told me stories about growing up in Minsk where you had to be careful what you said or how you said it. Her father is a university professor who still teaches science there, but her family has hardly ever known freedom, neither before the fall of communists nor in present day Belarus. Even today, she's told me you still have to watch what you say because you never know who might be listening.

That's how I felt last year when I spent a week in the People's Republic of China. Our group was always escorted, always watched by several well-heeled visitors who represented the local Communist party. There was no trouble, and to be honest, they were very polite to us. We even shared more than just a few rounds of their local moonshine. But it was beyond creepy how we were never alone and how, even in the wild outback of southern China (where very few people live) the long arm of control could reach out and intimidate you anywhere.

I could go on and on, describing the Soviet ship crews I saw in the mid-80s, or a brief visit to Romania in 1994, to the Kurds I met on that same 94 trip, or reading through the Voice of the Martyrs (which is a periodical that discusses real persecution happening in our world today).

I don't think you need to leave the United States, however, to find people who aren't free, people who live with unfulfilled longings for freedom from whatever it is that oppresses them. It will be difficult to convince me that the kid who does crack in inner-city Philadelphia (or Chicago, Dallas, New York or Walla Walla) is free. Ditto for all the people out of work in the Rust Belt where jobs have exited and despair rules. And what about the suburban housewife whose husband is an abusive alcoholic who gets violent when he's had too much bourbon? Are any of these people really free?

The theme of our worship this morning was, not surprisingly, being thankful for our freedom: freedom as Americans and freedom as believers. True freedom begins with freedom of the spirit, bought and paid for with the freedom-giving blood of Jesus Christ. The doubting Thomas in me, though, says 'you can't eat that.' And while my Christian faith gives me the spiritual fortitude to overcome almost anything, it's easier said than done transmitting that faith from a personal belief into a political movement.

Still, it can be done, evil can be turned back and people turned back from evil. In my book, the greatest man of the last one hundred years was John Paul II. Look at all he accomplished simply by first saying "I believe." We could argue about a hundred fine points of policy and coincidence but I don't think there's any arguing that, without John Paul, our

world would be a drastically different place today. His action all started with simple faith that sweetened his soul and motivated millions.

Today, when our nation is 234 years old, we should each pause to reflect on what freedom means to us. For my daughters, it's the chance to watch "Bridezillas" in the other room while I type this in mine. For some, it will be to watch fireworks, grill out, sit on a pier to fish, or maybe read the pages of a brilliant novel in the making. For so many others in the world, freedom to speak, love, worship, vote, assemble, or even live free from fear will be nothing more than meaningless words said to a heart in despair. I dare say this will be the lot tonight for most of the people in the world. I'm proud to be an American, and I wouldn't trade it or anything to live any place else in the world. I pray, too, that God continually pokes holes in my pride to remind me that he didn't bequeath me this freedom to squander it on useless pursuits, or to flaunt it in arrogance. He bequeathed it to me to protect it, advance it, and use it for the good of his kingdom. He did it for me, and he did it for you. So, in the words of Mr. Beamer, himself one who dearly understood the cost of freedom, "let's roll."

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 5 July 2010

A wicked messenger falls into trouble, but a trustworthy envoy brings healing. Proverbs 13, verse 17.

When was the last time you were the bearer of bad news? Have you recently told a friend or a family member something that hurt their feelings, or relayed bad news? This verse brings to mind something that happened 25 years ago.

When I went into the military, my father gave me some advice: don't BS 'the man' because 'the man' needs to know what he needs to know, not what you want to tell him. Dad was talking about briefing your superiors and how they need to know facts, not opinions. Bad news is news and if you have bad news to report, then report it. If you've ever endured the verbal wrath of a master sergeant or colonel who doesn't like what you have to say, you know what I mean. Generals and chiefs don't stomp around snorting mad, and captains, majors and junior NCOs usually don't have the standing enough to do so. But a master sergeant or a colonel has just enough authority to be responsible for many things and not enough authority to really control all of them. That combination makes for a short fuse in just the right person.

Try delivering bad news to a tense colonel on a busy day. You'll get your head snapped off.

I can't imagine how bad that would be if I were the wicked messenger. I know how to move in the infighting of politics though I find myself loathe to do so. What I dislike most about politics is how it's disingenuous, how you are forced to suspect everyone you know and what they're saying. Decisions are calculated for effect, not necessarily morality, and right versus wrong usually takes a back burner. I'm a political junkie but I'll admit I really don't have the stomach for being a political participant. Don't envision yours truly ever being on a ballot for anything higher than the school board because I think politics is full of 'wicked messengers:' people who are in the game for what the game has to offer them, not the other way around. It constantly amazes me how we make even small groups political; if you don't believe me, try joining a church council some times.

But in politics, the military, your home or any group to which you belong, bringing trustworthy news is a healing thing. Praise results when you have good news to deliver; isn't that why 'spin' rules the day in politics? We all like praise, and we all want to be painted in a good light. Nobody likes giving bad news and everyone wants to tell 'the man' what he wants to hear instead of just what he needs to hear. I think back to a lesson I learned from my friend, Bert, though: face up to the bad news. If you have to deliver bad news, do it quickly, as a matter of fact, and immediately take what responsibility you can. Doing so in a group usually de-fuses the animosity and finger-pointing that arises from all points of contention. Doing so quickly allows a group to move quickly from accusation to solution...and healing.

Bert, that's very Biblical advice. It's very Matthew 18.

From time to time we all have to deliver bad news. It's just part of living. I hadn't thought of it until this morning when the proverbial came up but my friend's advice is right in line with the verse. It's a code I try to live by, and it works because it is of the Divine.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 6 July 2010

He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm. Proverbs 13, verse 20.

This morning, I was sitting on my back patio enjoying a cup of coffee in the warm (and humid) Texas morning air. I was looking at a pear tree planted there. A previous owner planted it; I think it must be ten or twelve years old. This has been a humid season so far and the pears on the tree are bigger than I've ever seen them. To be honest, I'm not sure whether it's just an ornamental pear with inordinately large fruit this year, or an edible pear that hasn't produced up to capacity so far. I suppose that doesn't really matter because, this year, it is what it is and what it is has thus far produced a bumper crop of very large pears.

That got me thinking about Adam. How must it have felt to walk the days of his life in unabashed freedom, walking and talking side by side with God himself. Talk about learning at the feet of the master. Walking every day in a garden of pure bounty and soaking up wisdom from he who created it all out of love.

And I then I think of my own life. I haven't walked hand in hand with God, at not without metaphors and spirituality being involved, yet I have walked with people who were wise, whose counsel I valued. Kim, John, Nat, Amy, Greg, Pam, Mindy, Don, TK, Troy, Mitch, Bonnie, Scott, Ray, Bill (a couple of them) Father Julius, Dad and others: I watched, I listened, and I learned. In doing so, I acquired some of their wisdom. I can't always say I've been wise in using it, or that all my decisions were wise ever-after, but I did learn from them and that learning was a wise thing. It was empowering, and equipped me with good tools to use throughout my days.

Likewise, I've kept the company of fools and have done foolish things. There's no good to be gained in naming names on this one, so I won't. Harm in forms big and small resulted. Some of that has lasted, and some things we never stop paying for. Yet it too has been instructive, providing white lines to follow along this path of life. I try to not dwell on these things too often because with them comes regret, sometimes much regret, and that's a dangerous foundation for one's days. I'm learning that some regret is natural, maybe even healthy, and that shame is a good mirror with which to occasionally gaze at your conscience. Yet I am now more of the mind that if we learn from our foolish things, we are better off because of it.

One of the people in my circle of close friends posted something yesterday, asking if anyone has ever wondered about the loves left behind and what life would have been like had we taken a different path. I wonder about that; I think we all do, especially in times of trouble. It's a fool's game to dwell too long in front of the Mirror of Erised, but from time to time it warms my heart. Such contemplation shows me how my life would not have unfolded as it has, good and bad, without the choices we made: even those that included leaving behind the loves of my heart. Doing that hurt at the time, and to be honest, it still hurts when I open the doors to the places in my heart where those memories reside.

Still, I go back to the lesson I learned from them and know that I wouldn't be who I am today had I not traveled the paths I did, including those that led me away from their side. In those times, I say a little prayer for them and get back in the game. In the end, I know wisdom – and love – grew from it, and I trust their lives have unfolded as God intended they should. Where I am now is where I'm meant to be; in truth, it's where I've chosen to be and I wouldn't want to go back to make different choices for fear of jettisoning the many blessings I've known. Life really is full of blessings. It is full of more wisdom than foolishness, and I am a rich man because of that.

That leads me back to my patio, and my cup of coffee, and contemplating that pear tree. It takes a great deal of wisdom to design something so brilliantly simple as a fruit tree that is doing better this year than before. I couldn't do it, but I'm glad God did. In fact, he did that for just about everything I see. I get to sit here now and wonder in humble amazement for a moment of fleeting serendipity. From time to time, I like to ponder these things because, when I do, I feel I've energized a little bit to help me handle the crises large and small that comprise my days. I'm thinking I'll pick off one of those pears to give it a try. Maybe, if they're good, I'll cook them down into pear butter so we can enjoy them long after this growing season is done. Maybe that way I'll remember the ways of the wise every time I spread out some jam on a piece of morning toast.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 7 July 2010

Misfortune pursues the sinner, but prosperity is the reward of the righteous. Proverbs 13, verse 21.

No wonder life is so hard. A cursory reading of this proverb says that it's all wrong. I mean, how else can we explain why some of the dirtiest dirtbags in the world succeed while most people struggle to even find meaning in life (let alone success)? Compare Hollywood 'justice' and what the rest of America could expect. Where is the misfortune in their sins? Maybe someone should ask Lindsay Lohan this question on her way to the slammer. Some careful thought is in order.

Let's begin with the end in mind. Prosperity is the reward of the righteous: there's that Puritan work ethic again. Hard work pays off in more ways than just a fatter checkbook. Investing time and work in relationships pays off in love, friendship, and more friends, more loved ones. Investing one's self in a cause pays back in improving the lot of others, spreading good news, and the reward of completing a task. Investing in a task yields that same completion as well as the satisfaction of knowing your hard work has produced something of which you can be proud. It goes without my preaching to re-iterate that all these things are the fruits of prosperity which, if you think about it, is the fruit of living in an upright – i.e. righteous – manner.

So what about the other half of the verse? We're all sinners; none of us is made perfect and none of us can be perfect even as we strive for that perfection. Going back to my Patrick phrase: got skin, got sin. Misfortune does walk hand in hand with our wrongdoing and it shouldn't then be a surprise when it comes our way if we stray from the straight and narrow. My preaching isn't needed here either.

At this point I go back to the question I posed earlier: how can we explain it when dirtbags succeed while non-dirtbag people don't? The long answer is "we can't." Life is partly about capitalizing on choices and while it makes me sad to say that some made of ill-gotten-gain get ahead, it happens. We all know them, and I want to be really careful here because there are those in the world who could rightfully sling some mud my way and cover me in it. I've done my share of bad things and advanced anyway. Some could rightly say "how did Dave get ahead being the so & so he is?"

My answer to that would be "hard work and lots of prayer." For every success I've known, there has been hard work, some hard fighting, and plenty of misfortune in tow. Some of the things I've wanted most in life I've failed to attain, and some of the things that I least wanted to happen to me are now part of my history. I have skin, and you can only guess what I've done. The only way I've found to avoid being mired in the misfortune of my sins has been through prayer, faith, repentance, and a whole lot of trying again. If I didn't do those things, I'd go crazy and be even more hopeless than I've been.

Ask the glitterati what their secrets are and I bet the words 'hard work' are involved. Let's hope there's prayer too. And, by the way, they're not so different than me. I could be called a dirtbag too. I doubt you'll find me covered in glitter, though.

At the end of my hard work, or at least at the end of today, I've been blessed with some prosperity. My bills are paid, I have people who love me, and right now there are more opportunities than there are crises. It hasn't always been this way, and chances are this won't always be so. When misfortune does find me, I'll pray & hope for the presence of mind enough to fall back on simple faith as the starting point in overcoming. I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer, but one need not be too sharp to grasp the simple elegance of that gift. One only has to be a dirtbag in need of a little cleaning.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 8 July 2010

A good man leaves an inheritance for his children's children, but a sinner's wealth is stored up for the righteous. Proverbs 13, verse 22.

I'm in storing-up mode. Yesterday, I spent some time in the kitchen, making apple butter and then canning it. Mind you, I didn't really expend a lot of effort at the task. Peel a dozen apples, cut them up, put them in the crock pot with a few other ingredients, then let it cook all day. Last night, we bought some jars and I canned it. Please forgive my bragging but I'm proud of myself. With the best biscuits in Texas this morning, it tasted good and, more importantly, I prepared something for us to use over the next few months.

Lately, too, I've been gradually stocking up on groceries, supplies, and other things. I buy a little bit at a time so my lean checkbook doesn't take too much a hit all at once. Before you know it, the pantry & freezer are full, the closets are packed, and I'm ready to weather whatever storm comes my way. It's the same with the bank account. All the bills are paid and still money is being set aside. Not much of it, and not much all at once, but it adds up. Before long, there will be a good amount of money and then some long-anticipated goals can finally be achieved. Hawaii anyone?

What's the point? Frugality and patient accumulation builds an inheritance. Were I to die today, my kids wouldn't be burdened with the debt I'd accumulated not too many years ago. I've worked hard to retire that debt so it wouldn't burden me or my family. In doing so, money was freed up for other things that, with a little discipline, should build into something I can leave for my kids and maybe even their kids. If I should go to my fathers today, I might not leave much, but I would leave behind something.

Is it just about money? If it is, I'm missing the point. I think the more important things we leave for those after us have nothing to do with the checkbook. I tell my kids stories about my grandparents who they never knew because three of them were gone to the grave before my kids were even born. I tell them things they said, places they went, things they did so the lives of these people long gone now live on. My mother has just finished writing her third book, this one a history of the farmers who founded her hometown in central Minnesota. The books are her legacy, preserving stories that only she can tell about people and places long gone gray into history. That's an inheritance to leave behind.

That's what God intends for us to leave behind for our descendants. It's not just about the money, though I'll make the claim that it's a Godly thing to be a good steward of these gifts as well. But I think the more important things we store up are the stories, the lessons, the memories we build and leave for others. Why has the Bible endured for thousands of years? Because it's God's word? Yes. But even humanists and non-believers admit that the stories contained in it are compelling, and many of the morality lessons within it are undeniable. They are compelling stories from antiquity that still have relevance and meaning today. My ancestors live because their stories are told down to us. They were taught to me as a boy and, in that way, those before me stored up in me an inheritance to pass on.

Already today I'm gone and back from an appointment, and already I've made both breakfast and a snack of those biscuits and apple butter. It's going to be another busy day. In it, I'll keep up an active pace and inspire my kids to do the same. My bored fourteen year old son is flopped out on the bed behind me and whether or not he knows it, these things he and I talk about, these words I pass on to him, his sisters, and others, are an inheritance for them. The faith foundation laid in my life decades ago is their foundation as well. It is solid, a rock on which they can build and store up their own memories when their time in the spotlight comes around. That will last long after me and my apple butter are gone. In fact, I'm hungry again. Time to go see what's been stored up in the pantry.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 9 July 2010

A poor man's field may produce abundant food, but injustice sweeps it away. Proverbs 13, verse 23.

Please indulge me in a little self pity. It's to make a point.

Someone close to me is probably getting married soon. She's been alone for awhile now, a single mother with children in a difficult situation. We became friends a number of years ago. As her coworker and friend, I helped her through the time when she and her husband were falling apart. We grew close then, and this year, when my own marriage started to crumble, she was there to support me in return. When my wife left me, she was there on the phone to explain away my tears; a few days later when I realized I'd lost the new love in my life, she was there again to talk me back from desperation. She's one of the more selfless people I know, and instead of turning on me as other friends had done, this lady stood by me to give me honest (and sometimes harsh) advice and emotional support.

She's been dating a friend in the city where she lives, and this week she insinuated they were talking marriage. He sounds like a good man, a single father with sons and a successful career. I gather that her children like him, and together they would all make a good family. I know nothing more about him, but I know the first two men to whom she was married were, well, losers. She deserves a good man to make her happy, someone to whom she can fully give over her big heart and someone with whom she can grow old in contentment. Over the last few weeks we've talked less and less but, you know, I've been kind of busy. In truth, part of me also suspected that she had found someone yet I didn't want to believe it was so and I didn't want to rock the boat because it really isn't my place to do so.

In my life, the field of my heart has produced abundant food: food of love though I am yet poor in such ways. I don't care for people easily even though I sometimes wear my heart on my sleeve. I see now how very blessed I am to have many good friends and people to love me in times of wealth and trouble. This feels like a change that is sweeping that away. It's not an unjust change, mind you, but I'll admit it's a shock to hear that she is contemplating such a life-changing thing so soon after my own experience with heartbreak. I want what is best for her, even if it means our relationship changes in ways that will push us apart. In another place and time, perhaps things could have been different, but they aren't and all I can do is watch while someone I care about is stepping out and away from me onto course that doesn't involve me.

Still, if you really care for someone, if you love them, you want them to be happy, so that's what I want for her. And yet, that's hard to do even if it is the right thing. Over the last few years, we've grown close at work and as people. Many evenings we stayed up late sharing wine and conversation, and many days we'd walk to and from work, planning out our days and bouncing ideas off each other. We shared our secrets and shared our confidences. She became my best friend, my go-to person in a hectic world of upheaval. We simply 'got' each other, understood each other. I didn't realize it at the time but I soon learned that I counted on her to 'be there for me' maybe more than I had been for her. Now all that may be changing.

I'm having a selfish moment of self-pity here because something in me thought she would always 'be there' for me to rely on. I feel like a little boy, standing at the gate of the school and watching my parents drive away, leaving me there because they think I'm ready to handle it now. Or maybe like the puppy you leave behind when you move to a new house where they don't allow dogs. It's hard to not say that it feels unjust, that this is some kind of cruel wind blowing through life, yet in my heart of hearts, that place where the poor man's fields have been blessed to produce a crop of abundant love, I know this is not so.

It is not so because that's the point. When you invest time, love, work, and your treasure in the lives of people you love, as changes come along that don't include you they simply feel wrong. But they aren't. They're just changes, and sometimes they come as a shock you're not ready to absorb. A change that can produce good in the life of someone for whom you care is not a bad thing. I'm learning this is the time when I need to trust that God's plans are perfect where mine are not, that he plays chess where I'm still learning checkers. Change is about the only constant in our lives, so adapting to these changes is something we should expect, even when it comes out of left field. Yet the changes that seem unfriendly at first, especially when they mean the evolution of a relationship grown dear to you, are not necessarily as unfriendly as they seem. Especially if they mean someone who deserves a better life may yet get to have one.

My own life has been in flux for most of a year now, and more change is coming for me as well. There will be good changes and bad but I trust, too, that the Almighty is at work in my poor man's land yet again. My own changes may come as a shock to some, as no surprise to others, and to others nothing more significant than a hill of beans. You become friends with someone, you share common experiences, you have a bond that you don't have with anybody else, and before you know it you realize that you'd do just about anything for them if they needed you: even when that means watching them walk away. Not long ago, I watched two women I loved walk away and it devastated me. This time, I'm

watching but trusting instead that God really does know what he's doing. We are in each other's lives for a reason, and more than just a season. This week, I've learned that 'just about anything' may likely mean encouraging my friend forward wherever her heart will lead her, and trusting that the field of her heart will itself produce an abundant crop that may never be unjustly swept away.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 10 July 2010

He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him. Proverbs 13, verse 24.

That's it. Scripture requires child abuse! It's here in writing! Can't you see it? God is a cruel god who says we should beat our kids if we love them. If you think that, go back and read it again until you think you understand because that isn't what it's saying at all.

The older my kids get the more I believe in this verse. We used corporal punishment when they were younger, but now that I'm in my mid-40s, I really wish we hadn't. I'm not against spanking, and I'm also not against the leverage a parent gets from threatening a spanking. Besides, there are some kids who, I think, benefit from a punishment swat on the behind. With my kids, though, I see now that we would have been better off to not use physical punishment as the consequence for some infractions. Now that I'm a little older, I think there were other ways.

My son is 14. I haven't spanked him in years; haven't really needed to actually. It's true that he's a mouthy, cocky, bull-headed typical teenager with an attitude that needs correction only about two or three hundred times per day. My son is cut from the same cloth as me. In truth, he's a lot like I was when I was fourteen, except that he's physically a lot brawnier than I ever was, and he has a lot more disrespect for his elders than I ever had; I think that comes from listening to so much Eminem. He struggles in school and he hasn't yet really learned to control his impulsive nature. The boy isn't much of a boy anymore: I'm only 5'11" and he is already at least 5'9". I think I outweigh him by less than ten pounds. If I were to try to physically discipline him now, while I would take him down, I'll admit that it would be a fight.

But it isn't necessary.

Mind you, he still needs discipline and a lot of it. What he really needs, though, is instruction on how to discipline himself. I think that teenagers need self-discipline now more than ever, so they learn it's the thing that will guide them most safely through these years of change and danger. Only a fool would think that self-discipline can be institutionalized in someone using the paddle. It takes time, repetition, examples and integrity. You can get away by using intimidation but that never works for long. Even in basic training, it doesn't take recruits very long to learn that the physically intimidating aspect of drill and all that yelling doesn't last long and is only to 'de-individualize' you in order to build you up as a member of the team. I don't physically or emotionally berate my children, though I regularly call bad behavior to task. God didn't intend for us to be a threat to our kids: he intended for us to be parents.

In doing so, I subscribe to this verse. I love my kids more than I love anyone else on this planet, and I want them to live safe, valuable and productive lives on their own once I'm a back-burner person in those lives. To get to that point, discipline – self-discipline – is needed and we only have so many years in which to teach it. The bad news is that they will grow up and move out. One is already gone and another will be leaving in only a few months. The good news is that the learning never stops, and as they get older they mature and acquire new levels of self-discipline while living through the ways of a wily world.

One of my friends from Colorado once told me that he never once had to spank any of his four children. He and his wife raised three sons and a daughter, and neither he nor his wife were very tall adults. But he held their attention and earned their respect, as a father, as a man, and eventually as a believer. He never resorted to corporal punishment because he never needed to. Now that my youngest child is physically a growing man, I don't need to anymore either. Every day, however, I need to inspire self-discipline in him so that he is driven by that when he works out on his own. My tools are the divine Word, patience, forbearance, and lots of calm self-control. With those as our guides, I can't see how we'll ever go wrong.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 11 July 2010

The righteous eat to their hearts' content, but the stomach of the wicked goes hungry. Proverbs, 13, verse 25.

There's something to be said for being 'hungry.' One caveat though: we aren't just talking about food. I believe there's something good to be said for having a yearning to do more, be better, improve, stay edgy. Those are traits of people who strive to achieve or overcome; they are attitudes that keep one mentally positioned to work harder and strive harder for things you want.

Still, I suspect the proverbialist used food as a metaphor because it's one we can all understand. Me, I'm dieting. I've found that a combination of healthy diet and exercise keeps me at a weight I can maintain. I've lost 40 pounds this year through rigorous exercise and a moderate diet. Yet I find if I get second portions too often, the weight creeps back. When that happens, I detest myself. I cross into the country of the wicked and I'm always hungry, literally!

Like you, I find it's hard to not feel unease if you're at the Golden Corral and you see large people going back two and three times for heaping plates of food. There's a soft wickedness in that. Though I've never been obese I had begun to understand the self-deprecating frustration that came from being overweight. For most of the last five years I've been well over my self-targeted weight. It took hard work and an emotional crisis to nudge me into finally doing something about it, yet even now, when I'm near to where I want to weigh, I understand how easy it would be to slip back into my old routine and eat until I don't even think about gluttony. So when I see the big folks going back again and again, part of me understands that compulsion, and part of me wants to scream "you're way over the line, dude!"

And then there's the exercise, I find I have to watch out for that too. As a confirmed Type A couch potato, I'm surprised how much I have come to enjoy my exercise. I look forward to it, and I crave the adrenaline rush. I have to be careful, though. When I had a physical in March, my blood work came back indicating high levels of an enzyme that's released from overdoing it. That scared me because that same enzyme is indicative of heart disease, and I'm already taking daily medicine for high blood pressure, which is chronic in my family.

All this means takes me back to the proverb because I see now that the proverb talks about much more than the hunger for food. There's good in the phrase 'everything in moderation.' A 'righteous' person will always want to be open to improvement, open to being more or better, but she or he will also be content to not cross a limit when one is approached. The drive to earn or the drive to succeed chips away at that feeling of contentment. There's a thin line between a healthy drive and an unhealthy compulsion; there's a thin line between fascination and obsession.

My soft spots are food, involvement and affection. I love good food but I understand now that I have to watch my intake and compensate if I occasionally overdo. I crave meaningful involvement. I find I'm easily distracted and become depressed if I am not involved in something whether it's work, a home improvement project, church or something other than just me sitting around stewing about it. And love: I want to love and be loved. When I've perceived deficiencies in soft spots one and two, I sensed that number three was lacking as well and I opened myself to affection where I should not have. That caused troubles in ways I don't want to talk about today.

I would have been better off to remember that, when we moderate, we can 'eat' to our heart's content. Moderate intake of food is easily maintained on a medium-built man such as myself. Moderated involvement in causes makes for temperate participation and usually steers clear of obsession. Moderated expectations of the feelings of others usually means clarity in seeing that you aren't really unloved and you aren't ever truly alone, not so long as you have knees on which to fall in prayer.

I'm in my mid-40s now, on the waning edge of mid-life crises of the heart and confidence. These days, I'm well-fed but still just a bit hungry. That can be a good thing. I'm open to letting the spirit work through me to help make an unrighteous man into someone better. It has taken me decades to become comfortable in my own skin, and while I can't say I'm 100% there, I'm getting closer every day. For the first time in many years, on the other side of heartbreak and desperate hunger, I'm learning that contentment for me is in moderation. And backing away from the food bar.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 13 July 2010

The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down. Proverbs 14, verse 1

Do you think this proverb is talking about a woman with a hammer and nails, adding a new wing onto her house? Or is it talking about the homemaker who keeps the house, oversees finances, and serves as the cornerstone for her family? Could it be talking about the woman who manages the household and makes it so that all the people who live there,

including herself, have a safe and hospitable place in which to thrive? And what about the single mom who does her best just to get by? I think the easiest answer is "yes." Yet with that comes the other side. One commentary I read in preparing for this proverbial said "A woman who has no fear of God, who is willful and wasteful, and indulges her ease, will as certainly ruin her family as if she plucked her house down." The argumentative side of me (and that's a big side. It's also that one that wants to play fair here) screams "yeah, but you could say that about a man too!" Too true, but we aren't talking about men today. We can do that in another column.

Years ago, I attended a bible study on the roles of men and women. It was a long course, taking several months to complete. And while there were things with which I disagreed in the study, I came away from it with a profound understanding of something I hadn't considered: God has enormous respect and love for the unique qualities of women. He created both sexes to perform complementary (and complimentary) roles because he intended for the world to work just so. Emotionally, physically, sexually, lovingly and bespeaking of our gender-biased abilities, God created men and women to be together, to work together, in roles that ebb and flow as leaders, parents, partners, caregivers, lovers and as friends.

The rub comes when we blur those roles. My mom has always been a strong role model. She was an independent, professional, strong-willed woman when the 60s bra-burners were just beginning to go through puberty. Mom was an educator, a career nurse, and an administrator who demanded respect for her talents and abilities. She has always despised anyone who condescended to her because she is a woman. Born in the 20s, I think my mom is more in her element in 2010 than even she was in her prime in the early 60s. Yet I'll tell you it's not easy to live in a family where the roles of men and women blur. Dad did much of the cooking, they split some things, and money was perennially tight. My parents were good and caring parents who did the best they could with what they had, yet I remember many nights of tension when I thought my mom was overbearing...because she was. She didn't handle stress well until much later in life, and we always lived stressful lives. There were times when I thought my dad caved to her; little did I understand that he was simply picking which battles were worth the argument. Still, I hope you get my point: my mom sometimes confiscated the traditionally male role of leader and it made for a lot of friction. It's true that there are families in which this is necessary, but ours wasn't one of them.

In my own relationships, I've loved wonderful women some of whom were of the same bent. Sometimes by necessity, sometimes by choice, they both built up and tore down what was their heart's love to keep. The smartest person I've ever known was a woman who had been abused as a child and grew up insecure but devastatingly determined to compensate for it. Another resolved and talented love had kicked multiple addictions and two failed marriages only to seek solace in ways in which it couldn't be found. I loved a spectacular woman who gave up a child as a teenager and it devastated her because she did it without faith or moral support from her parents. And I loved another whose insecurities and ferocious competitiveness, I believe, stemmed from the fact that her father left them when she was a young girl and life was always a constant struggle between overcoming and faith. These were all strong-willed and wonderful ladies who ruthlessly captured my heart, and with whom I was bound to have conflict. I've known others, as friends and as more, who were tough as nails. That's not all bad, you know. Any of us could say the same thing.

Still, I believe God blessed women with gifts of perception, caring, insight and resilience in ways that he didn't similarly bless most men. That, too, is not all bad. If saying that makes me a dinosaur, so be it; growl, raaawwrr. Men have other traits in ways that differ but complement women. In our America of 2010, there isn't typically room for a traditionally molded stay at home mom and work outside the home dad. Gender roles have shifted, due to mores, technology, the workplace and the changing influences of faith in our lives. That notwithstanding, I still hold with the proverb, believing that women have the unique ability to both build up and tear down our homes – and hearts – from within, in ways which we men don't fully possess. The most extraordinary people I know – my wife, daughters, sister, and even my mom – are all women. Thank God for that. Yin and yang, male and female: it's how things are supposed to work.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 14 July 20101

He whose walk is upright fears the Lord, but he whose ways are devious despises him. Proverbs 14, verse 2.

"Don't buck the system. The system is bigger than you and it's here for a reason." That's one of the things my parents told me before I enlisted in the Air Force. Their words were both advice and a caution that the hierarchy, 'the system,' in place in the military was much bigger than little old big mouth me and I'd do well to become part of the team rather than bucking the trend. It's how the military functions and that function is dependent on the system performing like a machine. The system was intimidating and it could crush you and spit you out as easily as it could reward and advance you.

And if you talked with your training instructor, your drill sergeant, he wanted you to consider him to be on the same level as God himself. He didn't want to be God, but he demanded you hold the two of them in the same respect. Your drill sergeant had ways to motivate you and they were, well, creative.

In basic training, I quickly learned that, to be upright (whether it was at attention, at parade rest or in formation) I would do well to develop a healthy respect, a healthy fear if you will, of both 'the man' and the system behind him. Whenever I deviated from that respect, that fear, trouble resulted. You could have a 398 pulled, a 398 being an Air Force form 398 demerit form. You could be chewed out with words and anger that would be memorable in the least. You could have to do extra PT, or KP, or menial tasks. Any number of different forms of punishment could fall on you, all of them designed to ingrain themselves on your memory, and all of them designed to correct your behavior, to retrain you.

My service in the military was the single most formative collective experience in my life, at least up to that time. I revered the men and women with whom I served and from whom I learned much. And when it came time to write a few words about this proverb, of course the analogy that came first to mind was basic training. I think that any drill sergeant worth his or her salt would easily subscribe to the words of this verse. The mission of basic training is to forge airmen, soldiers, sailors and marines from individuals and to do so in only a few short weeks. Anyone who resists the instruction must be corrected because their behavior is a threat to the bigger team at large. Such behavior is stamped out because it is despicable; in other words, it is despised.

To me, that's what God does. God despises our sins and knows we trample on his love with them; it's like we despise that love with how we flout it. Whenever God puts correction in our lives, he does so to retrain us, to help us instead of hurting us (even when that correction hurts). And like the other mentions of 'fear' in the Proverbs, the fear spoken of in verse 2 is the respecting, reverent kind of fear, not the terror or intimidating kind. People who respect and revere God will find themselves walking an upright path of honor. Those who don't will find themselves on a tougher path. Why is that? Because God is the system; because he designed it. Ever known a happy atheist? Neither have I. While I respect (and even fear) someone's choice to fight the common sense and mainstream acceptance of the Lord, I can also say that most atheists I know live contentious lives of always having to disprove and argue. For me, such a life fights against both nature and the order of things. I would think there would be little real peace in it. I choose to not buck that particular system.

Twenty-five years after I first heard my parents' advice I still subscribe to it. Don't buck the Lord. Fear, respect, revere, and honor Him because He knows what he's doing in our lives. The result will be walking in His ways and a rewarding life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. To me, anything else fails the common sense test. To do otherwise would be like having a 398 pulled on you and those are demerits that are awful hard to work off.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 15 July 2010

A fool's talk brings a rod to his back, but the lips of the wise protect them. Proverbs 14, verse 3.

Ok, everyone who knows me well or has known me for a long time, feel free to repeat this in unison: Dave is a fool. Brash, loud, foolish, cocky, goofy, foolhardy: that's me. I have always wanted to be remembered as someone wise but I can't honestly confess that I have been that man. Especially during my younger years, I was someone who would speak before he thought. Especially when my heart is involved, I am someone who has been known to do things I said I would never do.

And oh how I've felt the rod on my back! How many times I've reaped the punishment I've sown, and all because it started with my big mouth.

Words mean things. They really do. Our entire way of life, everything we do, is based on what we say because what we say represents what we believe. The Declaration of Independence, perhaps the greatest statement of human freedom ever, is nothing more than words that mean things. Marriage vows are words that mean things. Eulogies are words that mean things. "I love you" are three words that mean all the world and more.

And God's word? He spoke all this into existence because those three words mean things.

Don't I know this better than anyone I know! Time and again I have reaped the consequences of things I have said, and all too often I have meant the things I've said. When I've said "I love you," I meant it with all my heart. When my silence spoke volumes, I meant that as well. And when I bragged or showed off or spoke foolishly, I'm afraid those words meant things too, namely that I was a fool who was in over his head and saying things I shouldn't have said. I'm a brash, loud, foolish, cocky, goofy, foolhardy man of middle age who is officially old enough to know better but still plagued by the sins of my youth.

How I wish I had heeded the instruction of people wiser than myself! All through the night of my life there have been people, wise men and women, who tried to teach me, who invested their time and talent in me. In my darkest moments, how I have wished I had listened more, listened better and acted better. I don't know if life would have turned out better, but I do believe it would have turned out different.

It's a fool's game to wish for such things, and there has been enough foolishness in my life. Now is the time to learn from it. The words of the wise have always protected me. Wise words that mean things have always safeguarded my heart, have always meant more than my foolishness, than anyone's foolishness. It was this way years ago; it is this way now. Going forward, with whatever tomorrow brings, it will still be so as long as God gives us time. I can't change what has happened, and I can't undo what's been done, but I can do better. I can be responsible for what I say in my days and years to come. I can say things that are wise, and turn those words into wise action. I can resolve to change and do better. I can say that, and mean it because, after all, words mean things even for a fool like me.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 16 July 2010

Where there are no oxen, the manger is empty, but from the strength of an ox comes an abundant harvest. Proverbs 14, verse 4.

A few years ago I went through phase where I wanted to be a farmer. It came at the time when I was researching my first book, which is about a farmer. I scoured books and magazines about how small farming could transform our country, and I was struck by the fact that, even today, living on a farm is still hard work and has different, although not fewer, complications than the hustle-bustle lifestyle of a traveling IT gypsy that I know too well.

And still I wanted to do it. There seemed to be an allure to drawing one's living from raising food, and I envied the (seeming) simplicity of the lifestyle. At one point, while working in Pennsylvania, I used to park across from an Amish farm and just admire it. Large scale farms are a wonder to see, especially when you think that one man (using seeders, harvesters, and tractors) is able to plant, cultivate, maintain and harvest hundreds of acres on his own. The Amish, however, still have relatively small farms that are all farmed just as they were 150 years ago. The farm I admired could have been on a postcard, with a huge barn, tall rows of corn, and animals grazing in a pasture.

In this recession, I haven't read many stories that talk about how Amish farmers are poor and suffering the same economic troubles plaguing the larger modern farmers who raise most of our food. If you look at an Amish farm, you'll see a well-tended lot with buildings in good repair and fertile fields full of succulent crops. Most are paid for, and what bills most Amish do have pay for taxes and farm supplies.

This proverb is one that an Amish man would know well. The Amish still rely on their oxen for farming, and they know that it's still darn hard work for both man and beast. The farmer who owns cattle, a team of horses and oxen is prosperous. He knows that his animals produce with him, and for him, and that their production means prosperity.

If you drive up to an Amish farm and you see oxen – or cattle, horses, hogs, and the like – it's a safe bet that the larder is full and the farmer has what he needs to prepare for a good harvest. Sure, farming depends on the weather, insects, temperatures, fertilizer, crop-tending and a hundred other factors that far from guarantee bounty. That's especially true when you're farming with technology that was modern to Abe Lincoln. Yet, long before I read the proverb, I thought while farm-watching that the presence of animals meant prosperity. Those animals cost money, and time, and they mean HARD work to raise and use for their labor. The farmer who owned them must be doing something right in order to support such a lifestyle. He certainly was blessed...

...As was the man who wrote the proverb that would be understood by a primitive farmer. King Solomon was royalty. He was a king, born in a palace, and raised to live in luxury. Though his words were divinely inspired, he also knew a few things about the way most of his subjects lived, including the men who raised and used oxen. The common-sense words of this verse could have been written by an ancient farmer – or a 21st century Amishman – and they would have been just as true 3500 years ago as they are today. Animals mean plenty; plenty means prosperity.

I'm writing this Proverbial while sitting in an airport, watching people come and go. I seriously doubt I'll be seeing any Amishmen today, though I think it's possible I'll see a farmer or two. As I sit here and people watch, I wonder how many people here are debt-free, or live close to the earth they tend for their food. I wonder how many of us here in Terminal E have ever milked a cow, or plowed a field, or scooped out a barn, or canned food for the winter. How many of us have lived by candlelight because it's all we have instead of what we chose for romance? Do we sew our own clothes and ride everywhere in a buggy?

I wonder indicates our prosperity. Do trendy clothes indicate an abundant paycheck or a maxed-out credit card? Does a new Iphone 4 mean that you need it for work or you just like to have a cool new phone? And how can you tell the difference, here in the airport terminal, between the businessman working his way up the ladder, the millionaire who wears the same kind of wardrobe he did on his way up, and the guy who just likes to dress nicely for the flight?

It's easier with the Amish. The ones who are doing well are the ones whose farms are well-tended. They're the ones who have an ox, a cow, or a horse in the fields. Farming is darn hard work, but so is insurance systems configuration, cooking fast food, running a pre-school, or tending to a family. How we measure our prosperity may differ, but we measure it all the same. Like the farmer, though, I feel much more comfortable if my pantry is full and my bills are paid before they're due. I'm not sure I'd want to trade places with that Amish farmer I admired in central Pennsylvania,

because I like my Internet, television, and electric can opener. Then again, I think when I get home, I'm gonna go check on my tomato plant and give it a drink of water. That may be like an ox at my manger, but it's a blessing from God all the same.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 17 July 2010

A truthful witness does not deceive, but a false witness pours out lies. Proverbs 14, verse 5.

You know, once you tell one lie, it's hard to stop. To paraphrase my grandfather, "if you always tell the truth you'll never have to try to remember what you told someone." Even white lies are lies. Having lied about so many things for so long and in so many ways, I'm loathe to do even a tiny lie to spare someone's feelings. I'd rather just say nothing. And we've talked about this before, how even parsing the truth, letting things out a little at a time, can be like lying; maybe it even is. If truth means something, we shouldn't have to skirt around the edges just to stay within it.

So, if you're a white liar, are you a deliberate false witness? If you tell someone you love them but you really don't, are you a false witness? If you fib about how fast you were going when the officer pulls you over, are you a false witness? If you're President of the United States and you deliberately perjure yourself to fix a sexual harassment case, are you a false witness? If you know someone's feelings are going to be hurt so you tell them things that aren't quite false but aren't really true, are you a false witness? If you work for the media, are you a false witness?

Um, I think the answer is yes, except for maybe that last one because I have a great respect for many journalists.

A truthful witness does not deceive. At the end of service in my church, they put a message up on a screen that says something like "true worship begins now as I go out in the world, a sinner in need of a Savior." I'm a witness to that, and everything I do in this world bears witness to what I profess to believe. I contemplate that saying and do my best to be an honest representative of them. I don't want to deceive, and I do want to be a good ambassador of my faith.

Yet, to me, lies are the hardest of all the sins with which I deal. But let's be honest here – please, no lies – and say that anything we do wrong, any sin, is hard to stop doing. In an affair? Best thing is to say 'no' and back away from it though easier to say than do, especially when you're in love. Ever fudge an expense report? Best thing to do is not do it, but it's much easier to tack on 10%, especially if corporate doesn't check closely. Ever ignore the speed limit (until they pull you over doing 21 over the limit driving off DFW...)? Best thing to do is stick to the signs, even when they are at posted grandpa speeds. Ever been bored out of your skull at a party, but when the pretty hostess comes up and asks "having a good time?" you say "of course!" Best thing to do would be to simply be honest.

You get my drift. Even the small infractions are infractions all the same. I could give you the Lutheran spiel about how we're thick with sin and it's why we need a Savior. All true, but it's Saturday night and I just don't have it in me to go there right now. I'll just leave it at "once you start, it's awful hard to stop."

That's the point, though: once we start any of these wrongs that plague our lives, it's awful hard to stop, and even harder to bear the consequences. And we're fooling ourselves – indeed, we're bearing false witness to and about ourselves – if we tell ourselves "at least I didn't X, Y or Z," or "at least I'm not as bad as..." You get my drift on those too. I find that, when I start saying "at least" what my conscience is really telling me is "you are" or "you did." The older I get, the more I think 'at least' are two good danger signals.

I also read this verse and know that I've read one like it before (and made similar comments in earlier columns). Maybe that means that the author or the proverbs (whether you're talking King Solomon or the King of Kings) wanted to say the same thing in a number of different ways because he knew that people might read one verse and it would mean little, but if they read the same thing worded in a slightly different way it would mean the world. Or maybe it means that, like a parent talking with a child, the proverbialist knew that he would have to say the same thing over and over before it finally sank in. Or maybe he just liked to talk.

Or, maybe, just maybe, they were good words that needed to be said and read no matter how many times or how they were said. At least they are those good words, and that's no lie.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 18 July 2010

The mocker seeks wisdom and finds none, but knowledge comes easily to the discerning. Proverbs 14, verse 6.

The theme of this one is 'desperation.' I'm segueing off that same theme of the sermon at church this morning. Desperation: we are desperate people. One thing I read from this verse is how it talks about the natural order of things. In this, it says that the natural order of things in our world is supposed to be order, not chaos. The opposite is true, however. The actions of our sins, and the consequences of those actions, throw everything for a loop.

When my son was a little boy, one of his favorite movies was "Jurassic Park." Think back on that and you'll remember that Jeff Goldblum's character talked about 'chaos theory,' in which random acts of chaos set off an unpredictable chain of events that, in themselves, each also caused other chaotic consequences. I'm not sure my son quite got that much depth out of the movie; he was more interested in the T-rex that ate the outhouse. But he's a random, deep kind of guy, and I see chaos theory playing out in his life now that he's a teenager. If you haven't lived with them in awhile, trust me please: teenagers are all chaos.

But more than any other people I know, teenagers crave wisdom and order, and teenagers live their lives in a daily battle of desperation. They are young women and men growing up to be mature women and men in a world that was designed for order, harmony and a one-ness with God, but is subjected to chaos and desperation thanks to the consequences of our actions. Teenagers struggle with this concept while undergoing changes in themselves, discarding the comfort of childhood for the uncertainty of the adult world. In a desperate period of their lives, is it any wonder that so many of our teens get into drugs, sex, or crime? I think one big underlying reason is that teens feel so desperate and haven't learned yet how to seek desperation's remedy.

Why are we desperate people? Deep inside, where things matter the most, we understand that we live in a world that was designed for love but was poisoned with its foe. One of my recurring thoughts is that we all want to love and be loved. We're desperate for that. We're desperate to return a time and place where loving harmony rules again. If we can't return to it, we want to have it here in a place that is thick with chaos, sin, and lies. In this way, we're all mockers because we mock God with even our smallest actions. We are desperate to be in real communion, real one-on-one time, with the Almighty but we are unconsciously aware that we can't be. We seek wisdom, we seek love and harmony, and we find none because real love and our sins are incompatible things. So we become desperate.

The sermon theme today was about how desperate people will do anything to get close to Christ, that is, close to the love and forgiveness we all desperately need and crave. I listened to the words and realized that desperation is a natural thing in itself. It's natural that, being frustrated by the sins I've committed and being naturally cut off from the love and harmony I seek, I feel all the more desperate to have that which I've lost.

For some, that desperation causes crazy things. Haven't we all been there to varying degrees? We feel desperate to be recognized for the good things we've done or even the good people we have been. When we aren't recognized, we do things we might not ordinarily do or say. Some people lash out; some go quiet; some go off the deep end; some don't change at all. I know desperation. Not long ago, I had lost everything. Desperation for love, for forgiveness, moved me to act unpredictably, even to being ready to give up my life: anything to stop the hurt of being so alone. I was breaking down and losing my mind, desperate for anything to make the emotional pain and loss go away.

The road back from desperation, however, has been a rocky road of healing. I'm on the upside of it. The lowest, darkest valley is always surrounded by high mountains, and usually a way out that valley entails going uphill in some way. But you realize you're ascending out of the low darkness. You're being brought back into the light and, on that journey, you venture back up into the hills of desperation where, you find, you really aren't alone after all. You're on a journey of redemption, and your feelings of desperation are truly redeemed – truly bought back, exchanged, recovered and set free – for love that is more than just a feeling. I got to see that the rocky road – more than just nuts and marshmallows – has been a satisfying lesson in learning how to be content and being thankful for the blessings God gives me. It's walking along a road where redemption was instantaneous but learning the consequences of it has taken awhile.

I'm guessing it might be the same for you.

It's love that is the truly natural thing, and sharing love is what we were designed for. That kind of love is the agape love that starts with God, runs through the lives of good people who care for us, and always returns back to God grown a

hundred-fold. Travis' last message today was how, when our desperation is salved, we're sent home. He used the story of the paralytic (who was lowered through the roof; check out Mark 2) as the example, and how that man was forgiven, healed, and then told to go home and be a witness to the people closest to him. I find it's been the same for me. I was forgiven, I'm being gradually healed, and I was sent home to witness and minister – to heal, forgive, be forgiven, and redeem – in my own home first. Bit by bit, in my family, we're exchanging the bitterness of desperate hurt for the soothing comfort of forgiving love.

In your own relationships, I'm guessing that's similar too.

Desperation has been a sad road to travel, and all around me I feel the pull of the sins that entangled me in it before. Feeling love and forgiveness doesn't guarantee that we'll stave off the sins forever, nor does it mean that desperation is never to return. I'm not Pollyanna. One battle is over; others will rage on, and there are still others waiting up ahead. In a world turned upside down where contented love is what we all want, that's just a natural thing. Naturally speaking, fighting for that is a battle I choose to wage.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 1 9July 2010

Stay away from a foolish man, for you will not find knowledge on his lips. Proverbs 14, verse 13.

Time and again you've heard me confess my foolishness, how I've said and done things that were unwise. I'm human, and I'm prone to mistakes. Just because I'm a Christian doesn't mean I have the answers to life's problems. Indeed, the older I get the more I believe that being a Christian makes problems flock to you. It isn't easier to 'go with the flow' of a fallen & destructive world, but it is easier, I think, to do that when your faith-conscience isn't always stabbing you, reminding you "hey, bub, you did it again!"

I have a graduate degree in education and I've been an adult educator for most of my career...chucka, chucka, chucka. To quote my friend, Willy, "that and a quarter still won't get you a cup of coffee." Having a college degree makes you a better person, but it NEVER makes you better than anyone else. I have come to believe that, here in the real world, it's the journey that counts more than the destination. I'm a good teacher, but I'm not really a great one. Thus, even in my chosen career, I have been foolish.

In my spare time, I write. I write these columns. I write poetry. I've co-written a cookbook, and I've written a biography. I have written dozens of short stories, and I have four novels in various stages of incompletion (though I'm nearing the finish line on one). Have I broken through the bonds of publishing? No, not yet. For all my writing desire, I haven't done much with it yet and still I keep plugging away. Foolishness.

As an IT consultant I have labored twenty-five years in pursuit of seeking the best middle management position I could find at the time. I've always wanted to be one of those guys who runs a big project, who leads a team that gets things done. True, I've done this on small scales, but never in the way in which I'd planned and most desired. I have pole-vaulted to the heights of middle management and mediocrity. Again, foolishness.

Finally, at home, at the time in my life when I should have been starting to celebrate successful parenting, I ran into crises. Crisis of the heart, crisis of the family, crisis of faith, crisis of marriage. So far, I have let 2010 be marked more by crisis in my life than by success. I had quite a few blessings and I squandered them. Again and again, I have been a fool.

Get the vibe? The proverb says to stay away from foolish men because you won't find wisdom in their company. I've demonstrated my foolishness again and again, and my track record predicts there's more to come if you stick around. You might want to turn around and walk away now, or maybe log onto a different web page.

But I hope you won't. I promise I'm not a bad guy, and I also promise that I'm doing my best to be better. If you are still reading, I'm really hoping there's a thought in your mind saying, "join the club, Dave. Jump in: the water's fine." We're all foolish from time to time, and we're all desperate, and we're all in need of the divine lifeline.

The good news is that God is a god of not just second chances, but unlimited chances. Yes, His patience has a limit; so does yours and mine, so I think that's understandable. But if there's genuine repentance and genuine effort to try again, to improve, that patience and those chances are never-ending. God wants all of us to be saved, not just the Lutherans, Baptists, and people who wear both a vest and a tie when taking Sunday collection. He doesn't want our works. No, he wants the love that inspires those works because, if the love is there, then the foolishness is a moot point and, believe it or not, so are the good works.

This is a Monday proverb, and I think that's a good thing. It's a good gut-check on a Monday to remind us that the work week ahead asks of us our A-game. Serious things are in motion every day, and the week ahead demands our best. I think it's a good thing every now and then to read a reminder from the Almighty that says "if you get too big for your britches, you really aren't all that and a bag of Fritos after all." I may be think of myself as the next big thing, but that just means there's someone bigger in front of me already. Besides, there's that old Mexican proverb that says, "If you want to hear God laugh tell him your plans."

Those are good words for a Monday of foolishness too.

Maybe you're in the same boat. Or we're in the same pool now. I remember now: you're the one who (I hope) said 'jump in.' Well, I'm in and if you don't mind, I'll sit down beside you in the water and let's relax awhile. One fool to another, it's nice to see you.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 20 July 2010

The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the folly of fools is deception. Proverbs 14, verse 8.

“Well, we big rock singers, we got golden fingers, and were loved everywhere we go. We sing about beauty and we sing about truth at ten thousand dollars a show. We take all kind of pills to give us all kind of thrills but the thrill we’ve never known is the thrill that’ll getcha when you get your picture on the cover of the Rolling Stone.”

Ah, Dr. Hook. There’s a lot of rock & roll ‘wisdom’ in that self-serving verse. There’s also a lot of foolishness. Many of the Proverbs contrast foolishness and wisdom. We’ve chatted here also that so many of them say the same thing several times over but in different ways yet I suppose there’s a bit of context that should be taken into account. If these verses were written by Solomon, then I think it’s worth remembering that, when the God of all time told him He would grant whatever request Solomon made, Solomon asked for wisdom. He didn’t ask for fame, wealth, women, food or his picture on the cover of the Rolling Stone. He asked for wisdom. It only follows, then, that so many of Solomon’s thoughts are on wisdom and how it applies to the world around him.

I read these verses and think that it’s like a gift he couldn’t wait to share. He must have felt compelled to talk about it, to share it with others, to spread the wealth and give out to others what had been given to him. One of his descendants taught a lot about that concept. Jesus talks about a hidden treasure being something so wonderful that a man would give up everything else for it (see Matthew 13). He also talked about the woman who lost a lot of money and called together her friends to celebrate when she found it (Luke 15). These were great gifts that inspired their recipients to burst with joy, to feel so excited that they simply couldn’t contain it.

That’s how I think Solomon must have felt about this gift of wisdom. He must have been positively bursting with enthusiasm to share it. He wanted to spread it around. The book of First Kings talks about how, for most of his reign, Solomon used his wisdom for the betterment of his kingdom, and how ridiculously wealthy he became because of that. The point in that isn’t to say “make good decisions and you’ll get rich.” If that were all there was to it, we’d all be on the cover of the Rolling Stone along with Lady GaGa. Instead, I believe the point is “trust God and He will bless you in the ways He knows best.” God blessed the people through their ruler who, instead of seeking glory, sought a way to use his power for the glory of God on earth.

He did it in a way that would mean something to the everyday man or woman. In verse 8 especially, this point is brought home. The word “prudent” is used in the NIV translation. I think that’s noteworthy because my dictionary says that, to be prudent, one ‘exercises sound judgment in practical matters and is not rash.’ It would be easy for me to think of the royal king, sitting on his throne like some stuck-up government egghead, talking down to the rest of us about how WE need to be wise because HE is. This verse, however, doesn’t appear to say that because it ties wisdom to everyday practicality. It says “in the things you do to live today, it’s wise to think about what you’re doing.” It doesn’t blather on about hope and change or talk down to us commoners like children. It says “God’s greatest gifts are for us to use in everything we do.” That’s good advice. Management consultants are paid thousands of dollars to tell their clients much the same thing that Solomon said for free.

Logic then follows that the contrast to common-sense practicality is ‘folly,’ which is a lack of sense. Not just a lack of sense, but a deliberately misleading lack of sense. Substituting another definition for ‘deception,’ you could read the verse as, ‘The lack of sense of fools is an illusion or fraud.’ Puts a slightly different spin on it, don’t you think? The opposite of practicality is fraud and self-illusion. The opposite of divine knowledge is a lack of sense. It follows, then, that knowledge of God, from God, is a common sense and natural thing, part of the real natural design for our world. What doesn’t belong, what really is foreign, is deception, fraud, self-illusion. It’s sort of like getting your picture on the cover of a magazine for being famous at living large.

King Solomon must have been bursting to share his good wisdom, as well as bursting to share that he knew what it meant when wisdom was ignored. Later in his reign, he forgot his own lessons and disaster followed. To say “it happens” is both proper and a sad commentary in realizing that the wisest man who ever lived squandered that good gift for high living. Once he started living high, it brought him low. In his later years, Solomon forgot the lessons taught to him, and what he taught others, by exchanging his common sense for the folly of a deception. That’s a good thing for us to remember as well. Heck, I do it all the time. All too often, I am filled with feeling great about something and I want to share it so badly that I sometimes do so poorly. Or my heart is full and it shows in ways unintended.

The lesson is one for me to remember as well, then. There's a thin line that separates foolishness and wisdom and it isn't always easy to see where that line divides. A heart of submission helps, and seeking to live life in a common-sense manner. That may not get my picture on the cover of the Rolling Stone, but I do believe it will ensure the words by which I live my life will not pass away in vain.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 21 July 2010

Fools mock at making amends for sin, but goodwill is found among the upright. Proverbs 14, verse 9.

There are some things we can't set right. I'm up at 3:30 in the morning with insomnia. I think it's because I had a drink last night too late; I'm one of those people who can't sleep after I've had too much to drink. I wake up with heartburn. So, I get out of bed, then sit down at the computer and try to keep quiet; other people in the house, you know. I check the bank account, read up on the news, and then land on Facebook. I post a few things, a few smarmy comments and a few links that, I hope, will get interested people thinking.

Underneath it all, there are things that bother me. Three in the morning is the time when they bubble up to the surface and remind me of wrongs I've done, people I've hurt, things that are undone or unfinished, and things I still need to do.

I'm writing a novel that fictionalizes an affair. Much of what's in it is made up, but much of what's in it isn't; only I know the difference. Quite a lot of what's said and done in this book are my memories. I haven't seen the lady in years, most of a decade in fact, and I don't even know what she's doing these days. She was special to me, though, and I look at the book as a way to tell a story about her, to tell people that she wasn't a bad person, but that she was someone good in a bad situation. If she had asked me to stay I would have, but those weren't the choices before us. I left; she was hurt; we moved on. Years later, after so much talk, so much counseling, and so many words, it still bothers me. What I do now, well, it's both a 'letting go' and it's like making amends.

Years later, I repeated this. I've written a lot about it on this blog. It keeps me up at night still. Staying away, letting someone else move on without me, trying to right the ship I wronged, is like making amends, even when it hurts so much. I saw her in her car yesterday, driving by. I don't know if she saw me, but I saw her. Instead of falling to pieces like I did before, I simply kept driving and knew the best thing I could do for her was just keep going forward. I can't change what happened, but I can do that to make amends.

Or there are my children. When they were younger, I was a harsh father. I was never abusive or physical, though we did use corporal punishment. Still, I yelled so much. I regret that; I truly, seriously regret that. Their lives were affected by it, and I helped light a short fuse for each of them, instilling impatience where patience should have been the rule. These days, I still pass on my feelings, my judgments, where I believe they're appropriate. And I try to set things right. But I have learned from it. You can't take back the past, but you can learn from it and make tomorrow better.

Last, there is my wife. For years, we grew apart. For months, there's been separation. For now, there is bridge building, and getting closer, and trying to repair some of the damage I did through my betrayal. Heck, for my betrayals! We're getting to know each other again, and we're discovering that we have – and we had – so much in common for so long. This keeps me up at night too; it has for years. To have squandered the most important relationship in my life is a regret I can't shake. Yes, it took two to tango; I know that. I own my part though because only I can own it. I feel like a fool for having ignored all this. It was so much easier to let myself be tangled up in seeing the ways we hurt each other instead, not realizing how doing that made it easier to hurt her even worse. Feel like a fool? I was a fool. I'm trying to make amends now. I'm listening more, doing things to show I care, and to be supportive and kinder than I was. In the midst of all this, I'm learning to heal the hurt by learning how to be the husband I should have been.

My list could go on and on. Do you have a list like mine?

What's my point here? I understand this proverb. I understand it because things that bother me usually spur me to want to make some kind of amends. I carry around the regrets and emotions of a lifetime of memories. Please understand, the good memories, the blessings, far outweigh the bad memories of my life. From them, I generally try to maintain a positive outlook. From time to time, though, 'the blues' get a hold of me and I realize how terribly wrong I was to so many people. The fixer in me wants to make amends. I want to try to do something more than just saying, "I'm sorry." I want to do what I can, if I can do it, to set things right.

Sometimes, however, you just can't. Sometimes it's impossible for us to actually do something to change an outcome, or to set things right. Sometimes the best thing really is to let go. That feels like giving up, and maybe it is, but whether or not it brings healing starts in the heart. The desire to try starts in a heart willing to send up a prayer of repentance and sorrow, taking ownership of when I've strayed from God's love, from the truth, from fidelity, and from what's right. I read the

proverb and see how it says that fools mock the action of trying to set things right, but instead of contrasting that mocking with another action, it contrasts it with an attitude, with 'goodwill.' And goodwill starts with that prayer.

I believe God wants us to have that heart of repentance and an attitude to be willing to do whatever it takes to set things right if that's the path He sets before us. That's what the proverb means to me. God knows we can't change the past. He wants us to be willing to do what we can to make the future better by seeking – and giving – forgiveness and amends wherever we can. He doesn't want us to be self-serving and open old wounds for our own sake. No, He wants us to own what we've done and felt, and to be ready to make amends if that's where He leads us in life.

I can't undo the fact that I broke hearts; hundreds of times every day I think of this. God doesn't take away the consequences of our actions. If He did, he'd be taking away our reason to make amends. So my nightly routine reflects this. I get ready for bed, then spend some time in prayer. Regularly I pray for the heart, safety, and peace of the people I've wronged, trusting God will lead them on a good path in their lives. He really does know what He's doing. I'm not in their lives these days; who knows if ever I will be again. That part isn't up to me. These days, I am still trying to do what I can to make amends to them through prayer, through what actions I can do (even when it means leaving well alone), and through my words. If someone can learn from what I've done, then even the wrongs I've done won't be in vain. That's not fiction or some novel idea: that's the goodwill of the truth.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 22 July 2010

Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can share its joy. Proverbs 14, verse 10.

Buckle up, this may be hard. Just like life because, you know, life can be pretty darn hard too. Gloria Stuart said it in 'Titanic:' "there are many rooms in a woman's heart." I believe that, but Gloria, it goes for us men too, though I will speak only for myself. My heart is compartmentalized. Life has taught me how to put feelings in little rooms, separate from each other. I didn't know how to keep them there, or how to wall out people from my feelings, from my affections, but I'm practiced and good at holing things up, burying them.

As a long-term way of living, I don't recommend that, especially where the bitterness and hurt are concerned. There is nothing new under the sun, and there's nothing hidden that won't be brought out into the light one day. All our secrets, all our suppressed feelings, all our memories will, in this time or the next, be laid out and dealt with. In this time, I'll say that I can't bottle up things forever. They bother me a lot, especially the bad goodbyes and the unresolved relationships. Like others, I've lost my share of love, I've let go and been let go of, and I know the feeling of love unrequited. I'm getting better at letting go of bitterness and anger, but that's only a recent development. Dealing with the hurt, however, is still a work in progress. If you've been hurt enough, it's hard to let go of. Even when I have been successful at compartmentalizing my feelings in those itty bitty rooms, in time they bang on the door and demand to be let out. They scream for attention in their shrill and pitiful voices. That kind of hurt will eat you alive from the inside out. In the least, it'll cause you to break down; it did me.

And then there are the good memories. There are more than I can count. There are first looks and last looks, moments of precious serendipity, days of faith and memories of times when I knew in my heart how truly loved I was. Joy is such an underrated word in our society, and joy comes from so many small things. Where I've known hurt that I felt I had to close it off, I've also known unspeakable joy that was mine to do with as well. It was the view from Pikes Peak, or watching your kids sleep. It's connecting with your students, and knowing you're in concert with the spirit of God and being touched by a word or a verse. Joy is a job well done, and pride at your children's accomplishments, and that first time you hold a baby in your arms. It is reconnecting with friends you haven't seen in years, and it was a first kiss on a cold autumn day when I would have traded everything in the world for the love in her beautiful eyes and for time to stop yet again. I understand joy as well, and I admit that I wall it up too, sometimes too much to my detriment.

Both of those are like fires by which to warm yourself. If you let them, either can burn you down. And, like the verse says, each heart knows its own bitterness and its own joy. Mine differs from yours, and some of yours will be stronger than mine, or not. We're individuals, you and I, and what trips my trigger might not trip yours. That's ok. That's part of the mystery of life.

I take comfort in knowing that, while my heart has many rooms, I believe God's doesn't. His is what it is. He too has a long memory, much longer than I can ever fathom. Yet I think of God's heart as being a great, open room where love covers over all the bitterness we bring. When I open my heart to his, I carry in my bitterness, my memories, and my hurt, and I stand before him to put away those things, to talk, to listen. I lay them down, put them aside yes, but more than this, I feel like His love dissolves them from me. It's not as much my action of letting go of the hurt as it is His action of taking it away from me. He touches my heart and the hurt begins to dissolve. The doors are opened and the hurt brought out and it is quenched. What's left is me, standing there with tears of joy in my eyes, washed clean and absolved yet again. I'm ready to leave the great room of joy and venture back out into where things are more complicated, back to where the hurt is ready to resume its place in the many compartments of my memory. I'm refreshed and renewed, and ready to try again.

I don't know your bitterness and joy, nor do you know all of mine. We can share knowing that both of us have more in common than we realize. We both bottle up the things we shouldn't, and we both know how tough – and how rewarding – that can be. What we also share is the knowledge that we can let go of that, have the compartments cleaned out and the hurt redeemed away by one whose only thing is joy, real joy. You may not know mine and I may not know yours, but in the long run, what love we may know together will far outshine whatever we once knew apart.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 23 July 2010

The house of the wicked will be destroyed, but the tent of the upright will flourish. Proverbs 14, verse 11.

Nothing lasts forever...or does it? If you're a Christian, you probably accept the idea that heaven does indeed last forever, that our souls live on after this life, and that forever was what God had in mind by sending His Son here to win us back for it. "Eternity Matter Most" says a banner that hangs in my church, and that can be a hard thing to wrap your arms around (especially since it's hanging up on a wall...). But I think this proverb is talking about something else. I don't read it to just talk about physical destruction or eternal consequences, though that's surely one valid interpretation. Instead, I think it talks more about consequences here: consequences involving the details of our lives.

Sometimes I wake up early in the morning because things are bothering me. Today, I was up at 0330 because it was too hot, then too cold, in the house; either the wacky thermostat reset itself again or my son reset it so he could refrigerate himself in 'The Man Cave' that is his room. Either way, I was up. Sometimes, though, I wake up because something eats at my conscience. Maybe it was a conversation I had that skirted the edge of propriety; being both a big flirt and a loudmouth, I struggle with this quite often. It could have been something I've left undone that could soon bubble up into a pressing need. I am a procrastinator and am notorious for putting things off until I HAVE TO do them instead of being more pro-active. Or maybe it was something from the past that still bothers me, and there are more of those worries than I care to admit in public. Too much alcohol, not enough exercise, financial worries, worries about my kids, concerns for my wife: you get the picture.

At four in the morning, these things press in and seem like they threaten destruction. That's what I think the proverb is talking about: the day to day destruction that shakes us from within. We each carry around some 'wicked;' I think artists call it 'inspiration' and the press calls it 'Lindsay Lohan;' ok, that was mean. Wicked in fact, but it was for a point; do you see how it works? Little bits of petty evil find themselves into our lives because we let them in. We let them cause us to think, say and do things we might not otherwise do. If I'm not careful, those things can snowball and before I know it, I have a full-blown situation on my hands. Maybe it's the love affair that starts with meeting for a friendly lunch. Or it's an email exchange that degenerates into an argument. Or it could be pushing away someone who you need in your life because of your foolish pride.

Destruction. Plain and simple, it's destructive, and it'll eat you alive from the inside out. Another way of saying that might be "the house of the wicked will be destroyed." That's not a stretch, you know. After all, termites quietly, persistently eat away at the wood in your house until what's left won't hold up the walls any longer. So it is with the little bits of 'wicked' that we let enter our lives every day.

Contrast that with 'the tent of the upright.' Man, it's hard to be upright, and while I like camping, I'm not sure I want to live full-time in a tent. But this too, I think, isn't talking about your average weekend in a family sized Coleman. Your average Bedouin (or Biblical patriarch) might live his life in a tent but it's atypical for we Americans. My take on it is that it's a reminder how our 'house' here is a temporary thing, that our lives are like living in tents. My life, my persona, my attitude, my lifestyle is a temporary construct. It won't last forever; it won't even last a hundred years (most likely), but what I 'build' here while living in the shelter that is my life, I will keep with me forever in the heaven that lies beyond.

Not only that, but how I live here affects how I deal every day with those little bits of wicked that find their way to my doorstep...or the flap in my tent. That's why the proverb implores us to be upright, to seek divine wisdom in how we will interact with others. And because God's wisdom is love, it implores us to live our lives out in love, according to the Golden Rule which he himself established. That's a tough thing to do, you know: always turning the other cheek, looking for good in people, giving the benefit of the doubt, walking around in their shoes for awhile, patiently waiting before responding. Those 'upright' things are a tall order, especially in a world where the cooler, easier way comes with pulling the little strings of wicked.

And listening to one's conscience. When mine jabs me at four in the morning it reminds me of important things, usually small things but important all the same. Today it involves painting, status reports, scheduling meetings, and watching what I say. Tomorrow it may be, probably will be, something completely different. I just hope it's not at four AM because I really could use some sleep, even if that too is little more than a temporary thing.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 25 July 2010

There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death. Proverbs 14, verse 12.

Have you ever had the feeling that things just aren't what they seem? I think we all have. Maybe it's a relationship that seems too perfect. Or it could be that, after so long, it feels SO GOOD to sleep with someone that it is everything you've ever wanted. Or partying: I like drinking, and I love to have fun; there are clubs and bars all over the country where I've made my mark and there are true stories about me that would leave you in shock and awe. And what about the crowd? Have you ever stood in front of a crowd and simply commanded them with your presence? That high is one better than any drug. It could even be serving others: extending yourself 'out there' that you are always on the go and doing things for other people to the exclusion of all else.

And then there's that old saying that has more than a grain of truth in it: if it's too good to be true, it probably is. Whether it's affection, sex, partying hard, the spotlight, or whatever it is that trips your trigger, the way of the world is tricky. I read a commentary on this verse that talks about how carelessness, sensuality, and worldliness are reckless the reckless ways of the world. I agree with that. In an affair, the rush you feel from falling for someone is positively electric: until you are reminded that neither of you is truly free and you're really making a huge mistake. After my seventh or eighth beer, I'm not feeling too bad, but fast forward a few hours to the hangover and I'm not pleasant to be around. And the bad thing about being in the spotlight is that you feel driven to always outdo yourself. If you aren't careful, you won't notice the thin line between competence and arrogance.

Here's where I'll temper my prudishness with remembering another time-worn maxim: everything in moderation. We don't want to be joined to the world, but we live in the world and need to always remember to be in it. The people grinding at the dance club aren't any different from the ones kneeling at the communion rail on Sunday morning. The people partying hard on the beach on a summer night have more in common with the people at home leading a Bible study than they know. Even good Christians can be secret lovers; even true believers are closet drinkers; even the pope has a checkered past.

I've belonged to cloistered churches and, let me tell you, it's no darn fun being so perfect. When I had all the answers it was SO HARD to look at myself in the mirror because, you know, it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way. "I'm so glad I'm not like one of them," we said as we judged ourselves against those we knew whose faith was less 'pure,' whose ways were not ours. Pffftt. Whatever. What a bunch of Pharisaical BS. We're all sinners. Name your vice, your sin, your way that seems right and, if you aren't careful, it'll bite you in the butt. If you let yourself get wrapped around it, it'll drag you away from what really matters most. We're all thick with our wrongs and the person singing loudest in the church choir is just as damned as the hooker walking the streets if they don't have faith in the Savior.

That faith is the antidote to all the misery that comes with what seems right to a man. Simple faith that someone has done everything that was needed to set things right. God isn't a god of second chances: he's a God of unlimited opportunities. Screw up last night? It doesn't matter if it happens a million times, though if it does you might want to question your motives. God is a god of unlimited love for genuine repentance. He wants our genuine love because he knows that genuine love is a game changer. And a life changer that leads away from death. That kind of agape love will change our ways and help us turn from what seems right to what truly is.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 26 July 2010

Even in laughter the heart may ache, and joy may end in grief. Proverbs 14, verse 13.

Of all the verses on which I've expounded, this one is closest to my heart. I won't regale you yet again with the details of my heartaches this year. They hurt on so many levels, and the funny thing (which isn't very funny) is that they started out as joy. Years ago, my marriage started out as joy yet over time became a marriage and we both realized that it really was tough work. At a critical time when the chips were down, we both pulled away and then I gave up. We tried reconciling, we moved apart, we tried, we split, we tried, we split. It was a vicious cycle that has swung back around to joy, and whose wheel we're trying hard to stop from turning around back to grief. There has been enough aching grief in our relationship and we're both trying to make sure we do our best to live in joy and laughter again. Still, I'd give anything to be able to take back the hurt I caused her. In this thought, it doesn't matter how we got to that point: I just wish I could take back the heart ache that I caused the woman closest to me.

And there was that affair. It started as pure joy with a lot of laughter getting to know someone as a friend, finding someone with whom you had so many common interests and shared dreams. It grew into more, then ended in grief: terrible grief for all involved and not a day goes by that I don't wish I could have spared her heart all that anguish. Not a day goes by that I don't wish for some way to fix all the damage that I did to everyone involved, knowing that wishes are in vain and don't amount to much. With her, I wish I could give back the life she had before: before her own relationship fell apart, then before ours did. I wish there were something I could do to preserve joy in her life, and forego all the grief I caused.

Isn't that always the way of things? Isn't it true that we usually feel bad about the terrible things we do? I think most people have a healthy conscience. It follows, then, that I believe most people want to do what is right. They want to live in joy and laughter but too often end with ache and grief. It's our fallen condition. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. That's a law of physics. A law of sin is that for every sin there is aching and grief to follow. It almost seems inevitable.

But notice two key words in this verse: "may" and "may." Nothing is written in stone. There is so much room for life to change in that three-letter word. Salvation is found at the end of the path past the door marked "may." The heart may ache, but it doesn't have to. It isn't guaranteed that the heart will ache, only that it may happen. Joy may end in grief, but that isn't for certain. It may happen, but it doesn't have to. A skeptic could say that Solomon was the author of political correctness, that he wrote the proverb with a way out and in such a way as to not take a stand.

If you truly believe that, then read no further. "May" means hope. "May" means possibility, opportunity, chance, and change. "May" means not being yoked to heartache and grief, but walking a path in which you can set them down, then change. "May" is a choice, just like choosing to accept what was done for us in salvation is a choice. Just like love is a choice.

The heart may ache and joy may end in grief. All too often this year I've seen how they did and felt that was inevitable. Yet out in 'may' there was support, love, friendship, and help. Heartache and grief live in the realm of intolerance, regret and law. "May" is a word of gospel. At the end of it, it meant that the heartache and grief may be laid aside in favor of understanding and peace that can only be gained in the agape way. May that be your way as well.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 27 July 2010

The faithless will be fully repaid for their ways, and the good man rewarded for his. Proverbs 14, verse 14.

So, does this proverb insinuate “earn your way into heaven?” That seems like a good question. Or is it more likely you earn your way into hell? The only ‘earning’ I think we do is when we believe, or choose to not believe. It doesn’t get any more difficult to understand than that. Repayment isn’t revenge: it is a consequence. God doesn’t stand around in eternity, gazing into a crystal ball at our lives. He doesn’t look at us and think “Ha! I’ve got you now!” Instead, He looks at us in love, and wants us to succeed in His love. He wants the best for us, and wants His love to spread in our lives because He knows that His love is unstoppable and will only grow more as we share it.

I’m not a Bible thumping televangelist who says that, if you believe and are a faithful Christian, you’ll get rich because God will bless you. I’m a Bible thumping average guy who believes that, if you believe and are a faithful Christian, you are already rich because God continually blesses you. If that ‘already rich’ condition means economic prosperity, so be it! That would be great; who among us wouldn’t like a few extra bucks in their pocket? The real gift is better than that. It’s one of the heart, something more universal and more useful than dollar bills.

Another question I have about this is ‘who is faithless?’ It’s easy to point fingers at atheists, Satanists or even agnostics and say they are ‘faithless’ (though I think there’s a argument for saying they actually believe something). Aren’t we all faithless if we can’t keep all of God’s edicts? I don’t write this as some exculpatory statement but I am the worst of sinners. I have faith in Christ and I share it freely, yet my sins are many and many more. Much of what I write centers on these proverbs and on sharing my faith in practical ways. Much else, however, might just shock you, and it’s all part of the same ‘me.’ Does this mean I’m faithless? Does it mean I’m hypocritical? Or does it mean that maybe I’m just another sinner whose white robes are a bit tainted by unclean living.

You decide. When I look in the mirror, I sometimes smile, even when I also usually see dirt on my robe. The dirt isn’t a badge of honor: it’s a reminder of a life hard-lived. With faith, in time, I’ll see it scrubbed away and my robe become snow white again.

There’s something good to be said for good works. The Apostle James said that faith without them is useless. What good we do is evidence of what good in which we believe, and that’s the point isn’t it? It’s certainly the point James was making. There’s also something good to taking one’s faith to task, and occasionally reminding yourself that, yes, I do fall short and I occasionally seem without faith even when the opposite is true. There’s good in looking at the mirror and genuinely wondering if the image looking back at you sees the same thing you see when you look at it. Whatever good we do in the world, let’s all, then, try to remember that others see not just the good we do, but what believe when we’re doing it.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 28 July 2010

A simple man believes anything, but a prudent man gives thought to his steps. Proverbs 14, verse 15.

Are you simple like me? Lynyrd Skynyrd extolled a son to be a simple man, “someone you’ll love and understand.” That’s a good thing, and I’m pretty sure it isn’t what this proverb is talking about. You’ve seen that a common vibe I weave through these proverbs is how I see that most of them apply to me. I think that’s by design: divine design, not mine. They are like a mirror to me. I read them, and I see how they apply to my life. Even the really scathing ones are an easy fit...

...Including this one because, yes, I’m a simple man. I’m in my mid-40s, and I am trying to be more discerning, more skeptical. It’s funny that I believe very little that’s uncorroborated on the Internet. But if someone close to me tells me something, I’m quick to fall for it. Doesn’t matter if it’s true or not, I quickly accept it as truth and I’m off to the races. I don’t gossip, and I don’t like spreading rumors, yet I am as guilty as the next man in doing that too. If it comes from someone I know, I’m likely to consider it to be true. That’s both a blessing and a weakness.

Is this verse in conflict with the verse in Matthew 10 where Jesus tells the twelve to “be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves?” Isn’t innocence simple? Not really. I think the kind of simplicity mentioned in the proverb is deliberate ignorance. Someone who doesn’t know and doesn’t want to know is ‘simple.’ Someone who is bullheaded and closed-minded is ‘simple.’ Someone who is ignorant and refuses to be taught differently is ‘simple.’ Lots of us, myself included, fall under that description. What Matthew 10 talks about, I believe, is innocence in assuming the best in people that love might go before them. He instructed them to act in ways that are above reproach, and to be clean in all they thought and did. So many of us rarely follow that instruction to its fullest intent; I’m betting the twelve didn’t either.

Christ also told them to be “shrewd as snakes,” that is, to be prudent and give thoughts to their steps. To be prudent is to be cautious in conduct, and exercise sound judgment. So, a cautious man of sound judgment gives thought to his steps. Someone who is cautious in their judgment will think about it before they say or do anything. They’ll take into account what could happen, then act accordingly. I don’t think that means all their words and actions will be calculated for effect. Instead, it means that a wise person will work to understand the possible effects before committing those words and actions.

That’s a lot to do. I wish I were more prudent, and I wish I knew more about how to be shrewd as a snake. I can say that, living my life in a public eye, I don’t say or do things that I wouldn’t mind the world knowing about. People could rightfully accuse me of being rash and sometimes even immature, yet I can rebut that by saying I don’t say or do things that I’m afraid to stand behind. Ever read my stories? I stand behind them. Ever have a private conversation with me? I stand behind it (and I’ll also keep what you said to myself). Ever see me do something foolish (as well as things that aren’t foolish)? I did them; they’re mine. I’m a grown up; I’m responsible. If we’re friends, I’m yours. If we aren’t yet (or if we once were), I hope one day we can be. If we’re friends, or if I tell you I care, or that I love you, it’s because I honestly do.

But you should know that I’m not always very prudent. I may own all I say, write, and do, but I also don’t always think through all the consequences. I’ve said things, I’ve shared things that I shouldn’t have said or shared. I’ve done things that were best left undone. If a sign of maturity is prudence, perhaps that means I’m still immature. Perhaps it means that I have a lot left to learn. Perhaps it also means I’m just a human being or, as Jimmy Buffett said, “a flawed individual that the cosmic bakers took out of the oven a little too early.” If you’ve ever done something you later regretted, then learned from it, congratulations. If you’ve then also done different things that you later regretted, then welcome to my world. Have a seat beside me. I won’t bite, or at least I’ll tell you before I try. I may not be prudent all the time, but few people will ever accuse me of being an actual prude.

To sum it up, I’m thinking we’re a lot alike, you and I. That’s a good thing, because you make me smile.

Somewhere in-between ignorant simplicity and wise prudence is a sweet spot where I think most of us try to reside. We live our lives as best we can, and in doing so we slide between those opposite poles; rarely do we cling to one for long. That’s not all bad, you know. It makes us human. Being human means we have a real and lasting need for a Savior. Good thing we have one. I love to make new friends, and if I share too much with you or push too fast, please forgive my exuberance. I’m simply glad to meet you, and glad I can be in your life. That’s a simple thing for me to share, but simple in a good and prudent way.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 29 July 2010

The simple inherit folly but the prudent are crowned with knowledge. Proverbs 14, verse 18.

This will continue on the theme yesterday, comparing simplicity and prudence.

In commenting about a verse several days ago, a friend pointed out that we really do reap what we sow. The discussion was around verse 14 (which, as you remember, says "The faithless will be fully repaid for their ways, and the good man rewarded for his."). His point was that our actions cause reactions, not necessarily from God, but as a matter of consequence. Play with fire and you'll probably get burned; be responsible and you'll be safe. Befriend many and be friends with many; be a loner and you'll probably be alone. Don't pay your bills and you'll go bankrupt; save a few pennies and they will add up.

You get the picture. If I'm a simple man, that is, if I'm willfully ignorant, then my sowing of 'simplicity' will eventually reap a harvest of folly. My bullheaded stubbornness can be a good thing if it's used wisely, or it can be simply stupid and do nothing but bad. When I've let my mind wander or let my eye stray, I've been simple again. When I act without forethought, speak in one way and act in another, or think without following up in constructive action for the Kingdom, I'm sowing the seeds of folly. That's my pattern. Got skin, got sin, and it sometimes feels like it's a wheel that just keeps going around. That's me. Sound familiar?

Without a way out, that's pretty hopeless. 'Simplicity' is hopeless? Something so innocuous is without promise of anything good forever? You bet. Without faith that saves, it's all hopeless whether it is common ignorance or willful, arrogant disobedience. They're cut from the same cloth, and it doesn't matter whether one is from the center and the other is a fray from the side. Hopeless folly.

And yet the flip side of this is prudence which, if you'll remember, was cautious action through wisdom. The end result of that cautious action is knowledge. It's the reward, the crown for recognition and royalty. Isn't it a wonderful thing that the love God gives us, that unrelenting, everlasting agape love, is permeated with knowledge. It's understanding and knowing, really knowing, undeniable truths to fill our hearts and minds. And more than that, it's knowledge about things that have kept us in wonder for years, knowledge that will last forever. God could give us riches, wealth, fame, and glory; to some, He does give those things, and that's His choice to do so. But to all who believe in Him, He gives real treasure, that is, knowing, wise love that will sustain us through the pursuit of 'happiness' or the recovery from its loss.

Too often in life, I've wanted what I cannot have, or had what I didn't want. I have spent so many years being a simple fool in so many ways that there are times I feel I really don't know any other way. Those are the times when I'm thankful there's prudent wisdom beckoning from another direction. Those are the times when I know in my heart that there is more to life than just wanting what I don't have or striving for things that are not yet to be. In the times of quiet peace, when I open my heart to listen, I hear the voice of reason, real and loving reason from above, and I know that I too, the simple fool, can be crowned with knowledge more valuable than anything taught in any school. I'm not sure how I would look with that crown, but I wouldn't be foolish to want to find out.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 30 July 2010

The poor are shunned even by their neighbors, but the rich have many friends. Proverbs 14, verse 20.

This is for someone who I never even met. Yesterday afternoon, a good friend told me that someone I knew of had passed away. It's been on my heart ever since, and I can only figure out part of the reason why. I was hoping for some epiphany, some moment of enlightenment in the proverb today, something that would explain why this man's passing is affecting me so. I can't tell you that's happened, but it's still on my heart and the proverb fits all the more without whacking me over the head in significance.

I never even met John Mackenzie. I met his sons, one in passing at a restaurant, the other in passing several times at his mother's home. John was the ex-husband of a woman to whom I had grown very close. I was very much in love with her, and in a certain time and place I nearly left everything for her. Had this happened, John's presence in my life would have loomed much larger than being the never-met-him acquaintance that he actually was. Instead, now that he's gone, all I can say is that I never met him and only knew of him because someone else did.

From what I know, he wasn't even the kind of man many of my contemporaries might have wanted to know. He was a life-long drug user, and spent much of his adult life in and out of addiction, and consequently in and out of incarceration. To my knowledge, he wasn't abusive or unkind, just not in control of his life. He and his ex-wife were only married for a few years, and in the space of that time they had two boys, multiple low paying jobs, and a very hard life. It took a lot of grit for her to break free from that life but, as she once told me, if she hadn't done so she believed it would ruin her sons' lives and maybe even kill her.

According to his obituary, John Mackenzie killed himself in police custody. He'd been arrested for a domestic disturbance with his girlfriend, and was held in a city jail. He hanged himself using a blanket and the bars of his cell. The police in Rhode Island are still investigating, but the most likely cause of death is suicide. I read his obituary today, and it said very else about him.

Why am I telling you all this? The obvious reason is that I see him now as one of the poor shunned by his neighbors. When I read the proverb, I didn't have that moment where the clouds parted, but even I could see how it fit. Here was a man who felt abandoned by the people he knew. He must have felt hopelessly forsaken: forsaken enough to chuck it all and end his life. That's a kind of poverty of the soul that, to me, screams of tragedy because it just didn't have to happen. There are always people around, and even in our darkest hours, I live in the hope that there is always someone, even a stranger, to whom I could turn for comfort. One need not be 'rich' to have friends, but thank God for the hope of having such friends who will comfort, listen, and love. John gave up that hope.

A less obvious reason, though, is that I want to say something about him because if I don't, who will? I only knew of him as a friend of a friend, an acquaintance with whom I never became acquainted. If I had met him, given the circumstances of the time, chances are I would have been suspicious of him because I knew the history his ex-wife had shared with me. Chances are, feeling what I did for her, I would have been hostile towards John. Chances are, back then, I would not have wanted to be one of the people to enrich his life by calling him 'friend.'

And that would have only added to the tragedy because, like you and I, this man needed someone to love him. For whatever reason, John Mackenzie gave up on life to the point that he ended it. I can only speculate that he felt enough hostility towards his soul that he no longer felt it was worthwhile to value it. He must have believed the darkness to the point of walking into it. Whether it was because he felt poor of spirit and abandoned by his friends and family, nobody will ever know. I can't imagine that feeling of desperate despondency for even in my darkest hours of late, never have I wanted to commit suicide. It is my hope that, in his final moments, he reached out in spirit and realized 'what have I done.' By the time you or I find out, we won't be reporting back.

Yet it is my hope that, in the end, he did reach out and realize he wasn't alone. Jesus Christ valued this man, more than anyone else who ever knew him. It must have torn at the Lord's soul to see someone He loved hurt so badly. I desperately hope that was the last thing John realized and he reached out even if it was only for milliseconds. It did the trick for the thief on the cross. I'm hoping it did so for this man as well.

I don't know how many friends and family went to John Mackenzie's funeral, or how many called on him in life. He left two sons, his mother, a brother, a girlfriend, and his ex-wife. He mattered to them, and he mattered to others I'm sure. He

was a little-known man in a small New England town who didn't leave a big mark on the world. As far as I know, his circle of friends didn't make him a wealthy man, and what little I know of his career testifies to the same. What you read here is much of what I know about his life, and now you know it too. Because of that, perhaps he won't have died in anonymity or in vain. Yet someone else knew him too, much better than you or I. Someone else loved him, someone else cheered for his successes and wept for his grief. There's someone else who never gave up on him. I hope John realized that before he died, and if that's so, then I hope to meet him one day, make up for the time I lost in not trying harder in this life, and finally say, "it's good to know you, friend."

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 31 July 2010

He who despises his neighbor sins, but blessed is he who is kind to the needy. Proverbs 14, verse 20.

Most of us don't like to admit we despise. We do it, and some of it is self-preservation, an unconscious reaction towards people and actions which repulse us. We despise those who wrong us; we despise things with which we disagree; we despise when we are rejected; we despise each other.

Jesus said a lot about this subject. I believe that other than giving love and praise back to the Father, this was the subject he cared most about. He used most of his ministry – and much of the Word He left behind – to constantly redirect us back to thinking about each other. So much of His time here was about the simple concept of loving God with all our hearts, then loving our neighbor as ourselves. That was how he summed up everything that had ever been taught before Him.

Now consider that this proverb was inspired and written hundreds of years before any of that happened. It was already ancient by the time that now ancient time of Christ came to be. It's even more so today.

"Despicable Me." My family saw this movie a few weeks ago, and it could probably have been about me. I suppose that's the point of any good movie: that you self-identify with it in the course of being entertained. I like the title of the movie because it really fits with this proverb. It's also been on my mind because, at every juncture, my son has been walking up behind me, telling me, "not cool, Dave. Not cool;" watch the movie to listen for that line. But think about it: he who despises his neighbor sins. Who's really despicable: me or my neighbor?

Wars are about despising our neighbor. Politics is about how we deal with despising each other. We write laws because we don't get along. Government is about preserving our liberties because, left to our own devices, we won't do it for each other on our own (and government might not do it anyway!). On a smaller scale, dealing with kids is about teaching them how to get along. It happens in pre-school and especially later in elementary; ask any teacher or room mom. We build fences on our property because 'good fences make good neighbors.' We arm ourselves because even good fences sometimes aren't enough.

On a more local level, did you despise your neighbor recently? I did. The other day, I flipped someone the bird. Yesterday I honked my horn because the woman in front of me was texting while she was driving. Idiot, except that I did that myself a few minutes later. At dinner, I looked around when I heard the plate crash and saw that some kid had thrown it on the floor. His embarrassed parents scolded the little boy and I thought, "can't they teach that kid right?" Then, I resumed my conversation with my own kids about everyday things that might just leave you in shock and awe. When paying bills last night, instead of being thankful that so much had been provided to get us through a critical time, I was jealous of those who have more. At night, when I went to sleep with a blinding headache, I said a few brief prayers for people in and out of my life, and while I prayed for their safety and success, I quietly despised that they would have it in ways I didn't.

And there was the man about whom I wrote yesterday. All his life he'd been despised and rejected by people, sometimes rightly so. When the chips were down, however, at his moment of greatest need, he finally succumbed to the deceptive lesson of being despised. He gave into the darkness. My feeling bad about it weeks later doesn't change the fact that he's just as gone and there's no second chance to change that. I never even knew him yet I despised what he'd done to those I knew and loved. In doing so I despised him. In doing so, I chalked up yet one more in my millions of sins.

WWJD? There's that kitschy phrase that you see on kids' t-shirts and wrist bands. What would Jesus do? He would have gone to the jail cell to listen. He would have been there when that man toked up each and every time. He would have tried again and again to get through and let him know that He loved him. What would Jesus do? The better question is 'what DID Jesus do' because He did all those things every moment of every day. He did them for John, for me, and for you: my neighbor. "What did Jesus do" sums up how blessed is the man who is kind to the needy.

What would Dave do? Dave would instead prove how he despised his neighbors. That's not a Christ-like model.

What would you do?

It's 0400 on a Saturday morning with a busy week almost behind me and a busy day ahead. I opened my 'user's manual' (which is how I think of my duct-tape-bound Bible) and I read today's verse. I look for inspiration on what to say about it, and I see how it's a mirror for my life. I see how needy I am. I need someone to understand me. I need someone to love me just the way I am, with all my foibles and faults. I need food, shelter, clothing, income, love, patience, guidance, knowledge, family, friendship and affection. I need input and I need the white lines on the road. I need forgiveness and redemption from the people I've wronged. And I need sleep.

It's four o'clock on a weekend morning when I hope you're still asleep, and what I need most of all is to forget how needy I am and remember that the day ahead can also be about focusing on your needs too. It's not about me; it really isn't! Opportunities will present themselves today; some I'll recognize and some I won't. For those I don't, there will be the lesson of what He would do to teach me not to despise my neighbors. Any time I don't do that, I'll probably hear those movie lines again: "not cool, Dave. Not cool." I may even turn around to see if Dillon is whispering them in my ear. Then I'll pick myself up and try again. That's a needed blessing not to be despised.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 2 August 2010

Do not those who plot evil go astray? But those who plan what is good find love and faithfulness. Proverbs 14, verse 22.

Admit it: evil is fun. Even the petty bits of evil are just too darn much fun. In fact, I'm not a politician, Stephen King, or a Hollywood actor so I don't know what real, giant-sized evil feels like. I deal more in the day-to-day more mundane, garden variety. I'm into cutting off the driver behind me, or the crass words about X or Y or Z at church, or the casual flirting that becomes more than casual. My kind of evil is all about that extra beer when I already feel the others, or sniping at my wife or kids, or maybe dodging my work when I know I should be doing it. It's all about feeling better about myself because, thank heaven, I'm not like those Mexicans looking for a job at the local Exxon lot (or the construction bosses who hire them), and I'm not about using other people to get what I want.

Whatever.

Mel Brooks was right: it's good to be the king. Of course, in that context, his character was talking about, well, evil; king-sized evil. I've only met a few people in my life who I sensed were genuinely plotting anything, and to even them I gave the benefit of doubt. I once dated a woman who others told me was a plotter; didn't matter to me at all because I didn't think of her that way and I didn't care even if she was. It didn't work out between us. I used to work for a man who plotted out every advantage in his military career; last I heard he got out of the military at the half-way point at the sky-high rank of E-5. One of my recent customers was, perhaps, the most calculating and conniving man with whom I've ever worked. The conventional wisdom is that such people get back as good as they give out.

There's just nothing good to be gained from plotting evil, king-sized or garden variety, against anyone. Whether we want to acknowledge it or not, in every friendship there are three involved: the two people and the invisible but ever-present God. The other person is definitely hurt, but so is God. God won't be mocked, and he deals in pure love in which you'll find true justice. It's by design that those who plot evil go astray, not because God is a god of vengeance but because God's good design was thwarted by the presence of sin. Not only that, but outside of the movies, how many plans always go according to plan? Even good plans change the moment they are put into motion. Is it surprising when a bad one falls apart?

The other pole on this one is living in faith. Make good plans, plan your day in such a way as to avert trouble, plan to respond with your words and actions so that good may come from them and love and faithfulness with emanate from you in waves. That isn't a coincidence you know. In that friendship of three, when God's behavior is emulated, his love goes out and never returns empty. It's like interest on a loan. It's like a tree that produces a harvest of fruit with millions of seeds. It's like sunshine on a cold day. Good plans breed love and faithfulness and change our behavior in such a way that we want more.

"I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints. The sinners are much more fun." Billy Joel sang that. Good luck with it, Billy. As a plan for Saturday night, have fun with it. "There's a thin line between Saturday night and Sunday morning." Jimmy Buffett sang that. Come Sunday – not Monday, Sir James – what you did Saturday night will be a memory with which you'll live forever. Why not live so that even the petty evils are something to avoid? Life is hard enough without making it harder for ourselves, let alone planning to do so. Those petty evils can be fun, but there's always a price to pay for them. Me, I've paid enough, and even more has been paid for me. How about you?

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 3 August 2010

All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty. Proverbs 14, verse 23.

If you do any kind of project work, you'll understand this verse. That's what I do for a living: information technology projects, specifically those in health insurance. In my line of work – maybe in any line of work – we spend more time talking about what to do than actually doing something actionable. A project manager plans, plans, and then plans more. When I'm not doing that, I'm sending messages, performing tasks, making calls, writing documents, following up on issues, updating planning tools, and doing a hundred other things that support those plans.

Invariably comes the point in any project where you're bored to tears with it. There's a point where you become tired of talking about doing something and you just want to get down and do it. Truthfully, that's not always a bad thing. Those times let you sort out what's important and what isn't; they keep you 'hungry.' But you might also find yourself stuck in 'analysis paralysis,' when your team is unable to get beyond talking about all the things that could happen and simply select an option. Or you might let yourself get caught up in breaking a major task down into dozens of minor ones and you lose the forest for the trees. Or you might just be afraid of moving forward.

Those moments lead to stagnation, which usually leads to 'poverty.' It's slipping morale, or that feeling of losing focus. Poverty is when your schedule 'slips to the right' and you miss your target days; that causes trouble for everyone involved. Poverty is the feeling of failure when that happens, the dissatisfaction with knowing you tried and it didn't work. If it's for circumstances beyond your control, I find I can live with that failure; if I could have prevented it by action versus inaction, man, that's a tough row to hoe.

Project work isn't much different from Mary Poppins' maxim that "well begun is half done." Or the Stephen Coveyism of "begin with the end in mind," or the rule of thumb for anyone who has ever built something from scratch: measure twice, then cut once. It's all about hard work, specifically planning, preparing, and readying before you take the action for which you've prepared.

And it's easy to forget that all the planning you do on a project actually is hard work. I get really ticked off when people insinuate that, just because I sit in front of a computer in an air conditioned room, I don't work hard. I don't know how to drive a big rig, and I don't know how to run a backhoe, or roof a house, pour aluminum castings at a furnace, assemble cars, build furniture, or the difference between nematodes and horny toads. I also don't suppose many folks who do those things know why ICD-10 codes are about to complicate all our lives or the steps to get them from a government mandate into actual practice. All work well done is hard work, whether it's cerebral or physical in nature. Like the organs of our bodies, each worker's contribution, blue or white collar, is important to the function of society overall.

The author of the proverb understood hard work. He was the richest king who ever lived, and while he probably didn't do the physical work of actually building the temple of God, he did work with all the architects, priests, workers, suppliers, and so forth. The king couldn't do the stonecutter's work without a lot of training; the stonecutter wouldn't know how to be king either. Solomon's work was hard, and he understood that good, hard work always produced a profit. For him, profit was a temple (and a palace and a wealthy kingdom blessed to him by God). For you or I, it may indeed be a profit if you're in business that produces fiduciary recompense. It could be completing a task, or working on a task that contributes to completing another task. It might be so many widgets per hour, or getting the house cleaned up. You might address a customer's concerns, or move teachers around the school to keep everyone focused, or maybe you serve a meal hot and fresh.

For me, it is forward motion on the project of the day. My first meeting today starts in thirty minutes. It is a short planning meeting for a splinter project off the one I'm managing. We will spend most of the meeting talking about the central problem, listing options, and talking about the people who will perform tasks. Sometimes it's hard work to keep a team focused; the quarterback plays just as hard as the rest of the offensive line (or the defense for that matter). But it's hard work all the same. I usually say that 'the goal of every meeting is to schedule another meeting' and that's only partly in jest. For today's first meeting, scheduling that next session will indeed be one goal. It will also be the profit we take from our efforts, moving forward and not looking back unless doing so contributes to what we do in working towards success.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 4 August 2010

The wealth of the wise is their crown, but the folly of fools yields folly. Proverbs 14, verse 24.

Solomon did it to us again, re-presenting the same idea in slightly different terms, so let's look at it in slightly different terms as well. Yes, this is a theme we've explored here before, but I'd like to come at it from a different angle.

What makes you wealthy? Is it the house in which you live, your neighborhood? The number of digits in your checkbook or the limits on your credit cards? Does wealth come from the amount of gold in your portfolio, or from buying brand names instead of house brands? Is it being part of the 'right' church, the cool clique, or having all the chairs lined up perfectly in a row? Does your wealth come from self-image? Are you one of these folks who prefers to be dressed in matching outfits, or you won't go out in public until you're properly attired and made up? If you measure wealth in a way that is glorious to God and works for you and differs from my measures, knock yourself out! I'm not right and you aren't wrong.

Yet, without getting either mushy or preachy, I'll ask this: do either of us measure wealth in a way that really matters? Online, I have been blessed with more friends than I had even 2 months ago when I thought my world was falling apart, and they're all people I know and people to whom I have real connections in life versus simply collecting names. In other parts of my life, I've been blessed to meet thousands of people in my travels, and call many of them 'friend' as well. I've been blessed to reconnect to members of my family with whom I'd had only distant contact. If these don't make me wealthy, nothing does.

If you or I died today, would our memorial service would be full of wealth? I would hope mine would be full of people hopefully telling stories and jokes and tears and laughter. It wouldn't be for me: it would be for all of them, and when such people gather in love, there is wealth beyond measure. The crowning memory to finish off my life would be people I love gathering together to have one last meeting in such a way.

Even better would be to look in the mirror now, while I'm alive, and see that I'm wearing a crown of the wealthy. I suspect that's how God looks at us through the prism of Christ's forgiveness. He sees snow white clothes, sinless past, and an open future. When God stands beside me and we look in the mirror, he sees the wealthy crown of love on my head because He put it there.

So what about this whole folly deal? There is rarely much left over in my checkbook these days, but there's usually enough, and I can honestly say I'm thankful for every penny. Still, I find myself worrying about that. Will there be enough? Why didn't I do X, Y or Z earlier and save more? Why did I let spending get out of control? I expend too much worry, way too much worry, over things that are water over the dam and are transgressions long since forgiven. When I do that, I don't see that crown of love anymore. I see "not enough." Or I see could have, would have and should have. Worse, I see my unforgiven sins.

That's folly. It's all a mirage, you know. It's all a life built on walking towards that mirage in unrelenting heat only to find that it was nothing but vapors.

How about we cool down and wash away that mirage? Instead of always running towards the next widget, the next meeting, or the next conquest, how about we slow down, listen to the words of peace, and relax? How about serving others, "it's not about me," and what can I do for you? Choosing to live my life centered around those ideas, I can feel my clothes getting whiter and that crown doesn't feel heavy at all.

If you or I died today, would people say we were wealthy? If they looked at my bank accounts and my house of junk, they probably wouldn't. If they looked at the lives I have hopefully touched in goodness, I would hope they would. Better still, instead of calling me 'wealthy,' I'd prefer they simply say "thank God for His blessings." That's wealth that never fades away even in the hardest of times.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 5 August 2010

He who fears the LORD has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge. Proverbs 14, verse 26.

In this time of modern war, the idea of a secure fortress seems antiquated. Attacks can be launched across the planet from the Internet or using a cell phone. The guerrilla warfare of terrorism can reach anywhere, even in places we thought safe. The MAD idea of launching nuclear missiles that travel between continents in minutes has made obsolete the idea of a safe haven a world away.

Yet not so long ago, even in the space of time of my parents' lives, a fortress was considered to be the safest, most secure place one could live. Having tall walls or guarded fence lines meant protection and safety. You could count on someone guarding the walls, walking patrol, or manning the towers. "You want me on that wall," said Jack Nicholson. He was right: we did. We still do.

So how ironic is it that the verse tells us that our fear of God (meaning our loving, venerating respect) is the place where we are safe and secure as if we were in a guarded, protective fortress? If anything is insecure, it is fear, even fear manifested as respect. Fear/respect is an emotion, and emotions are always subject to whims. How could our ultimate security be dependent on simply respecting the ethereal and seemingly never-present invisible God?

The answer is, I believe, that God operates in 4D, not on planes in which we operate. He is in, around, of, within and without everything we are. The focus of the security from respect is that God does for us where we don't or can't do for Him. Unconditional respect comes from devotion, which is love. Showing respect – fear – to God is then a manifestation of love. God surrounds us in protecting love and even more than we give to him, he shows us respect and love. How does that happen? Free choice: God gives us free choice and respects our will to make whatever choices we do, and He loves us in spite of choices that flaunt that love. That never changes, never wavers.

And it's intended that we should have that forever. God exists outside of time, and forever is a commonplace thing for him. It's not an unfathomable mathematical variant: it is a constant. We can't understand it, but He intends that we should always rely on our respecting love for him as the protection we need against all things that could harm us in this world. Sticks and stones? Sure, if that makes you happy. Names and accusations? Whatever? Guns and death threats? I don't want it but bring it on! I'm covered. I'm good.

When I was a kid, we toured a lot of old forts back east. Fort Necessity, Fort Duquene, Fort McHenry. They were places of safety and security, refuge if you will. In light of this verse, I see those memories in a different light now. Where greater things were done in the name of martial glory, greater things are still to come in the name of true security and true refuge. That's something we can look forward to.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 6 August 2010

A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly. Proverbs 14, verse 29.

Patience has been on my mind a lot this summer. I've been working hard to improve mine. The daily devotions I've been doing at home focus on patience, and on controlling anger. That hasn't been an easy thing, especially since I am working to overcome a lifetime of impulsive reaction. As a young man, I was always quick to respond, often before thinking. As a young father, I focused too much on trying to perfect too many small details in my kids' behavior which I now see as fairly unimportant. As a young career man, I was obsessed with perfectionism in seemingly mindless details. As a young husband, I was far too quick to give up and pull back.

Middle age creeps up on you, though. I'm not old. Make no mistake about that. Like my grandfather, who on his elderly deathbed insisted he didn't think or act old, I refuse to accommodate age or any state of increasing decrepitude. I'm only in my early forties, so 'old' is many years away. For what it's worth, so is decrepitude. Still, I'm starting to look at things in a different light, and I'm starting to see the wisdom of this proverb. There is great understanding in patiently acting upon what the world offers instead of reacting to it. There is benefit to holding my tongue, controlling my words, and measuring my actions. These are blessings that the twenty-something Dave was simply not ready to accept. A score of years later, I'm beginning to open my mind.

I've been doing this because, awhile back, someone insinuated that I wasn't a very patient man. My lack of patience, and my lack of measure in my thoughts, words, and actions brought about too much folly in my life and the good lives of those around me. Granted, at the time I was told this, I was breaking down physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. I wasn't the man I wanted to be. In truth, I wasn't even a man I wanted to know.

More than that, I'm beginning to understand that following the words of divine wisdom is how real understanding is gained. All my focus on details, perfectionist behavior, impulsivity, and being a helicopter parent looks silly and foolish compared to simply listening for the voice of God as it speaks in whispering small ways. It is in the smile from my son as we left for our camping trip. It is in the affection of loving friends and family. It is in the music of the wind and the chirping of the wildlife here in the woods. And it is in His divine word.

Forty-something me can thank heaven that the master of heaven is a master of infinite patience himself, and the giver of multiple blessings. Another chance, another opportunity, presents itself with each sunrise. Each new day is another day in which to try again, try harder, and try to improve on my follies of the day before. Today has been full of busy action, with meetings, a drive out into the country, and work just to set up a comfortable place to sleep. Tonight will probably mean a fitful night of sleep since we are camping out in the woods of Arkansas. Tomorrow, well, who knows what tomorrow will bring? If God brings another tomorrow, the only thing of which I can be sure is that, if I rise in it, I'll be privileged to give it my all again and maybe improve a little bit in the doing.

Tomorrow I'll do what I did today and work through the day – better yet, LIVE through the day – one patient moment at a time. Years ago, in the salad days of my youth (as both Shakespeare and Douglas Fairbanks called them) I was impetuous and impatient. Tonight, before I go to sleep, I'll pray for forgiveness and thanks for what I've been given today, then tomorrow go into it and look for little hints of understanding in the most unlikely of places. Whether it's camping in the woods, digging for treasure in the hills, or simply spending time with my son, I'll patiently revere those moments and drink in the warmth of the good times.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 7 August 2010

A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones. Proverbs 14, verse 30.

It took getting away for a couple of days to give me some perspective on this verse. I'm writing from a campground in Arkansas where my son and I are staying the weekend. This is only a short getaway, just two nights, but given the circumstances of the year, it's about the only vacation we'll get this summer. The place we're staying is outside of Hot Springs, at a very clean KOA campground. Today, we've cooked out several times, gone mining for diamonds, driven country roads, gone fishing on a beautiful lake, and he went 'drifting' on a bike he borrowed here at the park. If you haven't been camping, it can be hard work: physical, outdoors, out of your element work. If you're the dad with a restless teenage boy, you do a lot of the work yourself; my choice, nobody else's.

Through it, my heart is a little more at peace.

Perhaps it's the rejuvenating effect on the body of that hard work. Maybe it was all those hours in the sun. It could be that we just enjoy each others' company. After all, we both like outdoor cooking and outdoor activities.

It could also be that God is at work in the details of our lives, especially when recreation is involved. He is at work putting aside the troubles of the work-week and the cares that bog us down in our daily lives. That principle of a Sabbath is especially at play in vacation, you know. Rest for the body, rest for the soul doing something you enjoy with people you enjoy. Now that I'm in my mid-forties I find I value those Sabbath times more. Getaways and vacations are enjoyable at any age if you choose to do something you enjoy, something you wouldn't ordinarily do. For me, that's camping in the wild outdoors (which actually isn't too wild considering we have both water and electricity at the campsite and I'm typing on my computer from the picnic table there).

I think I enjoy it even more now because I've let bone-rotting envy occupy so much of my time this year. Envy over the relationship I wanted, envy for status I hadn't achieved, envy at others for being more faithful than I (in more ways than the obvious): I've let envy rot me from the inside out. Clawing my way back through the consequences of my envy has been the most difficult thing I've ever done. A better man wouldn't have let himself become so consumed. A better man, however, may be an illusion. While others' sins may not have been like mine, surely everyone I know has something, some sin, rotting him and her from within. Just like me.

So, on an Ozark Saturday night, with the night bugs calling out and birds chirping in the trees, I thank God yet again for the blessings of many more chances than I deserve. I'm thankful for the opportunity to get away and rejuvenate for even a short while. We didn't find any diamonds today. My son called most of the places we drove through 'hillbilly hell.' We got skunked on the lake as well. We're sunburned. We're bug-bit and I pity him for all the hot dogs and chili beans we had for dinner. Know what? I wouldn't trade it for a week at the Ritz. The last two nights have helped put my heart at peace and that's good for the rest of me as well. I hope all the bird-calls don't mean rain, and I really hope my air mattress doesn't deflate tonight. If it does, though, my bed in the air conditioned blessing of home is only a few hours away tomorrow. Until then, I'm here with one of my favorite people and that's time that can't be had anyplace else on earth.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 9 August 2010

He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God. Proverbs 14, verse 31.

I can't remember the last time I consciously 'oppressed' the poor. I just can't. In fact, I don't know anyone who actively goes out of their way to 'oppress' the poor. More, I know very few people who actively oppress anyone. Sure, we each hold grudges and, sure, we all try to avoid people who look dirty. If you live or work in the city, you especially know what I mean. Walking the streets to work, you try to interact as little as possible, especially with homeless people and panhandlers. I don't think that's oppression. In an era of widespread drug abuse and alcoholism, it's more self-preservation. Yep, I can't honestly remember the last time I oppressed the poor...

...Except...

...Except that we ALL oppress the poor, and each other, hundreds of times every day. We do it with rudeness, insincerity, crassness and sarcasm, back-biting, and selfishness. I can't say you are all those things, but I will say I am.

And the really ironic thing about this is that, while not all of us are poor, we are all needy. We all need food, clothing and shelter. We all need love. We all make mistakes each and every day so, consequently, we all need forgiveness. Whether we accept it or not, we all need spiritual redemption. We desperately need that.

Every time you and I wrong each other in ways large and small, we oppress each other. You or I are each poor in one or more ways, and every time I let you down, I oppress you. Every time I don't back you up, or criticize you behind your back, I oppress you. Every time I don't support you in front of our friends, I oppress you. Every time you say something about me that you don't mean, you oppress me. Every time you compare yourself to me and declare yourself superior, you oppress me. Every time we judge each other in any way not based in love, we oppress each other.

And we're friends! Just imagine how we treat people who really are poor. Those homeless people we walk by, the people who live in the shacks and hovels that sit on the other side of the tracks, the people who constantly seem to mess up, the hoarding neighbor whose trash always seems to clutter up the neighborhood, that black-sheep cousin in our families: I can't imagine how we look down our noses at them. According to the verse, we oppress them, and the verse is right.

Just imagine what our not-so-disinterested Maker feels when we do this to each other, or to people we don't even know. He knows and loves them the same as He knows and loves you and I. Just imagine how it makes us feel when we're hurt or betrayed and it's probably a taste of what God must feel. At the bottom of the pit I felt I was in, when I went public with so many sins this year, the weight of the oppression I felt from people was overwhelming. I can't imagine how it must have felt to God, knowing what I'd done, and what He felt for both me and my oppressors. When people showed contempt for me, even when I gave good cause, they showed contempt for God.

Ever been there and done that? I bet you have. I know I have.

What's the solution to this? Kindness, simple kindness is the first step back. A smile, a nod, a 'hello' costs me nothing and it makes human interaction so much easier, so much more pleasant. Listening when someone talks with me, when someone confides in me, when someone needs me is a fruit of that kindness. There's prayer too. Prayer is free, and it's private, just between you and God. Nobody else needs to know; in fact, I think there's more value to praying privately for someone instead of doing so publicly.

And if you're moved in such a way, then how about actually doing more? You don't need a lot of money to lend a hand, donate, work in service, or do something to help someone in need. Whatever you do, know that it flows from the milk of human kindness and, even more, it reflects the love of God at work in the details of our lives.

We need not approve of each others' sins to show kindness to each other. We don't have to condone bad behavior to know that good people do bad things. We don't even have to walk around in each others' shoes to know that, in our poverty, we each need compassion. To quote Mama Judd, don't you think it's time?

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 10 August 2010

When calamity comes, the wicked are brought down, but even in death the righteous have a refuge. Proverbs 14, verse 32.

Wicked. I've heard that's a good musical. I haven't seen it yet. When I think of the term 'wicked' the indelibly etched vision of the Wicked Witch first comes to mind. Margaret Hamilton screeching "I'll get you, my pretty, and your little dog, too!" It's funny how a particular vision attaches itself to a word or phrase; for me, 'wicked' means the old, green witch.

Wicked also means the man in the mirror. My wickedness is evidenced in my hypocrisy, in writing things here yet, through each day, saying, thinking or doing things contrary to them. It means not only living in imperfection, but embracing and flaunting it. Profanity, envy, lust, adultery, murder in my heart, lying, hating, wishing all kinds of evil on people who did me wrong, intolerance, and not loving my neighbor/brother/sister as I would want God to love me: all various kinds of wickedness of which I'm fully guilty and that's just in 2010! Many of them are just since I woke up this morning. Wickedness means you when I see you in the store, or when we talk online, or when I see you sitting in church. Just this morning, in the space of an hour, there were problems with work, the washer overflowed, the dog peed on my bedspread (which is why the washer overflowed), and my daughter's car broke down (probably something electrical; never cheap to repair). Bet your money on the fact that my initial reaction to these things wasn't a prayer of gratitude.

Face it: I'm wicked. Unless you act in perfection on matters like these, so are you.

Mr. Webster says 'wicked' means "morally bad, evil, naughty, mischievous, generally bad or unpleasant." Huh? I'm saying you're morally bad, evil and unpleasant?" That takes a lot of chutzpah. As I stated in an earlier entry, I thought we were friends! I thought I would do or die for you, support and defend you, be your champion and cheerleader through all these struggles we call 'life.' Don't worry: I am still those things, and I would do or die for you, and deep inside I know you feel much the same way. We were friends before this commentary and friends we will be after it.

One wicked person to another, then, what do you do when a crisis occurs? When calamity comes into our lives, do we immediately knuckle down and try again? Do we look for someone to blame, or some way to avoid the consequences? When you're in a fender bender, is the first thing out of your mouth "that was SO all my fault," or is it something different? How about when someone does you wrong: ever wish for a little revenge or misfortune to come their way? Each month, do I brag to you about the cost of my Texas-sized electric bill or do you hear something different from me?

Stalin didn't become a monster overnight. Little bits of evil gradually consumed him. Hitler didn't become evil when he became a dictator: he already was eaten up with it. I believe petty evil, little bits of wickedness, overcome us bit by bit, sort of like cooking a frog in water: put the frog in a pan of hot water and he jumps out; put him in a cool pan and gradually turn up the heat; before he realizes it, he's cooked. I believe that's how wicked evil works in our lives. And when it builds up to a point when there is crisis (or calamity), we are laid low. We're cooked. Our world seems endangered. We cry 'woe is me' and think that God must hate us or is punishing us (itself an interesting argument). Is it evil in our lives, punishment for evil we've done, or a random consequence of living in a fallen world? You decide.

In those moments, it's so hard to think of having refuge in righteous faith. When the car broke down this morning, it was hard to keep positive and remember that God may not give me a fat checkbook, but he does strengthen patience. When the washer overflowed, the water was still there along with my faith, and so was a mop; I didn't like mopping up, but it got done and I'll remember next time to not overload the machine. When I wanted to flip the bird to the driver who was texting at the stop sign, or when I felt down and depressed, or when I picked up the kids' things for the millionth time, and when I tried to figure out ways to fatten my checkbook in lean times I found it hard to remember "thy will be done, God." I don't understand God's will, and I don't usually like what he has to say because I don't see how it answers my questions.

Answer it does, though. And the answers are always designed to build up even when they first tear down. In a time when I want answers now, and I want immediate gratification, when it's me, me, me, slow and steady still always wins this race. God is in the details.

The car is parked off the street and I'll go to get the battery checked; a good friend gave me good ideas and I've been able to, I think, isolate the problem. We'll get it fixed. Money will find its way as it does; there's rarely as much as I want but there is usually as much as I need at a moment in time. The washer isn't running right now, and I'll put a load through it to see if it leaks again; I doubt it will. It's a hard thing to retrain my brain to turn from hypocrisy, envy and the rest, but it's a good challenge and my quiver of arrows in doing this is never empty. Oh, and at the end of the movie, the Wicked Witch melted and good still prevailed. This is hardly the moment of death, and still there is refuge in learning to be patient, learning to listen, have faith, then acting on those blessings. As long as we're here, there always will be.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 11 August 2010

Wisdom reposes in the heart of the discerning, and even among fools she lets herself be known. Proverbs 14, verse 33.

A few things about this proverb. It says a lot without saying much at all.

First, it's common sense. God's wisdom is simply common sense, which seems like an overlooked phrase these days. Common sense is something plainly understood by people across the spectrum; it needs little explanation or revelation. It is something known even by fools (or Christians, electrical workers, train linemen, housewives working two jobs, people with blonde hair and me). We talk a lot about common sense, and how successive generations seem to be stripped of it. Yet even to new generations some things still remain the same. Truth is truth no matter when or where you live.

Religion is common sense? Faith in God common sense? Yes, and why not? "But I thought every person had the right to choose what they believe, not simply accept the truth" Or, "I thought that there were many paths to God and no one faith has it right." Then there is that whole "truth is relative" argument. See how any of these work out for you. If it quacks, it's a duck. If it costs too much and you don't need it, you shouldn't buy it. If it hurts, there's something wrong. These are all common sense, self-evident things. Why should God's wisdom be any different? If we can accept certain things as truth without hesitation, why shouldn't we accept without hesitation that divine wisdom is common sense? You know the answer.

Another thing that the verse tells me is that wisdom is confident. It reposes in the heart, and to me that means it is at rest there, it is at peace; it is at home in our heart. It isn't a transient or temporary thing: wisdom is meant for our entire lives, living in our inmost being, not just in our conscious thoughts, but in our hearts, in our subconscious. Because of these, it doesn't have anything to prove and it doesn't need to be affirmed by us for it to be true. It is confident in its knowledge and in the knowledge of itself.

Yet another thing I see is that those in whom common sense resides discern it. Discernment is more than just exposure or understanding. It is the acquired ability to clearly recognize something. The search for knowledge is, by nature, a restless, hungry thing. There is peace in finally, clearly recognizing plain, simple knowledge that speaks for itself. If the disposition to sin is ingrained in us, so then is the antidote to that. Discernment of that is the first step to understanding and embracing it.

Finally, one last thing I notice is, again, how Solomon refers to wisdom in feminine terms. He had been granted anything in the world and he asked for wisdom. It was something near and dear to him, something he cherished, loved, revered and found beautiful. To Solomon it was like a woman: a beautiful, alluring, seductive, rewarding, brilliant, perfect partner. Like a clever, choosing woman, she reveals only what she wants. Here, she reveals the plain spoken, spectacular beauty of her common sense face even to those who would deny it.

Does dissecting this proverb mean I'm discerning or a fool? You get to decide on that one. I haven't always been quick to grasp things that were plain for others to see, so perhaps I'm not as on the dime as I could be. In some subjects, I need repetitive exposure to fully grasp an idea, especially if it concerns algebra. I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer, you know, but even I know that something which speaks for itself needs no further embellishment. That's a common sense, wise concept that even a fool like me can understand.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 12 August 2010

Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people. Proverbs 14, verse 24.

What to say about this? Are we a righteous nation? As a people, as a melting pot of people from all kinds of backgrounds fused into one single entity, are we righteous? There is no doubt that our nation, above all other in history, has been blessed and exalted in ways no other nation has ever known. In terms of wealth, prosperity, standard of living, (relative) political stability, technological advancement, worldwide influence, historical influence and, yes, widespread faith, the United States is the most blessed and exalted nation in history.

But are we righteous? Rap music, Lady GaGa, Jersey Shore, trillion-dollar deficits, accessible pornography, half of all marriages ending in divorce (and even higher rates for remarriage), Lewinsky's blue dress, political venom, pedophilic priests, the Kardashian media clan, and Hugh Hefner popping Viagra by the handful: these are hallmarks of our modern pop culture. Can anyone make an argument that they are actually high culture, or that they are righteous? I can't, and neither can I make an argument that anything passing for entertainment or political discourse today is exalting.

To both a prude and a hedonist alike, they seem more like disgrace.

So, this is the point where I chastise my countrymen and say "be ye separate" and to turn from our evil ways, right? No, and not just for the chastisement I'd receive in return. I have no moral grounds on which I can rightfully stand up and tell anyone else to do. Yes, we should all turn from our evil ways, and yes we should all learn from our mistakes and turn from habits that encourage them. And yet someone must stand up, and can't be just one person.

How do we as a people take back the disgrace that is the train wreck of our pop culture, of our sliding morality, of our political discourse, and of our families? First and foremost, we turn back to what works. For me, it's a daily conversation and involvement with God. It's having Christ lead my life wherever it leads and involving him in my life, in decisions large and small. It's in the struggle and, like Miley said, "it's the climb." It's God.

Our best days are yet to come, you know. They really are. Things are bad now, to be sure. Two wars, an economy in the worst shape in generations (maybe ever), high unemployment, and a host of other problems: it seems like things have never been worse. But they have been. In talking with older members of my family about 'the good old days,' I remember they actually lived through the Great Depression, the worst war in human history, and technological and societal changes from which the world has yet to recover. Things have been worse, and things will get better.

And not just in the heaven to come. The best days are still ahead of us here. I understand the gloom and doom calls of how bad things are, yet now is the time to stand up and tell what we're prepared to do about them. Speak out for our rights, preserve freedom for our children, combat threats to that freedom whether they are from within or without. Change government, change the laws, change fiscal policy. Lower taxes, cut spending, de-power the bureaucracy, drive out the crooked politicians. Work from the ground up, change hearts at home, share and teach. Fresh paint and fresh perspectives make for a fresh start.

All of these solutions start on our knees, submitting to righteousness given to us, given for us, that can still rejuvenate and exalt our nation and our people out of problems much worse than what we know now.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 13 August 2010

A king delights in a wise servant, but a shameful servant incurs his wrath. Proverbs 14, verse 35.

Along with yesterday's call to activism – whatever that means to you – this is as close as I'll get in these to expounding on anything political. As a believer, I think more and more that it is the duty of the faithful to stand up for justice in many ways, including being active in government and speaking against it as well. Throughout the Bible there are references (especially from Paul) about submitting to authorities as submitting to God, and about living in peace under the appointed government. Justice and change are God's to bring about as He will.

Yet it is we who are used as instruments of that change. One way is to speak for justice. I believe we are not to go about fomenting insurrection or disharmony. Yet we, especially as believers, are within our place to speak up in favor of those things that are in accordance with God's word and preserving our rights.

And I hope you do because, according to the verse, a king – meaning our government – delights in wise servants. In our nation, nobody is a servant, so the verse should be read for context, not literal interpretation. Ours is a nation of knowledge and faith, both existing to the glory of God and the betterment of mankind. An informed population is a wise one, and a wise population keeps its government in check. Where ours is a government existing at our consent, when that government does or says things that are contrary to that consent, it's our duty to wisely inform them. The system, as a whole, is healthier because of this; it becomes unhealthy when this governed to government symbiosis gets out of whack or is shut down. There are non-violent methods for feedback, input, assembly, and protest, and rights of the people which prevent 'the king' from prohibiting us to do so. Wise citizens will use those methods to exercise those rights.

Who, then, is the shameful servant? Of course, a shameful servant is one who shirks his duties or actively pursues doing wrong. A shameful servant is also one who ignores his rights and responsibilities as a citizen. A shameful servant is one who stands by and does nothing while his rights are taken away, or he is oppressed, or his neighbors are oppressed. We are all shameful in our sins, to be sure, but there is everlasting shame and regret for she or he who stands by while an over-eager government works actively to deny others their rights be it through taxation, regulation or aggression. Such a government no longer exists in delight, and such a government no longer operates under the consent of the governed. In time, the symbiotic relationship between the governed 'servant' and the governing 'king' breaks down into disorder and wrath.

It has been this way since the days of Genesis. Even with our technology, it is still so.

This is where I stop. I'm not here to tell you what to believe or to sway your political beliefs. I care for you and our bond here as readers means more to me than that. It's our right – even our duty – as citizens to speak out in favor of what we believe as long as that speaking isn't destructive. How you do that is your business. It is a biblical thing to be a wise citizen under 'the king.' To shirk one's duty, however, brings disgrace upon a citizen 'servant,' and chips away at the integrity of our country just a little bit at a time. To quote an old movie line, you don't have to stand tall, but you do have to stand up. Trusting in faith and in our right to justice, today is the day to do so.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 16 August 2010

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. Proverbs 15, verse 1.

I think this is a good Monday verse; don't you? It's a fitting reminder to start the week with gentleness, with intent to listen, and with peace in our hearts. You know like I do that the verse is true: kind gentle answers defuse angry situations. During an argument, when I push your buttons, a kind answer is the best way to keep tensions at bay. Keeping the peace always involves defusing the tension; gentleness is needed to turn away wrath and avoid stirring up anger. Unless your heart is already hard, it's difficult to stay angry at someone who acts kindly to you. A gentle answer turns away wrath.

Wouldn't it be nice if that were always the way? Wouldn't it be nice if that Monday thought would carry through all the tasks, angst and issues that will come your way this week? When you have to discipline your employees, or when you are frazzled between the kids and work and your significant other, when you're nervous about a new job with more responsibilities, or when there aren't enough dollars to meet your needs, wouldn't it be nice to remember that gentle answers turn away wrath?

I find it's much easier to fall back on the other half of the verse, the Monday part about harsh words stirring up anger. Me, I like to stir things up anyway. I'm a rabble rouser; always have been. I don't like it when people are angry at me, but I have a short fuse and I'm intolerant of people who don't perform at my level. Harsh words come easy to me, especially at home when I haven't had enough sleep and haven't had any nicotine. I can say I don't go out of my way to stir up anger, but I can also say that I consciously know my harsh words and actions stir anger in others and I do little or nothing to stop that. Is it any wonder that I find myself in the middle of angry situations, or that I incur the wrath of others?

How about you?

One of my favorite figures in history is Robert E. Lee, who was famous for having a volcanic temper when presented with waste or stupidity, but reserved and gently firm in the rest of his comportment. Having been schooled in the Bible all his life, I'm sure this was a verse with which he was familiar. One time, when a soldier was brought to him for discipline, the general kindly said "you have nothing to fear here, son. You'll get justice here," to which the nervous soldier replied, "yes general. That's what I'm afraid of." Wrath could have been the order of the day there, but gentleness preserved justice instead. I don't know whatever became of that soldier, and perhaps it doesn't really matter. What matters is that, when presented with a choice of whether to flash that famous temper or respond in firm, gentle kindness, the general chose the path of gentleness.

What also matters is that the week to come will present you and I with many opportunities to respond in the same way. Wouldn't it be nice to begin this week saying, "starting today, I'm going to temper my temper." Or, "starting now, I'm going to watch my words and be kinder." Kindness gives rise to gentleness, and gentleness demonstrates love. Yes, I know that there are times when we need to be firmer, stronger, harder. I don't discount that, and those times are many, especially on Mondays. I propose, though, to make this verse the theme of my week and challenge you to do the same. It doesn't always mean backing down or looking weak, and giving way need not always lead to giving in. I propose that I will think before speaking in this week to come, and that I will attempt to give gentle answers whenever answers are called for.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 17 August 2010

The Wife of Noble Character – Proverbs 31.

I'm writing this in celebration of the birthday of my friend and wife. Today is her birthday; I won't state which one, but let's just say she's old enough to have a long memory. We've been married for twenty-one years, and on the whole, they have been twenty-one good years. She and I have known many ups and downs, and we've spent much of the last few years growing apart. This year alone, we've spent much of it separated, and have had to claw and fight our way back from pain and trauma that I wouldn't wish on even my worst enemy.

Through it, she has become a Proverbs 31 wife.

I challenge you to go to www.biblegateway.com and read verses 10 through 31. The proverbialist talks about the qualities and abilities that set a wife of noble character apart from her peers. Those verses fit Kim.

I've known her for twenty-seven years and have been at her side for twenty-four. She was the first person I met when I moved to Indiana. Both of us have passed from teenagers to young adults to parents to middle age together, and our path has been a difficult one to walk. When I first knew her, she wasn't yet a Proverbs 31 woman; what teenage girl is? Through these years, through overcoming our sins, grieving our losses, hard work on every day, and more patience than I ever knew possible, she went from being an insecure young girl to being the wife of noble character worth far more than rubies or anything else of value.

For my part, for reasons only she and I fully know, I've given her more grief and trouble than any woman should endure. For my part, for the part I've played in our marriage, I both grieve and celebrate daily, trying to live in repentance for the wrongs I've done to her, and celebrating the fact that the blessings I've been given are largely because of her.

For her part, she has always tried to move forward. In the face of adversity, she refuses to lose hope. In the middle of crises, she finds her center and takes action. Through grave sin and terrible ordeals, she has learned to trust that God is at work in our lives and walk where we are led. As a partner, she has always tried to anchor our family, to ground us in what is good and provide a foundation for all of us to become more than we could be. As a friend, she is without par and will be the fiercest friend you could ever imagine. She's the kind of person you always want to have in your corner.

She is not without flaw; that is true. Who is? Today especially, those few flaws pale in comparison to the verses that celebrate her in Proverbs 31. They could have been written just for her. Her talents, her abilities, the depth of her ability to care, and the devotion that she shows to her family and others speak volumes, even more than these verses, how God is always at work in her life.

Happy birthday, Kimberly Anne. It's a rollercoaster, not a merry go round, but I'm glad to be on the same ride with you.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 18 August 2010

The tongue of the wise commands knowledge, but the mouth of the fool gushes folly. Proverbs 15, verse 2.

I thought about this verse this week, and about the verse from the other day (the one about a gentle answer turning away wrath) in the context of a discussion about the mosque to be built at Ground Zero. I participated in several online discussion threads about said mosque, some of which were constructive debate and some of which were open hostility. In reading those threads again today, the discussion continued, with several instigators taking arguments out of context and people responding, quickly and rashly, as people do.

Of course feelings are sensitive about the issue: allow the mosque to be built or don't allow it to be built. There are good arguments to be made for both sides, from the freedom of religion aspect to the aspect that we should be sensitive towards the feelings of those who lost people on 9/11.

I think this is a good issue to put verses one and two into play. We each have strong, valid feelings about whether or not the mosque, worship center, or cultural center should be built near the World Trade Center. Those feelings shouldn't be discounted as law, government policy and public relations are executed. What also shouldn't be discounted is our ability to use gentle answers to turn away wrath because the tongue of a wise person commands knowledge while the mouth of a fool gushes folly. This topic is a perfect opportunity for all of us to gently, wisely answer each other in love instead of harshly provoking each other further in ways that resemble angry folly.

When you're in a discussion thread – or just about any old place – it is so tempting and easy to react instead of respond. A reaction is a corresponding action to another action. A response can be measured. As such, a response can be gentle and thoughtful, where the reaction could be more of a knee-jerk. I need to keep learning how to respond in ways that better live out verses one and two because too many times I have been the fool gushing folly instead of the wise speaker commanding knowledge.

I constantly fall into the trap of responding before truly thinking through the outcomes of my provocative statements. Only God can know what lies ahead of each word we utter, and I won't attempt to be God. What I will – and should – attempt to do is to carefully guard what I say and do so as to neither offend nor lose my brothers in the faith, responding in gentle firmness to answer every question posed to me. Some things said are wrong, and some are designed to be provocative; these should be confronted, and in doing so we should each remember that being a believer doesn't mean compromising one's ability or duty to confront injustice or error. It means doing so with the heart of Christ as my primary motivation, saying and doing and thinking as He would and then letting that guide how we respond.

And some things are best left alone.

One of the cute sayings I've seen floating around Facebook lately is "sitting in church doesn't make you a Christian any more than sitting in a garage makes you a car." When responding to sensitive topics like this one, that's a good maxim to remember. I'm no holier or better than anyone else with whom I believe or worship, but even I, chief of sinners and fool of fools, can use the awesome God-given ability that is the command of knowledge. Even I can use that earth-shaking thing called divine knowledge to plant the ideas that change people's hearts and move mountains. To "command" knowledge is to use it constructively for the powerful betterment of others; to gush it out is little more than gossip.

And even I can command that knowledge gently, in a way to build others up so that we all can be made better in ways that further the work of God's kingdom. I can confront things I believe to be wrong and still do so in a way that builds up the kingdom by not ripping apart others.

Chances are that my world will still continue to spin on its axis whether or not the provocative mosque is built. If it's built, I'll probably never go in there anyway. And, chances are, my opinions on this topic will continue to be as sensitive and emotional as those of others. That's ok: we're human and wired for sound. This is a good point in time to remember that God did indeed wire us in certain ways and wants us to communicate, interact, and love each other in ways that bring glory to Him as exemplified through each other. I'll do good to remember that the next time I see a topic on which I wish to opine.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 19 August 2010

The eyes of the LORD are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good. Proverbs 15, verse 3.

God is the ultimate Big Brother, that is, if you choose to subscribe to that rather pessimistic view of an omnipotent (and omniscient) god. His eyes are everywhere, he's watching everything we do, he can keep track of everything we do and think (including the things we don't want others to know), and he has the power to squash us. Whew! That's pretty scary stuff, if you think about it. Kinda creepy too, actually; it's weird. There actually is this person/spirit/whatever hanging around me all the time, watching me do everything I do, including the embarrassing things?

Yep.

And that part about keeping track of everything, he can do that? He has the ability to keep a long list of all the good and bad I do in this world, the small and big evil alike? Not only does he see it, but he remembers it?

Right again. Better than Santa Claus, even.

And he really can squash us? Vanquish us? Eliminate, obliterate, and wipe us from the earth? Just because of a few white lies and such?

Yep, yep, and yep yet again. That's an advantage of being God, I suppose: you can do whatever you want.

Good thing He loves us, don't you think?

And is it so different from being a parent? God is a parent. He has a son, and he has billions of other children who, while not begotten of himself, are his children of divine creation. Is it so hard to understand that God could, and in some cases does, see our sins and keep track of them? I have teenagers. I expend much energy keeping track of what they do and say, where they go, when they get home, the lies and half-truths they tell, when they take things without asking: all those things that teenagers do. Yes, I keep a record of those things and, yes, I bring them up when we are 'discussing' said infractions. Teenagers hate lists, especially when they're convicting.

Guess that makes us all teenagers, eh?

It's an intimidating and frightening thing to think that God can keep track of all our junk, all our sins, and that he has the ability to use that against us if he so chose. It frightens me to think that someone could have that much control over me, that I'd live my life like a goldfish in a bowl at someone else's pleasure. Where's the love in that? I suppose the answer to the question is "steeped all through it" because, being a sinless and holy God, he is all love personified. Anything that is even slightly contrary to love – including all our wrongs – demands loving justice. It requires a way to set that love right again.

Stop me if I'm wrong but isn't that what happened at the cross? Wasn't that the reason for the cross? If that isn't heroic love, there is no such thing.

And the coolest part about it is that God can and does keep records of what we do, and he could indeed smash us with them (and as creator and God, it would be within his right to do so) but he chooses not to. Instead, he forgives us. When he looks at that huge, ugly list of our wrongs, he sees snow white purity...because we believe in that act of forgiveness from the cross. He sees how the price was paid to set right all our errors and terrible choices, and that he doesn't even think of holding them against us because of that. The injustice of our sins demands that a just god know of them and make amends because we chose to step over the line. The inherent love in our just God's nature is a freely given gift that means those sins are declared paid for and we're declared innocent, and that list is rendered moot.

With traffic cameras, security cameras, inquiring friends with inquiring minds, nosy people everywhere and the general prickling of my over-active conscience, I don't always like the idea that God watches everything I do. I don't like it, that is, just long enough to remember that I am embarrassed by some things, and I don't want Him to see those because I know He loves me enough to die for me. He did that. It's a wonderful thing, then, that he does see all my wrongs and protects me with his love, like a sentry on a watch tower, guarding against wrongdoing to preserve the safety of those under his keep. Knowing that, then I know as well that I really have nothing to hide.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 20 August 2010

The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit. Proverbs 15, verse 4.

I'll start out by talking about message boards again. Last night, I was on another one, this one talking about a road sign critical of the current president. On both sides of the argument there were some pretty vitriolic comments, including many that resulted in a lot of profane mudslinging. The person who was slinging the loudest self-destroyed many of the points he was trying to make. I disagreed with his message but even a fool like me could see that his points would have been valid if only he hadn't sabotaged them with the way in which he presented them.

It reminded me that we're trying to tone down the volume in my own house. In years past, this was a loud house. I can only speak for myself in saying that, as a younger parent, I was immature and obsessed about things that I now believe don't matter much. I mean, in the grand scheme of things, to me, having all the dishes done right after a meal or pushing all the chairs in at the table doesn't matter as much as, say, your kids learning from bad decisions they made. Yes, of course it's true that they learn to make bigger decisions by complying with smaller ones (like doing dishes and pushing in chairs). The difference in my perspective concerns my reaction. In the past, when they weren't done or weren't done to my satisfaction, I let my short fuse burn by either getting angry or doing the chores myself (and then getting angry).

These days, on the other side of family trauma and with a few more years of maturity under my tightening belt, I've come to look at things differently. I believe now in toning down the volume but, more importantly, in toning and tempering the lower volume with healing. Healing words of calm, healing words of truth, healing words of understanding and comfort, healing words of compassion: the forty-something Dave wants calm healing that the twenty-something Dave would not have understood.

My kids are teenagers and I have come to believe that one of the most valuable gifts I can impart to them is that of patient kindness. I want them to be in the world boldly and fearlessly, but to say and do what they will say and do with calm understanding and patient, quiet compassion. They can be independent, strong, fun, true and honest and still be calm, quiet, and controlled, patient, compassionate and Christ-like.

If you think about Christ's example, he wasn't a wuss. He was compassionate yet always toed a strong line. He patiently taught others even when He Himself was being oppressed. When faced with the choice of being angry or expressing mercy, He chose the merciful path. Yet he never backed down, never gave an inch from standing up for God's will and what is right, and he did that with the attitude of a servant and quiet, gentle, understanding compassion.

I want my kids to act that way because it's a tough old world out there. There's enough junk in the world that can crush your spirit if you let it. They're all online, they see message boards like the one I described earlier. They know the score with all the problems in school and the world. They aren't naïve, and with good reason they're intimidated by making their own way. They're also equipped to do it, and one of the strongest tools at their disposal is the ability to quietly, honestly, compassionately live out their lives in a world generally hostile to those attitudes. If I can teach them to model a Christ-like attitude of quiet, compassionate, healing, strong service, then all the years of being an immature parent won't have been lived in vain.

At the end of my message board discussion, I ended up calling the mud-slinger on his mud-slinging and did so without slinging any wet dirt back at him. He responded in mostly cogent, reasoned terms, and even accepted my friend request. Out of the rancor, I gained a new friend in an unexpected way. I think I can respect someone who defends his point with quiet honor instead of one who snorts around trying to bluster. Over time, I'm betting we can learn a few things from each other, and perhaps each of us – and others around us – can also be better for the conversation. I like to think that the calm, healing words did what they always do and built a bridge between two opposing banks. That's a win for all involved. Besides, I've learned that I'd much rather have "beloved" on my tombstone instead of "he was a real SOB."

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 21 August 2010

A fool spurns his father's discipline, but whoever heeds correction shows prudence. Proverbs 15, verse 5.

Yesterday, you heard me mention that I've spent most of my parental life as an impatient, immature father. I yelled more than I wanted to, and I let too many small things bother me. I learned this at the feet of masters. No, this isn't one of those "let me blame my parents for all the screw up's I've done in my life" rants. They yelled a lot, and they did so because they were under enormous pressures at work and in their finances while trying to give our family the best life they could. Lost in the volume was the fact that they also were constantly teaching my sister and me.

When correction was needed, I took the path of least resistance. There were many times in my childhood when I resented my parents' discipline, especially if it came with loud anger. I bore grudges for things I should have let go, and I internalized anger instead of confronting and dealing with the message it was telling me. Bad on any parent for venting at their children frustrations for which that child is not responsible. Bad on me too for not listening better, not standing up for better, and not confronting the yelling when I had the chance.

When I became a father in my own right, I repeated that pattern only now I was the responsible one, responsible for both my children's welfare and my own thoughts and actions. Is it any surprise that my loud ranting, my snorting and stomping, and my insistence on kids' toeing my standards line met with resistance? Is it any wonder that, when I later tried to constructively discipline my children they spurned my efforts? Consequently, is it also any wonder that, like fools, they have run into problems when we did so?

My kids are good kids. They aren't perfect, and they are good solid people of character who let themselves be caught up in a world of imperfection and temptation. Each of them has succumbed to temptation, and each of them has had to deal with the consequences of their actions, both sin and praiseworthy things alike. They've repeated mistakes that I, their mother, or others have made while also making mistakes far different – and in some ways more severe – than anything I've yet done. When presented with discipline, they spurned it and paid for the consequences.

Just like me, in fact. That whole thing about repeating mistakes while doing far worse things, well, I've done that too. I've done it in more ways than I ever thought I could, and I've regretted it every time. I think it's because the capacity for human depravity is an amazing thing. We are each capable of it, and in our own ways, we each produce it. One wrong leads to another; sins snowball; you know what rolls downhill. The white lines on the road and the parents meeting us at the doorway are points of discipline. And "discipline" can mean correction, training, behavior, or pattern, remembering too that the root of the word is 'disciple.' Children are our disciples, you know, as are any who follow our teachings. And, if we follow the discipline, instruction, and patient love of God, we're his disciples too. That's a good thing to keep in mind, especially if you're tired of looking like a fool.

My efforts to turn down the volume at home are very much a work in progress, as are my ongoing, ever-growing efforts to become a better parent. It isn't easy to raise kids these days, but I don't know that it ever has been; every generation faces unique challenges even as there's nothing new under the sun. I'm pretty sure I was a mouthy kid, though not nearly as mouthy and disrespectful as my own children tend to be. Then again, I was also never faced with a culture of rap music and dysfunctional entertainment vomited out by a media all too willing to choose profitable depravity over poorhouse virtue. I'm also partly responsible for allowing their access to those things. For every minute of Eminem, I choose to combat it with twenty minutes around the dinner table. For every "16 and Pregnant" I choose to turn off the tube and talk with them in the morning before they go to school or work. And for every time we are tempted to start yelling at each other, I choose now to step back, take a breath, and remember that quiet compassion is the best way to make faith's case so they heed correction and embrace prudence.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 23 August 2010

The house of the righteous contains great treasure, but the income of the wicked brings them trouble. Proverbs 15, verse 6.

I'll start this one out by quoting an online reference. It's from <http://www.easyenglish.info/bible-commentary/proverbs-lbw.htm> and says "A good man has precious possessions. He cannot buy these possessions with money, and he cannot sell them. They are not physical objects, but they are real. They are things like wisdom and knowledge. These things are really valuable. An evil man also earns things. He might earn money, but he also earns something else. He earns trouble. He will suffer trouble because his actions are evil."

Do I need to say any more? Probably not, but of course I will, and I'll try to put it in context of today, because today is the first day of school. The kids got off to school, on time even, for the first time since early June. My middle kid is now a senior and my youngest is a freshman. While reading online commentaries from friends and loved ones with little children, I realize how quickly the years have gone. On less than ten fingers I can count the number of months until senior-girl graduates, and freshman-son has less years left in school than I have fingers on one hand.

Today especially, I'm aware of that, while also being aware of how my sometimes unrighteous house contains incomparable wealth. What has transpired in my family through all these years is the accrual of great treasure, immense wealth worth more to me than gold. It's true: I wish now we had accrued more gold, real gold, because it would make day to day living much easier! But I wouldn't trade what I feel each day for the people I love most for a house full of jewels or a bank account with billions.

Of course I'm talking about love, you know. Love, knowledge, memories, forgiveness, laughter, learning, hope, communication, and time together. We have an account full of those things, even as we also have a ledger peppered with anger, infidelity, profanity, theft, hatred and a score of other sins that blight the pristine white of those others. Every family has those, I'm sad to say, and they have brought us trouble. Dissolution, separation, arguing, unforgiving: they are things we know well here and they have been a constant source of trouble for the people I love most.

Yet through them, the love and knowledge and memories, the laughter and forgiveness mean more. I can't tell you about all the fights that happened in senior-girl's junior year, nor can I tell you all the things that freshman-boy and I have argued about over the summer. I simply don't remember them even though their hurt has etched itself into our lives. But I can tell you how I felt when I went in to wake them up this morning. And I can tell you how it feels to see them smile. I can tell you how I'm looking forward to all they'll have to say tonight, recounting the drama and fresh fire of this first day. And I can tell you how proud I feel, how blessed I know I am to send them off to a place of learning from a house where love will triumph over adversity.

That love came to us as a gift to share, to grow and to use in building more love throughout our lives. I know that not every family has it, and there are people in the world who feel desperate to be loved. I'm one of them and you may be too. Is it so strange that we can feel this in the middle of a world torn apart by so much discord? We're imperfect people living in an imperfect world. And even when we band together to try to grasp at love, our faults sometimes get the best of us. Why, there are whole groups full of dysfunctional, sinful and downright evil wicked people. They can say and do truly cruel, even evil, things while yearning in the same breath to feel love and to share in real love. They are called "churches" and they're led by hypocrites, murderers, adulterers, haters and gossips. They are you and they are me. They're my family and they're my friends.

And yet we are ALL also the people to whom the originator of love, the God-man himself Christ, gave himself up. Whether we congregate or scatter, the gift He gave remains the same, untarnished and unstoppable, our precious treasure possession. He gave it to us out of love I can't possibly understand but I always do embrace. And he did it to give me a little bit of treasure on which to build a fortune in an unworthy home such as mine. We aren't perfect, but we are typical. And because of that love, that immeasurable love, we are living on a mountain of treasure.

I don't have that much in the way of earthly possessions, though if you come help me clean out my garage you might think different. I don't own much that's worth much, and my few investments wouldn't get me far if I had to rely on them today. But I, even I – the most unworthy man I know – am truly rich living in a house where the precious possessions of wisdom, knowledge and love have been given to overpower and defeat anger, bitterness and strife. With that love, bathed and clothed in it, I sent my kids back to school today, asking them to learn more and apply themselves, and become

themselves in the world. One day, they will grow this investment on their own. Today is another step on the path towards that time.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 24 August 2010

The lips of the wise spread knowledge; not so the hearts of fools. Proverbs 15, verse 7.

There's a lot to be said about this verse chastening wisdom over foolishness. I'm the captain of fools, so I won't sling my hypocrisy at you by telling you to do things I myself can't do. You have enough on your plate without me adding to it, so let's look at this verse from another angle.

Which do you trust more: knowledge or feelings? Do you go with what you know or do you release your feelings? When you're on uncharted ground, do you want a map or do you believe that all roads lead someplace? Facts or faith: which do you prefer? And what do you do if they are one and the same? What if, in the words of the Santa Clause elf, "seeing isn't believing, but believing is seeing?"

If you know me you know I'm an emotional guy. Some people have said I'm a cold fish, and to be honest I can be stubborn and cruel when I need to be; I'm human. For the most part, however, I'm emotional. That embarrasses me because (1) I'm a man and (2) I don't like it when feelings and emotions rule me. I am foolish enough; I don't want to be known as a fool whose heart vomits out all emotion without base or depth. I prefer to let reason and knowledge govern my life, letting them control my emotions, master them for a better purpose. It's ironic to me that I've spent so much time this year wrapped up in emotions, vetting them out, letting people in and out of my heart, exposing my feelings to others and here to you. I do prefer to keep my closest feelings to myself, but the strange thing I've learned about it is that feelings are the human side of knowledge. Where knowledge is the machine, feelings are the rubber that meets the road. Christ had knowing, loving knowledge to surpass all else yet he wore his feelings for all to see to show people how much he cared. That's a good example to follow.

But I'm still wrapped up in that knowledge thing. When I was a kid (heck, when I was forty-three too) I wanted to be a professor. For as long as I can remember, I've wanted to teach in a college. I want to do the work to earn the degree, then land the job and teach in the room. You know from my writings here that I value learning, and that I also enjoy being in front of a crowd. What better way to massage my ego than to be a professor! To teach in the hallowed halls of some ivy-covered stone building, to nurture young and inquiring minds, to pursue knowledge and pass on something useful to the next generation: all of these noble goals are wrapped up in the reasons why I would like to do this. We'll set aside for now the business of the political polarization in academia, as well as that whole "get published to get tenure" thing. Allow me my fantasy.

For now, that's just what it is: a fantasy. True, I may be working my way towards this, and I hope there are many more years in front of me to pursue this dream. But for now, for a number of reasons, it's just a fantasy. It's even more so when you consider that the knowledge spoken of in this verse is the knowledge of God, not just the knowledge of the ivory tower. The lips of the wise spread knowledge; they don't pursue egomaniacal gratification. The lips of the wise talk of knowing love, not selfish love. The lips of the wise gently speak of God's patient understanding and what that should mean in our lives, not of using the ways of the world to get even or get ahead. It's not about me in a room, commanding the adoring attention of bored students: it's about how they will live using that knowledge of a loving God, then passing it on to others.

Which do you trust more: knowledge or feelings? These days, I look at them as a yin and yang, as matters that depend on each other. Knowledge without feeling is cold and useless; feelings not tempered by knowledge are uncontrollable fire. I'm learning that God wants us to use both of them in living out our lives. One with the other; one for the other in harmony. I'd love to do that in a college some day. Even if it isn't ecclesiastical instruction, I would love to be an example for others just by the way I think, speak and act. But, for the time being, since that's just a fantasy, why wait? Why not do it now? Why not start living life in this way, in the world, in my day to day interactions? Why wait? I may not be a professor yet, but I can be a teaching example to others right now so that what I know and how I feel will amount to more than just self-serving words on a page.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 25 August 2010

The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him. Proverbs 15, verse 8.

A sacrificial attitude is what strikes me about this verse. Sacrifice is a word that gets a bad rep these days. Maybe that's not a bad thing, you know, with the connotations of 'sacrifice' being human slaughter, giving up something, and extreme loss. When the verse was written, thousands of years ago, sacrifices meant giving up property of value for God. It talked about giving up animals, the first and best (and therefore the most valuable and meaningful) to God as an act of worship. I can imagine the Jewish temple which Solomon built was a gruesome place, with the smell of frightened animals, blood and burning meat. Hundreds of animals sacrificed every day; it must have been a horrific thing. And God WANTED this? He actually demanded this?

But don't get hung up on the details, even though that's a big detail. What he wanted was the attitude. He wanted his people – in time, ALL his people – to be willing to give up that which was most precious to them, that for which they had worked hard and strived. He wanted people to love him because they could, not because they had to. He wanted what they felt, what they KNEW in their hearts about him, and he wanted to remind them of that. God didn't do that just with animal sacrifices. He did it in how he ordered their lives with the various codes for Jewish life, with circumcision (how much more personal can you get than that?), and with a thousand other details documented in the Old Testament.

He did it for love, because of love, because He is love. He wanted them to have that attitude of love.

Now, think of what that would mean if the person sacrificed for selfish reasons. Think of what it would mean if the person's attitude was focused on seeing and being seen, or on politics, or giving a sacrifice because they had to and not because they wanted to. That would be more than selfish and petulant: it would be detestable. It would be wicked. God can think, feel, love, and emote in ways familiar to us; he is the author of all those. Is it any stretch, then, to think that he could detest such a sacrifice because the person was wicked? Is it a stretch to think that something given unwillingly, not out of love, would displease God?

Contrast that with genuine caring. When someone does something for you and you know they did it because they cared, does that warm your heart? When a friend confides in you, really opens up, does that make you believe they care? Makes it easier to see what God really wanted, doesn't it?

That's how I read the 'prayer of the upright.' It is something done because they care. The person who prays honestly and earnestly does so out of love, out of needing to communicate her or his deepest needs. To those not familiar with doing it, prayer is an intimate conversation, a time when you say what truly, deeply is on your heart. It is cleansing and cathartic. And the more you do it, the easier it becomes to truly open up so that even quick prayers become expressions of your inmost thoughts. When we open up to God, it pleases him because he wants us to communicate with him with everything in our mind and soul.

Notice, too, that the Proverb contrasts sacrifice and prayer. Is prayer a sacrifice? Does it require giving up something? Does prayer involve loss? Blood? Selflessness, devotion and our 'first-fruits?' Yes, especially that last part. God wants us to bring our first thoughts, our inmost thoughts and worries and sins to him. He wants to know it all, especially the things we're ashamed of. He wants us to slay our pride, our honor, and even our own love so that he can build up what we break down. Like a bloody animal sacrifice, he wants us to sacrifice anything that takes us away from him. Such prayers are upright and, when we bring all our cares, worries, hopes, dreams and thoughts to our God, they and we, are upright as well. That's an attitude of which we can be rightfully proud.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 26 August 2010

The LORD detests the way of the wicked but he loves those who pursue righteousness. Proverbs 15, verse 9.

“Hate the sin but love the sinner.” I think that’s a healthy variation of this healthy proverb. In the middle of being a middle class guy who is hit by a tough economy, tough personal problems and things just being tough all over, it’s so easy to mess up even more and wade even deeper into the waters of my sins. Sure, there are people who revel in living large or living on the edge, skirting sin and indulging in it; I’ve been one of them and, to be honest, I still am from time to time. Still, I believe people, by and large, try to avoid living in sin because we each have a conscience and our consciences bother us. By and large, people love us anyway because they see through the veil of our wrongs and try to love the person inside.

We learn that from above. God loves us anyway. Amazing concept. Thank God he is God. Not even living with teenagers can instill the kind of selfless, patient and never-ending love that forgives even the vilest transgressions. I’m chock full of them; so are my teenagers; so are you. Knowing that, it’s a great time to notice that the verse says God detests “the way of the wicked” but not the wicked themselves. He loves us anyway. We model that and love each other anyway. He hates our wrongdoing just as much as we do but he loves us anyway and understands we’re a work in progress. That work is pursuing righteousness, turning from our wrongs, and living to do better. Slip and fall? Sure. I do it all the time and then He picks me up, chides and loves me, and sets me back on my feet to try again. Amazing thing to have people, and a God, who will do that for us.

Another way I read this one is this “ain’t about how fast I get there; ain’t about what’s waitin on the other side...it’s the climb.” For those of you without tweens or teens, that’s Miley Cyrus. Good lyrics for a movie character, don’t you think? The journey matters. The way of the wicked is a journey, and it’s a rocky road to travel. I’ve had valleys and deserts where I’ve endured the consequences of bad choices and my sins. That way hurt; it always does. It’s still a journey though, and out of every bad patch I find there is still sunshine in the sky to light my way, and fresh terrain to cover and improve on. That’s when the ‘pursuing righteousness’ comes into play. That’s when I get to remember the lessons given to me, and to love as I have been loved.

I’m not righteous; can’t be on my own, though I am made righteous by God himself. He says in this verse that the pursuit, the journey – Miley’s climb – all matter. He took care of eternity and put aside the punishment for my wrongs so that, because of faith in him, we don’t have to endure the separation from his just love. Yet he still wants us to know that we learn on the journey, we are in the world on the journey, and we encourage and love each other on the journey of pursuing righteousness. We can choose to love, choose to live the model of the Golden Rule He left for us, for the life Christ lived here among us. What we learn and how we love along that climb, they matter.

Hate the sin but love the sinner because, after all, it’s the climb. Those are good words with which to go into today and make the most of it.

28 August 2010

“Stern discipline awaits him who leaves the path; he who hates correction will die.” Proverbs 15, verse 10, and “A mocker resents correction; he will not consult the wise.” Proverbs 15, verse 12.

Let’s get this out on the table without you saying “oh there he goes again:” I know what correction is. I’m all about correction and I’ve spent much of my life being corrected for things that needed correcting, as well as taking the rap for things that aren’t my doing. I know what it is to have my ears boxed when I deserve it, and I know what it is to be left holding the bag for things that aren’t my fault yet become my responsibility anyway. I have a strong sense of responsibility. If fortunes were to be made by instilling that sense into children, my parents would have been millionaires. When those around me falter, or when the people closest to me are in danger, I step in. I’m a fixer, and I fix, and generally things aren’t the better for it.

Is it any wonder that I run into situations where correction is in order? You see, we co-dependents don’t easily see that it isn’t our place to fix someone else’s issues. Yes, people may be wired for the disposition to a certain behavior (which environment and conditioning enhance) but it comes back to us. When I want to help, for reasons I don’t even fully understand, I don’t easily see that it isn’t my place to step in and lend a hand. A counselor recently told me “it’s hard to

know when to act and when to just pray for someone.” So true. Learning when to differentiate between those choices is learning when correction may or may not come my way.

It's also hard to not feel resentful when correction does happen. Let's face it: living in a fallen world can seem like a world of crap. Consequences are hard things to live with, whether it's overspending on your credit cards, gossiping so that it becomes public knowledge or cheating on your spouse. No matter your poison, it's a hard thing when the fiddler wants to be paid because, hand in hand with that payment is the temptation to say “woe is me.” I have teenagers, so my favorite line is “that's not fair.” Fair is a four-letter f-word. Yes, it's hard to not feel resentful when things happen, even more so when things happen that hurt.

But let's remind ourselves of something: God doesn't punish us for our wrongdoings. The longer I live the more I believe that, if we don't turn from our wrongs and repent of them, it isn't God punishing us for them when things go to pot. Instead, it's the natural consequences of those wrongdoings happening in a world of sin and chaos. What goes around comes around and when we do things, it's natural to expect that there will be consequences from them. To me, that's one reason why we need God. Maybe he won't stop the bill collectors, but He will give us the know-how to work past them. God stands out of the way and lets nature take its course. Could he prevent the bad from happening? Of course! Could you and I prevent that too? That's a tougher question to honestly answer, don't you think?

It's hard to answer because it's the stern correction part. He allows consequences to happen, just as he allows us free choice. He also allows for the love to come flowing like a fire-hose. And, just as he allows the good, let's face it: he also allows the bad. Those consequences and, yes, sometimes, things that aren't even our doing or our fault but are the consequences of someone else's actions. Whether we bring it on ourselves or not, when correction happens it hurts. If I allow myself to spiral into self-feeding hurt, it becomes very easy to think that hurt is like a set of high walls, that it is keeping out the bad when, in reality, it's keeping in what's good.

Yes, it's true, there I'm going again. In the last few months especially, I've become intimately familiar with correction, both called for and un-called for alike. I've reaped what I've sown and I've also taken a lot of flak as well from people who didn't really know what they were shooting at. It's all good, I suppose. It's all part of what happens from midnight to midnight. I find I want to step in and fix things that aren't mine for the fixing even after I'm reminded that there are some things I should just leave up to God. I'm thankful that He's patient with me, especially when I try to fix what I shouldn't. I need his patience more than ever.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 30 August 2010

Death and destruction lie open before the LORD – how much more the hearts of men. Proverbs 15, verse 11.

My first read on this proverb is the obvious one: you can't hide from God. I can't hide my sneaking around, she can't hide her closet drinking, he can't hide how he cheats on his taxes, and you can't hide your lies. More than that, it's my lust that can't be hidden, her insecurity, his greed, and your avarice. It's not just the deeds we do which God sees: it's the motivation behind them. God sees what drives us. Sure, he wants results...as fruit of what's inside. Yes, he wants us to do right by each other...because of his love. Of course he wants only the best for us...because we want to, not because of what we do. You can't hide from God. I can't either.

Now, of course, the contrast between the two clauses of the verse is heavy. DEATH! DESTRUCTION! Boom, pow, gnash, sock it! I feel like I'm in the Batman show! Even these are subjected to the gentle eye of the Lord. He is master over them and sees all, controls all, allows all, and all that is happens on his watch. Even the grave is controlled by him; think of the people Christ brought back from death before He brought himself back. It's not some zombie movie: it really happened. Even these things are under the control of God.

There's more, however, and it's not all focused on the bad things. Notice too that, while the verse talks about the hearts of men, it doesn't specifically say "the sins of men." I think that's because the verse isn't meant to be a hammer. It's instructive for both positive and negative reinforcement. I think negative inference happens when our reading of the second clause is predicated on our perceptions of the first. Death and destruction are negative, so we carry over our negativity into interpreting the second half. That's not necessarily the only interpretation, though.

"The hearts of men" also speaks tenderly. It says that our innermost cares, joys, and love are visible to God as well. They're real to us so they're real to him. He does that because he chooses to, because love is a choice even for him. He could choose to deny us that love, but he doesn't. He shares it, and it's like a live wire connection straight into our hearts. God sees what we feel and he empathizes. God understands. He truly can and does feel the anguish we feel when we know we've done something wrong even if our feelings around it feel so right. He truly does celebrate, cheer, and smile with us when we feel happiness and joy over our successes, when our kids make us laugh, and when we feel all is right in the world.

To me, it's the reason why honest prayer is so cleansing, and why baring your thoughts to your spouse, love, or friend feels so right and empowering. God sees all this and he blesses us because of it, and he does that because he chooses to, even though the death and destruction that he controls are the logical outcome of all that is contrary to his natural love. He blesses us out of love and that is never wrong. Because of that, we don't want to hide from God. We want our hearts to be open before him, so we can acknowledge our good and bad to him and let him work his love on us. It isn't some Pavlovian demand/response concept: it's common sense. We want what is best and what is best is to embrace his love. We want our hearts to be open to him.

That's not an easy thing to do, I know. Tomorrow's verse will deal with heartbreak, and I've known heartbreak just like you have. Sometimes it hurts so bad that you don't even want to go on. I found that the time when it hurt that much was the time I needed to open my heart most. I won't jump ahead; tune in tomorrow for more. Let's leave it here at 'it isn't easy to open up.' After all, ogres – and people – are onions, you know; lots of layers.

Finally, there's the other part of the contrast, the inherent one we may overlook; I know I did. It's the contrast of how powerful the heart is. Death, destruction and the hearts of men are open to the Lord. I don't think it's coincidental that Solomon contrasted those three things because the human heart is modeled on God's own. Our capacity to love – and to hate – is immeasurable and is just as powerful as any other force of nature, even death. What we hold in our hearts motivates us in everything we do in life. It is under God's dominion and it's present here because it is one of the most powerful forces in life. Love can motivate us to move mountains and change lives like Mother Theresa; it's opposite can turn you into Osama Bin Laden. Both live in the heart, and both are open for God to see.

Big thoughts for a Monday, I suppose, but perhaps it's going to be a big week. Whether is big or small, it's open for God to see and that's always a good thing.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 31 August 2010

A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit. Proverbs 15, verse 13.

Don't we all know this one so well! Some of the saddest people I know try their best to put on a happy, cheerful face. They don't do it to be masters of deception but, instead, do so because they believe in putting their best foot forward. They were raised to believe that happiness begets happiness, and cheer begets cheer. And despite knowing just as much heartache as you or I, they try their best to remain positive and remain cheerful.

And then there's me. Then there's my story. I haven't always been known as the most cheerful guy around, and you know some of the reasons for that. Once upon a time I was lonely and falling away from things I had always held dear. I was at a point of change, and my heart was an open slate, ready for someone new. Along came a woman and I fell headlong in love with her. She was everything I had ever wanted, and she had all the qualities I thought I wanted in someone with whom to spend the rest of my life. We fell in love, we dated, we got closer, and we moved in ways that better, more discreet people might have avoided. We said we wanted forever, and we planned for it, and worked for it. It shouldn't have been a surprise but it didn't work out. She found a man closer to where she was, who was in a situation not unlike her own, and she fell in love with him, then cast me aside. When she did, it completely broke my heart, devastated me, and while I couldn't go back to the way things were before, neither could I move forward. I obsessed, I was jealous, I was distraught, and I felt even more lost than before. My best friend helped me through, and in truth I came to love her even more for that. Yet I was still shattered and it took time to get past it. I understood the verse then as I understand it now because real heartache crushes the spirit.

Sounds like my story from this year, doesn't it...except that it isn't. It happened to me 25 years ago. A heart doesn't forget something like that, especially when it's been broken. It was devastating, and it crushed my spirit. I couldn't eat or sleep, I couldn't focus or concentrate, I was unreliable and unpredictable, and I was desperate. Good people around me saw what was happening and while some tried to help, most didn't. Even those who did, I pushed most of them away.

What I learned through all of it took awhile to sink in, many years in fact. The hardest lesson I learned, though, was to be happy, to let happiness happen in my life. I came to believe that happiness is the by-product of our journey, not the journey's destination. My only real destination in this life is eternity, and in eternity I will know true happiness. In this life, whether it's a trip to Florida, a new job, publishing that first novel, or even time with my family, those are the goals, those are the destinations. Getting to them, or being in them, can bring happiness...if I let it happen.

Happiness and heartache seem mutually exclusive. I believe we let go of one to experience the other. If we hold onto only happiness all the time we risk becoming insensitive to the love and compassion we need to show to others living with heartache. If we cling too tightly to heartache, we avoid the happiness that can come to us as a result of letting go of our pain. It's true that they can co-exist, that we can be happy about some things but sad about others all at the same time. Yet I still hold they are exclusive as it relates to singular goals waiting up ahead, or those things in which we find ourselves living today.

What makes us happy and compassionate all at once? It's that letting go. It's casting aside the heartache by giving it to God. Letting God carry the weight for us allows love to rush in and heal the wounds that heartache leaves behind. Letting go of our hurt allows us to learn from it and live better lives in spite of it. Defeat can be turned to victory, heartache to happiness. And it's also submitting our happiness to Him, letting Him move us in the directions he wishes to move us, letting Him produce results in us we never would have imagined on our own.

Why does God, through his Proverb, tell us these things? Because they're feelings he understands himself. Seriously, how must it have felt to stand back and justly watch your only son be murdered by creatures so much less than himself, knowing that it was done out of pure love so that eternal happiness could be bought back for everyone? Don't tell me He doesn't understand them as much as we.

It took awhile to bounce back emotionally, and after several wrenching episodes I finally let happiness come into my life. At the end of heartache, I found someone to love and I married her. Yes, that cycle of happiness versus heartache still played out in my life again, and to this day I wrestle with that, as well as the terrible consequences of it. It's part of the human condition, I suppose, and won't end today or probably even tomorrow. What I know I can do, though, is admit my mistakes and give them to God, then let Him take them away so happiness can return once more. I've known great sadness, and I've known it throughout my life. That sadness, though, is eclipsed by overwhelming happiness and love

that blots out the hurt leaving only a radiance of love on which to start building better tomorrows. I prefer to let that make my happy face cheerful instead of wearing the scarlet letter of heartache as a signature badge for people to see.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 1 September 2010

The discerning heart seeks knowledge but the mouth of a fool feeds on folly. Proverbs 15, verse 14.

Why do you think that is? It could be because we're humans and humans have a natural yearning for knowledge. It's a natural thing to want to know more, and it's usually healthy to seek knowledge. We want to 'do things' in our lives, and to do them, we need to know more about them. We, who are fools, want to know more and be more.

Actually, though, I think the truest answer is "because that's how God made us." To me, this verse confirms it. Our healthy hearts are hungry for love, and it is naturally apparent that God is who he says he is. We want to know more about that because we desire real love. Understanding God's place in, above, around, and throughout our lives is real discernment. He made us this way, able to love and understand and discern and seek, because He loves us and wants that love to grow.

So, is the verse also saying that God also made us fools who feed on folly? We are full of foolishness, full of sin, full of wrongdoing and God lets it happen so therefore God made us this way and it's all his fault? That almost seems like inductive reasoning, but it's actually a logical fallacy. It falsely infers that because God made us and we are sinful that God made us sinful. Don't fall for it because don't forget about that idea that we choose the sin, and God allows us the choice. Does God allow us to sin? Sure. Does that mean He's responsible for it? No, not really. No more, that is, than you are responsible if your kid shoplifts at the store, or if you see your neighbor watering their lawn when they aren't supposed to but you do nothing to stop it.

And what does it mean, to 'feed on folly?' That seems like a clever but strange phrase; what's up with it? It goes back to that whole sin thing. Think about it: don't our wrongs feed on each other? Some are like snowballs rolling downhill, while others are like monsters growing larger and larger despite our efforts to contain them. That's especially true with a talker. This one I know too well because, well, I'm a talker. I'm the king of tall tales and I can talk (or write) for hours just to hear myself do it. To be honest, sometimes it's a feast of folly. When that happens, it becomes self-serving (and dull). It slips into the gray area between what is good and what isn't, and it becomes all too easy to slide over to that 'isn't' side. Talk is cheap, and it makes sin even cheaper.

What's the cure for that? Said Thumper, "If you don't have nuthin nice to say, don't say nuthin at all." That's good advice, even if it comes from a cartoon character. In order to minimize the folly-filled-foot-in-mouth syndrome, I need to remember to clam up and listen. Listening is the first part of discerning, and of remembering that some things don't need my commentary. It's the start of remembering to put all my things, including my words and my big mouth, at Jesus' feet. And it's by listening that I find I can open my heart again to let out the stale air of folly and wrongdoing and breathe in the fresh air of redemption and discernment.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 2 September 2010

All the days of the oppressed are wretched, but the cheerful heart has a continual feast. Proverbs 15, verse 15.

From the most unlikely of sources comes support for this verse: "Smiling dancing, Everything is free, All you need is positivity." Thank you to the Spice Girls for making my point today. We're gonna end up there.

On the other side of Geri Halliwell's positivity is oppression. Have you ever been oppressed, I mean, seriously, terribly, undeniably oppressed? You've seen pictures of Darfur, Gaza, North Korea and Venezuela; where there is no liberty there is oppression. In our own country, you KNOW there are people who have been oppressed, and you can go to places today where active, hostile oppression is happening. Go to South Central some day, or West Philadelphia, or anyplace where MS13 breeds like a cancer. Take a long drive through the backwoods in Alabama, or Detroit, or even in good, old Clinton, Iowa. You'll see the evidence of oppression there and, like the old saying says, where there's smoke there's fire.

Then look closer to home. Oppression can be how we treat other people. It's how we treat kids who are different, or how we drive on the road. It's the pastor's hypocritical wife, the best old ex-friend, the troubled man in the mirror, the overbearing writer. Movements start with attitudes of the heart. Factions begin as emotions. It may not have the same force as police intimidation or overt threats but the room-mom gossiping, the 'have you heard' barking chain of email, playing petty politics in church, and our brushfire disdain of men we think to be weaker are all oppressive. In school they call it 'bullying.' Outside of school, it's called "society."

No matter how it happens, oppression makes you feel wretched. Put yourself in the shoes of the outcast, or the stranger, or the one who marches to the different drummer. I think there's a slippery slope that starts with unfamiliarity, slides through tension, mucks up in ridicule, and ends up in hostility. We shy away from strangers and from people who do things repugnant to us. Before long, our thinking moves from "I don't know what to think about you" to "I know darn well what to think about you." That's the time for a gut-check because maybe everything isn't what it seems; maybe there's more we don't know; maybe they aren't so different from ourselves.

What would Jesus do? I think He would do the gut check.

I also think He would have a continual feast because He'd remember that, one choice that can come from the gut-check is happiness, good cheer. That adage about, 'when life gives you lemons, make lemonade' has a grain of truth in it. Perspective matters. As much as possible, even in my most depressive moments, I choose to try to remain positive. That positive outlook manifests itself in a smile, and an easygoing demeanor. One can be positive and still be realistic, but being cheerful and positive positions us to be open to possibilities rather than closed to the outside. Besides, nobody likes to hang out with a frowner.

What can we do about it? First of all, today, here and now, remember the verse. Remember to gut-check and pro-act in a cheerful way. Then, remember the Spice Girls and project a little positivity. Why wait until tomorrow? How about now? In that vein, slam it to the left (if you're havin a good time).

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 3 September 2010

Better a little with fear of the LORD than great wealth with turmoil. Proverbs 15, verse 16.

Boy, we could unpack this one for a week. There is so much to say from those 13 words that even I could write for pages and not sound (too) boring. Respect, greed, capitalism, grace, benevolence: all themes that could easily be found in this one small verse from which you could easily write a dissertation.

Let's just stick with one: contentment. It's better to have what you have, even if it isn't very much, and live a wholesome life than it is to have much more and have it through pain, suffering, anguish or (as the verse says) turmoil. I believe contentment is like happiness. It, of itself, isn't much of a goal. I can't get to contentment, and I can't reach contentment, but I do find I feel content when I am doing something I enjoy or when I'm basking in love I know.

That contentment comes with realizing a few things. First, the world really is bigger than just us and we really aren't all that and a bag of Fritos. This realization is especially difficult for me as I like to think I'm both bigger and better than I usually am. No, the world is much more than us and the only being who can keep track of all of it and then some is the Almighty.

Another thing to realize is that contentment can be fleeting. We work all our lives to achieve a level where we can be content and then we find it doesn't last. In some ways, that's not a bad thing. There are benefits to being unsatisfied. Usually, though, if contentment is fleeting it's because we do what we can but it slips away or is snatched away by bigger cares of the world that come to take its place. It's the way of things in a fallen world.

But let's be honest here: I dream about having great wealth. When you've worked all your life and come up with physically very little, it's easy to dream about having much more. When I let myself get into this mode, it doesn't matter to me whether the world is fallen or not. I want the cabin by the lake, the car that isn't a minivan made in Korea, the long vacation at that resort in Phoenix. I dream of it and I strive for it and I am working to one day have it because I'm tired of working year after year and seeing every dollar go out the door for things I neither want nor really need. I crave the attention, the spotlight, the time in the sun and I'm willing to do almost anything to satisfy that craving.

And let's be honest again: as an apologist for capitalism, I think the pursuit of wealth is a healthy thing. By far the economy most compatible with living a life of faith is a capitalist economy; command economies almost always involve commands we'd rather not consider. No, the pursuit of wealth (or, as Mr. Jefferson put it, "the pursuit of happiness") need not be all negative. Whatever wealth 'it' is, I'm sure that 'it' could be considered something worth attaining as well as something worth disdaining.

Know what? When I finally do get 'it', whatever it is, I expect my contentment with it to be fleeting. I expect to look around and be unsatisfied, and to see that the world really is bigger than just whatever 'it' is. Maybe then I'll have the brains enough to stop and see that, whether I have a lot or I have a little, it's better to have that and live in righteous fear of the LORD than to keep chasing my tail to keep up with the Joneses.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 4 September 2010

Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred. Proverbs 15, verse 17.

Think back on yesterday and this verse continues the thought from “Better a little with fear of the LORD than great wealth with turmoil.” I like the way the Proverbs offer amplified thoughts, with one verse introducing a concept and another amplifying it. The second verse usually moves in a slightly different direction. I’m sure there is a term for this kind of literary device; if someone knows what it is, please let me know.

No matter, the thought that is imparted here is deeper than just the pit of my stomach (which is, itself, pretty deep). Better to have filler with love than substance with hate; better to have something less with more than something more with less. The concordance I use mentions how a fattened calf, in ancient days, was a sign of luxury. It took a lot of care and time and precious grass or grain – themselves costly – to fatten a calf. In 4000 years, little has changed. Even today, prize livestock is tenderly cared for. If you’ve never gone to a 4H fair, try going and walking through the animal barns. The animals there are the best of the best and are all tenderly cared for. They are fattened calves.

Thus, you would only slay the fattened calf for the most special occasion. A wedding, a feast, or maybe an honored visitor: you would slay the fattened calf as a sign of respect, provision and wealth. One of my friends in Colorado is famous for staging pig roasts, and it’s no small affair to do so. They’re always a celebration yet, behind the scenes, it takes A LOT of work. He puts himself into it so that it’s more a labor of love than just a simple entrée. I’ve done them a couple of times myself so it’s no small deal. Roasting a pig, or the fattened calf, isn’t something you’d do for your average Saturday night meal.

How would that feel if you did so out of malice? It’s healthy to be proud of your ability to stage such a feast; wouldn’t it be unhealthy if you did so just to show off? Sure, people would show up; everyone enjoys a free meal. How many would stay knowing you were doing it out of spite, anger, or ostentatious pride? Think about poor Paris Hilton (and I really do mean poor). How many people does she have who are really her true friends and how many show up just to eat the fattened calf? It’s a wonderful thing to walk the red carpet, but would you or I want to do so if it was all about rubbing someone else’s nose in the fibers? Thanks, I’ll pass. Someone please pass the broccoli.

Of course it’s easy for me to moralize from a distance. I don’t have the kind of wealth that Paris has, and it isn’t fair or right to do those “look at me compared to her” kinds of comparisons. Please know I do so simply to make a point. It’s easy to say “I’m happy with my poverty” which, if you look around my middle class house, really isn’t poor at all. God has given me people who love me, a stable home, opportunities to make it my own, and an income to keep it running. Look in the canisters on my countertops and you’ll see they’re full of flour and sugar; check out the pantry and you’ll see the larder is full. It’s full of pasta, cereals and lots of vegetables because I believe in being stocked up. If you go out in the garage you’ll find meat in the freezer, but it’s meat we’ve gotten on sale; bargains that, if I might say so, I’m good at finding.

Hardly the fattened calf because, I think, my cupboards are probably a lot like your cupboards. Not overflowing but not empty either (and still my kids complain “there’s nothing to eat around here!”). Yes, I wish for an even bigger kitchen and a big freezer where I can store a side of beef and all kinds of game and fresh foods. But if you boil it all down, I don’t need that. It’s not about the food, and the verse isn’t about eating. All I need is whatever God chooses to put in my path. Midnight will still come today at God’s will and, when it does, I’ll be able to look back and see that I was blessed to be given whatever it was I was given today. 99% of the time, it’s enough. I’ve come to see the remaining 1% as a lesson, a challenge, and a blessing in its own way too.

Better to have vegetables where there is love. That 99% I mentioned is time spent feasting on vegetables. I like my steak, but let me tell you this: those veggies are pretty darn good by themselves if you’re eating them with the people you love. Last night, I spent some time with my kids. After the emotional trauma of the first part of this year, it’s been a long, slow path walking back to times when we could re-connect. We sat around the kitchen table, I had a few glasses of wine (ok, a whole bottle), and we talked. I don’t know if you could call the fermented grape a vegetable, but I know I felt that love. I’d rather have that than a feast on the fattened calf; I’d rather have that than great wealth that means a life lived in more turmoil. Someone please call Paris and tell her that dinner is at 5 today and she’s more than welcome at

our table. I'm sure her stories would be interesting, and given her figure I'm sure she's familiar with eating vegetables. She's welcome to sit at our table and learn what it really is to dine.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 7 September 2010

A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel. Proverbs 15, verse 18.

The older I become the more I repudiate my old ways. Don't we all do this? I don't live in regret and I don't live wishing for do-over's or second chances. But maybe I'm finally learning from my old ways and turning on the ones that didn't seem to do much good. I used to be very quick tempered, and I spent a lot of time looking to be offended. It came from being picked on a lot when I was a kid because I was short, skinny and awkward and I hadn't figured out my way in the world. Being that way helps to develop a short fuse and I had one of the shortest.

The strange part of all this is that I don't like dissension in relationships. I didn't then and I don't now. It doesn't upset me to stir the pot in a debate, or to defend unpopular beliefs; you can't be a Christian and not have to defend your unpopular faith every now and then. I'm not afraid to speak in front of a crowd, and I'm not afraid to say things the crowd doesn't want to hear. But in my personal relationships I don't like to cause dissension. I don't like confrontation, and I don't like to hurt people. I've had enough drama, I've caused enough drama, and I've been hurt enough myself that I don't want to cause it in others. In addition to being a recovering short-fuser, I'm co-dependent as well. It saddens me to admit I've caused dissension, trouble, and heartache in life. Those things just stink.

Yet if you have a short fuse, there's going to be trouble. There just is. Reactivity, impatience and being quick to anger are three traits that don't mix well together. I know this too well. Want to know something else? In my reading of it, "hot-tempered" doesn't always mean angry. "Hot" simply means 'emotional' and those emotions can be anger, jealousy, and even love; they can be anything in excess. Trouble is bound to result any time we open your hearts quickly out of a motivation other than that agape love we've talked about.

There's an antidote to that: patience. Patience is a fruit of love. I think it walks in the same line with contentment, listening, forgiveness, empathy and understanding. A patient man is a confident man as well. He's the one who can be relied on to watch, assess, and decide to make the right move. The patient person is the one who models Christ and those teachings of perfect, loving understanding. Such a person can calmly, confidently enter a fight a break apart two people who are at each others' throats. Such a person can confront a group with unpleasant facts and walk out without tomato juice splattered all over their suit.

And, like 'hot,' I think 'quarrel' has a number of other meanings. Yes, it might be stretching things a bit but work with me here. A quarrel can be an argument, of course. I think it could also be a disagreement, or a dilemma, or a decision that needs to be made. It could even be something of a better nature. Patience ruling any of those things is an action done out of love, and out of content generosity rather than self-serving anger or greed. It's strong yet tender, firm yet understanding, resilient yet flexible, and always generous. No wonder it can cure any quarrel.

The older I get, the more I find myself slowing down and trying to let patience teach me things I wish I'd learned years ago. If I had been a more patient, stronger, or more understanding man, I think I might have avoided some of the pitfalls I encountered along the way. Now that I'm a dad, and especially the dad of an impatient, hot-tempered teenage son with a short fuse like mine, I see this is more important than ever. The best lesson I can teach him is how to listen and how to let God work his ways through me to calm quarrels instead of stirring up dissension. After a long summer of emotion, turmoil and change, let's move into the rest of the year in patience and love and see where that takes us instead.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 8 September 2010

The way of the sluggard is blocked with thorns, but the path of the upright is a highway. Proverbs 15, verse 19.

Some days, I sit down to write these and I'm struck at both the high tone of the verse and the impossible nature of my ever being able to live up to what it says. Some days, it's not as much feeling struck as it does being slapped across the face. The last day or so here in North Texas has been tough, what with much stress, change in the air, nerves, tensions, preparations for a busy month, and torrential rain. I've been struggling to keep the blues at bay again; this is a cyclical thing for me anyway, sort of like my own emotional monthly period except that I'm a man. My work schedule is like a rollercoaster; ditto my personal life. A thousand details comprise my daily docket; few could call me 'lazy' or 'sluggard' with any claim to credibility.

So why is it that all I see in front of me now is thorns? I feel like I'm walking through molasses today, and my heart has ground to a halt. What I really want to do right now is crawl under the bed and hide for awhile; hey, it works for the cat who likes to keep me up at night! Why not for me? Probably because I'm not a cat, and there isn't enough room under there for me anyway. Today especially, I feel beaten down and sad. My conscious mind knows it's a mirage but my mood makes me think that all I see on the road ahead is a briar patch. Brer Bear and Brer Fox are running up behind me and getting ready to tie me up so they can throw me in it.

It's of my own doing. Where I am now is a place I engineered for myself, both in consequences I bring on myself and on how I react when things happen. It's the rights and wrongs in my life playing out of my life. It's sin, wind, rain, frustration, fear, anger and angst.

Maybe it's time for a reality check.

I'm going to spend a lot of September driving on the highway. I love to drive; I really do. For long, long distances, I prefer to fly, but for anything under 1000 miles or so, let's just hop in the car and see where it takes us. Highways take us places, and they keep our lives moving. They are the infrastructure of civilization, and the distinctive difference between a society that is healthy and functioning and one that is inwardly focused and going no place. They are how we get from point A to point B, and they are a smooth ride over the twists, turns, corners, and dead ends that comprise the streets all around.

They're a path of the upright.

So why am I traveling on the highway? I'm anything but upright. I have a list of sins a mile long and growing, and I have self-righteousness, insecurities, guilt, shame, hurt, and regret that plague me all day and every day. I'm like the apostle Paul: chief of sinners and worst of the worst. Why am I, of all people, on the highway?

Because He put me there. Self-righteousness, insecurities, guilt, shame, hurt and regret are the thorns in my path, and while some of them are justifiably real (and they hurt when they stab you all over), they're also taken away. I sometimes get what I deserve, but I also get what I don't. I get love and forgiveness. He gives us the forgiveness and strength to let go of the hurt and try again. He gives us the tools to stay out of the briar patch and to avoid the thorns, either by driving around them or crushing them under the wheels. And today, that's enough to start on.

The rain is still coming down outside, but we needed rain anyway and it'll make for a greener autumn. I delayed my morning workout because of it, but I'll try again shortly. There are still dozens of mini-projects to do around the house, and there are work projects on the job that both challenge and confound me. The worries of how to pay for X, Y and Z, the stress over so many things coming up and I don't know how to fit them all in, and the all-pervasive blues are all still there. They still sting and they aren't going away. But I'm going to get on the highway soon. I'll air up the low front tire, fill up the gas tank, and drive. Where I'm going, I don't really know, and I'm not even sure how I'll get there. There could be detours and maybe even a flat tire. I can deal with that because He deals with me daily. He picks me up, dusts me off, and hands me the roadmap again. Then He says "let's get moving." On my own I'm not upright but I am on the go because I'm never really alone anyway.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 10 September 2010

A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish man despises his mother. Proverbs 15, verse 20.

Don't you just love how the Proverbs use such strong language? In case it didn't hit you on the first read, slowly re-read that verse, then look at that contrasts. Wise versus foolish, son to man, bringing joy compared to despising, father and mother. And read, too, what it says about the contrasts between gender roles and age roles with the son bringing joy to his father and man despising his mother. There are no coincidences in Scripture. What's there is there for a reason. I believe the strong language contrasts are meant to make the verse indelible in our minds. They are to be unforgettable, both as a divine command and as inspired common sense.

Because, well, think about it: wise boys make their fathers proud, but men who make bad decisions disappoint their mothers. Of course, being politically correct (and gender-neutral) we can substitute 'parents' for either father or mother, but how about we simply take God at his word this time?

Dads, are you proud of your sons when they do well in school? Play sports? Stand up for themselves (or stand up in the bathroom)? Does it bring joy to your heart to see your boy learn things that he'll need to know as a man? We're not talking about spitting with the wind, pick up lines, that first beer, or anything that happens on MTV. We aren't even talking about cleaning his room without being told. I'm alluding to making honest, good choices, and standing up for those weaker than himself just because, and being responsible. I'm talking about him being able to love honestly. And I'm talking about him building a relationship, on his own, with God. In my own experience, the moments when I'm proudest come when I least expect them; when, like a parting of the clouds, I pay attention and see that my son – and my daughters as well – does things that will serve him well his whole life. Things like letting his emotions go in a constructive but open way, and witnessing unabashedly, like taking younger kids under his wing, and taking an interest in his work because he wants to do his best at it.

What about the other part of the verse? When you do things that are foolish, do you think to yourself "what would Mom say?" Men, do you catch yourself from doing something stupid because you wonder what others would think of you doing it? My dad has been gone for 13 years now, and I have a good relationship with my mother. She's my sounding board for many ideas, a constructive critic concerning the things I write, and a source of advice and support when I've needed it most. I can't conceive of despising her but even I will admit that, when I've said or done things that are contrary, it's not much different from despising what she holds to be dear and true. Mothers love their children in different, and I believe stronger, ways than fathers. I think that's both societal and genetic in nature. There's something instinctive in how mothers care for their kids, and when we kids do wrong, it hurts our moms deeply. I've done it and I'm betting you have as well.

Most of the people I know have constructive relationships with their parents. Sure, there are many people who disagree with their parents, and many others who don't even like theirs. Our whole parent/child dynamic is strange in nature in that most species release their offspring into the wild quickly and treat them as peers instead of children. Not so we humans. We're wired differently and 'strange' isn't necessarily a negative word to describe us. If our parents are alive, most people have some kind of life-long relationship with them. I think the healthiest relationships are where we treat each other with respect but both parent and child also know that a parent's primary responsibility is to be a parent, mentor, teacher, and example of God. I want to be friendly with my kids, especially my son, and I want to both earn his respect and have him come to know that he must earn mine as well. I'm Dad when I do that, but underneath that I will always be their earthly father.

You've read here my posts about how my dad and I struggled as father and son. And yet the dynamics of his life consistently play out in my own. The older I get, the more I see my father in me. My mannerisms, my temperament, my physique and my affectations are all similar to my father's. If you're talking about the way I like to cook, read, my phobia about crowds, my need for affirmation, and the kinds of movies I like, then chances are you're looking at something of Ken Terry left behind in me. If I vote for the liberals, go selfish when I could serve, watch too much football, or overeat then that's me despising my mother. I will admit it: there are times when I don't like to do either of those things, but at all times the verse is still true. When I do what is wise, when I channel divine love and wisdom in my decisions, then my parents are pleased. When I do what is foolish, they aren't. The verse goes along with the Fifth Commandment not as an obligation or debt but, instead, as a reminder that what we do we should do in love and honor. And 'love' and 'honor' are unforgettable, strong words as well, contrasting perfectly to anything that would dare to stand against them.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 13 September 2010

Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisors they succeed. Proverbs 15, verse 22.

Good Monday all and I hope you had a great weekend. If yours was like mine, you got one or two things done that you've been planning to do for a long time. At my house, I cleared out the attic. Since I moved here 5 years ago, I've stored things in the attic over the hallway. There's a lot of room up in the attic and it was easy to put things up there that I didn't know what to do with. The problem with that is that I am a collector, and over time I collected junk. It wasn't a lot of stuff – my son and I got it cleared out in less than a half hour – but it was enough to make it difficult to get around up there if I needed to actually go upstairs to, say, get to the A/C unit. Many times I planned to get the small project done but I would always put off those plans for other things, some of which were worthwhile (like time with the family, or other higher priority projects) and some of which were worthless (like last night's Cowboys game).

If only I had made better plans – and not procrastinated – I might have gotten it done sooner. If only I had sought out the advice of a few people on how to execute those plans, or how to avoid storing junk, or better ways to store my stuff, then I might not have had the need to stand up in the attic where, on a late summer Texas afternoon, it was about 120 degrees! Up until yesterday, my plans failed for lack of counsel, and there is still the matter of all the junk up in the attic over the garage!

By trade, I'm a project consultant. I plan out work for others on a regular basis, so it's no surprise to me that plans fail for lack of the advice of others but, with that advice they usually succeed. At work, I build project plans to scope out all the details, decisions, actions and tasks that must be undertaken to complete even the simplest of projects. Working with groups of disparate customers who have tasks, priorities and agendas beyond just the project your planning, you learn that it takes a lot of effort to do things the right way, and that if you don't get the input of all the involved 'players' on a team, it's easier to overlook small but critical steps.

Yet one of my favorite quotes is from Margaret Thatcher, who wisely quipped that, "Consensus is the absence of leadership." I read Lady Thatcher's words to mean not "go it alone" but "don't get stuck in analysis paralysis." In project work, in planning home improvements, in political issues, and especially in divided groups and church building projects, the advice of many advisors is always welcome. It is also something to be taken with a grain of salt because it is very easy to over-analyze things, and it becomes easier to delay action when your team becomes even larger. It's critical to get input from all sides. Problems arise, however, if a leader listens to that advice for too long and delays actually leading. At some point, decisions have to be made and you must go forward in action. It's critical to not unnecessarily delay those decisions in looking indecisive or weak.

I read this verse to support both sides of that coin. It wisely advises that we should seek the input of others when making large and small plans in our lives, while it also wisely says "many advisors" instead of "all advisors." If a planner had to seek the advice of everyone, she or he would never get the plans executed. At some point, a leader must decide that he has received enough good sound advice to move forward. That's the point where faith kicks in. It's the point where, having received man's guidance, he'll see yet again that God's guidance was with him all along. The leap of faith can then occur knowing that we've made the best informed decision we could while remembering that, no matter what happens, God is always our safety net. What results, good or bad, is part of a larger plan, and God always knows what He's doing. He even takes his own advice because the advice of three (in one) is always more helpful than one planning alone. If you think about it, the verse serves as an indirect reminder to us that our chief advisor, our Creator, is interested in the details of our plans. Whether we remember Him or not, He's part of our inner circle, our group of advisors and counsel, and he never parses out bad advice.

In several churches to which I've belonged over the years, we planned building and expansion projects. One of them never got off the ground, and another took years and much re-design before the group finally took the leap of faith it rightfully could have taken a decade or more before. They simply refused to take the leap of faith. In war, operation plans and attack plans are perfect up until the point when they're executed. That's when complications arise. To minimize complications in anything we do, God directs us to seek wise counsel – first and foremost His – and then plan our actions accordingly. John Steinbeck, himself no great believer in God, still said it right: The best laid plans of mice and men oft go awry. When that happens, only God can restore the mouse into the man and set those plans back on track.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 14 September 2010

A man finds joy in giving an apt reply – and how good is a timely word. Proverbs 15, verse 23.

Now and then, the Proverbs side on one emotion only. I think we've seen how most of them have good and bad clauses, positive and negative things to say. This one is obviously a bit different in that the 'law' part of it is downplayed. It's still there, but it's more subtle.

And how true it is that there is joy in giving a response that is correct. Doesn't it feel good to be able to give the right answer, or better yet, the best and right answer when someone poses a question? And doesn't it feel even better when you can give that response and know it was the right thing someone needed to hear at just the right time? Of course, there's something to read into that, some back-story. An apt reply isn't one that's flippant or given lightly. An apt reply is one that is appropriate and fitting to the question. It's also one where the answering party is open to response and feedback. Someone who is apt is a good learner, meaning a good listener.

We're talking real communication here.

This morning's devotion here at Chez Terry was all about prayer and how we should take everything to the Lord in prayer (just like the old hymn says). That's what apt communication means to me: taking everything to God in prayer in being an apt communicator. God constantly, lovingly implores us to talk with him, to pour out our real feelings to him. He always gives an apt reply, so the verse then makes me think that it must bring joy to Him to be able to give us a studied, careful, loving, and appropriate answer to each of our prayers. Even more, his responses to our prayers are always timely: God's time, not ours.

Too many times I hear "God doesn't answer my prayers because I didn't get what I asked for." I disagree with that because God does hear them and answers in ways that we need, not just ways we want. He does that in his own way and on his own timeline, when it's most timely for us. When we realize that, how good it then feels to know that we received an answer. Think back and you too may see that the answers God gives you – doors that opened, relationships found, opportunities, wonderful people, even correction – are what you needed versus just what you needed to get you by.

I love it when someone pours out their honest feelings to me. If I do something wrong, I actually appreciate it when someone tells me so. Too often, my big mouth gets the best of me and I say things I don't mean or shouldn't say. Not long ago, I let out an expletive in a casual conversation and my fellow conversant said "hey, don't say that. I don't like hearing that." I appreciated it because, well, I shouldn't have said it to begin with AND they were being honest and helpful. How good is a timely word, and how timely are good words as well. When I hear them, I'm like you and I'm more apt to pay attention, and to give good feedback myself.

And what's more, I love saying things that genuinely help someone else. Whether its conveying simple understanding, giving advice, passing on a verse, or providing some good words to help, I love it when I'm able to help someone with my words. I suppose it's the vain writer in me that loves this, but it is what it is. I love the feeling of joy in giving an apt reply because it means we're really communicating; it means I have said what I've said with caring, thought, and love. More importantly, when something is spoken out of genuine love and caring, I believe it's my light shining for God.

Sometimes I'm not very apt; I'm betting you can say the same thing. And sometimes my words are neither timely nor good. The other times are those for which I live, that is, those times when what I say and do reflects and shares the blessings that God puts into my life. Those blessings are always there, and there is always something good to say about them. Sharing real joy is, perhaps, the most apt thing I could say to anyone anywhere because it is always timely and good.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 15 September 2010

The path of life leads upward for the wise to keep him from going down to the grave. Proverbs 15, verse 24.

People don't talk like this anymore. These days, "going down to the grave" is a phrase you just don't hear in common parlance. You don't go to the barbershop and talk about Uncle Joe passing away by saying "he went down to the grave." And while people still poetically refer to life as a highway, journey or path, usually only in music and ministry do we talk about the path of life leading upward. In my experience, these days we talk about the path of life leading to dreams, or prosperity, or maybe success.

Antiquated language is one reason why, I believe, people shy away from reading the Bible, even a more contemporary translation like the one I used (the NIV). We are uncomfortable talking about things in ways that are unfamiliar. Our jargon and street language is so vastly different from what Solomon used thousands of years ago. Aunt Ethel might know it chapter and verse, but that was for her generation, not ours, right? Whatever.

So why is it that we understand it now? Could it actually be true that good words never go out of vogue, no matter which generation reads them? And could it actually be true that what was written yesterday still has meaning and value today when we know so much 'more?' And above all that, could it actually be true that God really does inspire these words as they were written, as they are translated time and again, and as you ponder them in your heart?

Yes, yes and yes.

No matter how you say it, the truth is still the truth. Life is still a path. In some ways it seems like a highway, with all of us rushing hither and yon (itself another colloquialism). Sometimes it's a two way street, especially in relationships. But I think that, individually, life is a path we each walk. It is narrow, winding, and mostly unpaved. Sometimes it's hard to see through all the brush, and sometimes there are many paths that diverge from one and you have to choose which one you think might take you to where you want to go. Wisdom leads and says that the path of life leads upward, to God, and to further enlightened wisdom.

Why is that? To avoid death of course. Sure, we are each going to physically die. It's the consequence of our sins, the end of physicality, and the transition from the temporal to the eternal. It's coming and it is just one way-station on each of our paths of life. Not long ago, someone asked me what the Gospel is, what the Good News means. I responded that I believe it's the story of life. It's the story of God's redemption of we humans, and that he gave it to us for life, for living. He redeemed us through Christ, and imparts that to us through faith, and he did so because of life, because He wants us to live. He doesn't want us humans 'going down to the grave.'

Instead, he wants us to live in worshipping harmony with him. To me, the Gospel is the story of how true love became true life, and how we can each live out that not so hush-hush secret as the cornerstone of our lives. We have it because God gave it to us to avoid going down to the spiritual grave of eternal separation from him. He gave it to us because he wants us to live in joy here that we might live in joy with Him forever. He gave it to us as a map for us to use as we walk our paths in life, away from danger and going down to the grave.

I speak bits and pieces of five foreign languages, enough to make me a linguistic threat to the sanity of those who use those languages every day. If you listened to me speak Italian, French or even a bit of Russian, you would probably hear my high-school level struggling with putting my English thoughts into those words I don't normally use. You might say "I think I understand what you're saying but people don't really talk like that anymore." My dialect would be unfamiliar, maybe even incorrect, and I might lose something in the translation. But I also think you'd get the drift of what I was saying, and that we would communicate basic understanding between us. Since the days of Babel this has been our lot. That we can understand itself is yet another small miracle.

How amazing is it, then, that the words spoken into the heart of a Jewish king thousands of years ago still convey their simple, brilliant truth to each of us today. People might not talk like that anymore, but the language is still easily understood. The words speak volumes in few words, and transform wandering hearts walking the uncertain path of darkness into peaceful hearts hiking the path of life upward.

Fo sho on that one cause if you noodle it before you bounce outta here, it really is tight. Pretty 'sick.' Please consult your typical seventeen-year-old for translation.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 23 September 2010

The LORD tears down the proud man's house, but he keeps the widow's boundaries intact. Proverbs 15, verse 25.

What sin is harder than pride? Stephen King called it the mother of all sin, and I agree with that. All sin is 'me first' but underlying that selfish motive is the foundation of pride. Pride is what joins one wrong to another. It's what tells us "you know better than God" or that something is worthwhile when, in reality, it isn't. Pride is what makes us believe we really can have it all, and that we're better than other people.

Please understand I'm talking about pride taken to an unhealthy level. It's not a bad thing to be proud of something. I'm proud of the people I love and proud to be part of their lives. I'm proud of my kids. I'm proud of my work, proud to be an American, proud to be a veteran, proud to be a several-times-over college graduate. And I'm proud to know you as a friend and to have you as a reader. God gives us pride as the silver lining of love, knowing that it can make us feel good and, when channeled correctly, motivate us to do many other things out of that same love.

We aren't talking about that level of pride. No, you know the kind to which I allude. Arrogance. Haughtiness. Stubbornness. Selfishness. I'm betting you have done quite a few regrettable things out of pride; things for which you feel shame, or things that you wish you could take back. God knows I have; He knows I do it every day. If the road to hell is paved with good intention then the white lines on that road are painted in pride.

Every time I get too big for my britches I get knocked down a notch or two. According to the verse, that's God tearing down my house. I have big dreams. I mean I have HUGE dreams, dreams that I've wanted for years and, now that I'm looking at my 45th trip around the sun, they seem like dreams that I'm unwilling to give up on because I've waited too long to make them come true.

Yet sometimes, I wonder if impediments aren't put in my way to keep me from getting too far off track and from letting my ego get too large. I've always believed that God is active in the details of our lives, and I wonder if some of his activity isn't some careful nudging in one direction or another when I get too proud. It seems that every time I get close to achieving something that isn't based in selflessness, there are problems.

Now's a good time to think about the widow's boundaries. Think about the widow. In the Old Testament, is there any better epitome of humbleness than an old widow, living her lonely single life in humility and, most likely, poverty? Around her property would have been boundary stones: ordinary stones that were set up to mark property lines. This was done in response to a command from God. The widow would have been cared for, taken care of, by family or others if she hadn't been married to a man of wealth. She was humble – and humbled – and lived on a social strata not far from the lowest of the poor, yet she was revered and respected because of both her loss and her courage. How significant it is that the Proverb mentions the widow, and the boundaries of demarcation surrounding her property. They denote her lines of respect, and the lines of protection that keep her both in and out of the public eye. God designed it that way.

Today I'm beginning another trip. Fresh back from 2500 miles up and back to Indiana, I'm off to Minnesota for some family time and a book-signing for my mom. On the way, I'm supposed to be on several meetings that promise to bring change. Whether that change will bode well or not remains to be seen. What doesn't remain to be seen is that my proud nature will shine through. No matter what happens, my type A nature will try to jump to conclusions and put the best spin on things. I will try to finagle ways to put myself in the best possible light, and I will hold my head up high. The trick of it will be to do so in a way that builds up without boasting, tears up without tearing down, and is proud in a way that still reminds me that I am one person among many in the sight of a benevolent and caring God. I'm special to Him, just like you are. Let my pride be proud only of that.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 24 September 2010

A greedy man brings trouble to his family, but he who hates bribes will live. Proverbs 15, verse 27.

More first-hand relating about to happen here; if you are tired of reading that, tune in tomorrow.

This is me. I have been greedy; I am greedy. I'm a man of strong appetite, and I love to eat, talk, and be in the company of great people. I love to work, to strive, and to pursue wealth and things I've never had before. I'm very type A and thrive on the rush of adrenaline that I get from living hard, lots of exercise, a great party (like our class reunion last weekend!). I love the thrill of driving fast, overcoming steep odds, good music, great food, better alcohol, new experiences, travel and love. I love to love & be loved.

In reading all that, two questions come to mind. One, what's really wrong with those things? I mean, really! What's so wrong with loving, doing, and feeding off any of those? You know the answer: nothing at all! There's nothing at all wrong with any of those things when they're focused in the right direction and when they aren't taken to excess. It's those concepts of focus and excess where I run headlong into the gray areas that immediately point me to question two which is, "did you notice how most of those statements started with 'I?'" Did you notice the self-focus of much of what I said? 'I this' and 'I that;' most of what I said was about me.

Again, some of that isn't bad. There's nothing wrong with stating what you like or believe, and it's a healthy thing to remind yourself every now and then that your own needs are just as important as anyone else's. Everything in moderation, however, and everything we do in deference and faith in God. Any time we deviate from that straight and narrow there's a chance that things won't turn out very good. That too is the story of my life: losing focus and falling away from faith into trouble.

So what is a 'bribe?' Is it money? Is it a criminal act? Is a bribe just a payment made in exchange for a service rendered? Yes, yes, and yes. It's not just money, though: it's anything that I put over the place of God, family, and you. I read the proverb to mean that a 'bribe' is ANYTHING that we exchange in return for the fruit of sin. The deceiver deceives; duh! He's pretty good at identifying our weaknesses, then exploiting them. For some, it's money. For others it's status. For me, it's driving fast, steep odds, alcohol, travel, living hard, exercise, talking, the company of great people and love. Any time I exchange my focus on God for more of those things – or anything – I accept the bribe and the trouble begins. Guilty as charged, folks. There's no use in denying or hiding from it. I'm guilty.

The remedy is in hating the bribe. Hate is a pretty strong word to use for something that, in reality, can be quite subtle. It's necessary, though. We're to strongly reject what's done to bribe us out of our focus on God. We are to turn hard and fast from things that threaten to divert us from divine wisdom and love, and we are to do so with all the strength that He can give us. Thus, the remedy is for us to turn hard and fast from what it is that takes our eyes off the ball. We are to cling fast to faith, share love with those who need it, and spread the word that the Word is good. We're to do that in everything we think, say and do, and we're to do it with joy. It's not an obligation or slavery: it's a privilege and it can be fun and, ladies and gentlemen, we can do it and still rock on!

Yes, I'm greedy and I still have voracious appetites to live all that life offers and to make my mark in this place. Those haven't changed and probably won't as long as I have breath in my lungs. Mind you, that's not a license for wrongdoing but it is a reminder that I'm only human and both in need and possession of a saving love that can overcome any bribe I've taken. That love is the cure, the medicine, the path and the glue to hold everything together. Not a bad thought with which to roll into the weekend!

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 27 September 2010

The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil. Proverbs 15, verse 28.

Sometimes I find myself watching my words, but to tell you the truth, I don't feel very righteous. In fact, I look in the mirror and I don't see a very righteous man. I know I'm forgiven, I know I have hope, and I know that all the wrongs I've done are (to paraphrase the verse) as far from me as the east is from the west. In my heart, I know all this to be true yet I will confess that I still let those wrongs creep back into my life and inhibit me from seeing myself as anything but the product of them.

And yet, I still weigh my answers and I do it to spare the feelings of those I love. I've hurt people in my life, and I don't want to hurt folks any more than I already have. It's a difficult thing to do but, when you really love someone, you only want the best for them. What's even more difficult is to weigh your answers and still stick to the truth. It's such a common-sense thing but the truth is still always the best policy, because it's what God ordained for us as the ultimate tool for living our lives. He wants us to live with His love guiding us in everything we think, say and do. And He wants us to use that love in how we deal with each other. Thus, to spare one's feelings, to give an honest opinion, to say what we really think, and in how we interact in our daily business, He wants us to do so in honest righteousness.

That means we weigh our answers. Paul says "love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." Substitute 'truth' for 'love' (because, from God, one is inherent in the other) and this can motivate each of us to watch our words. We always strive to be open and honest with all people, and we always work to say only things that build others up. The trick is to do so out of selfless, not selfish, love for them. In my life, it means that even old garrulous, talkative, and brash me finds himself watching what he says. This hasn't always been the case, but the older I get, the more I see it is imperative.

I see it because I've been the mouth of the wicked gushing evil. That's quite a vivid picture, you know. I think of it like an open sewer pipe, gushing out its filth and dirt on a clean, green street that would be quite pristine without it. It's like an oil well, gushing out black, staining, oily junk that will burn if it gushes on just the right spark. I've been that gusher, spewing out my insecurities, bursting out with my sins and wrongdoings, staining and poisoning the lives of good people who didn't deserve it. Whether you're talking about my profane invective, the subtle (or overt) lies of deception, or the things I've said and done to tear others down, my wicked mouth has gushed out things contrary to the loving wisdom of weighing better words.

It isn't easy to turn from all that, especially in a world of Eminem, traffic jams, an alluring internet, and my own weak tendencies. Turn from it I must, though. Turn from it we must if we ever hope to channel God's real love instead of love's opposite. I may not reveal everything I'm feeling and I may not let out everything that's on my heart. I probably won't let it out all at once. I will, however, speak only what is honest and what it real, and I will strive to do so while turning away from my historic arrogance. Whatever I say or do, I will do so out of love, to encourage, to build up, and to let you know that you're important and I value you as a brother or sister on the same journey of faith.

This weekend, I've spent much of my time with words. I've been at a book-signing, and I've met family and friends I haven't seen in a generation or more. Words have been on my heart, and I've been telling the same stories, giving the same news, over and over, catching up after years apart. I've done so in the truth, telling things about myself and my loved ones while, I'll admit, not letting out the whole back-story. In doing this, I've watched my words so as to build good relationships based in caring and love. In doing this, I've been privileged to re-enter the lives of good and wonderful people. We each weigh our answers, but we do so because we care for each other in knowing that the best is yet to come. Not a bad way to start out another week. Here's to hoping it's a good one for you.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 28 September 2010

The LORD is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous. Proverbs 15, verse 29.

"I feel like God is punishing me." "God must really hate me because all this is happening to me." Have you heard (or said) these things lately? I've heard them; in my weakness, I'll admit that I've even allowed hints of them to creep into my thinking. I've wanted what I shouldn't, loved where I shouldn't, envied what I shouldn't, endangered what I shouldn't, and I've felt that, surely, there was no way that God could ever love a dirty dog such as myself. I've simply done too many evil things that are unforgiveable. This verse even seems to confirm it because I've surely been wicked and anything but righteous.

That just isn't true.

It IS true that, of and by myself, I'm anything but righteous. And it is true that I have done wicked things. It's also equally true that God is a god of perfect holiness, that He's without wickedness and anything unclean like the things I've done. He DOES keep his holiness far from wickedness...and 'far' is a matter of perspective I suppose. After all, there's a thin line between Saturday night and Sunday morning.

What's impossible for men is possible for God. Where I'm wicked, I'm blanketed in the love of Christ. Where I'm unclean, I'm cleansed in His blood. Where I'm unrighteous, I'm made righteous by Him through faith in his perfect sacrifice.

I believe prayer is really a conversation. To me, it really is, and I can tell when I've let the worries of the world interrupt that conversation. I can tell when I'm trying to hide things from God, when I'm trying to keep my sins quiet, and when I shy away from Him. Those are foolish thoughts, you know, as we can neither hide from God nor keep what we do private from Him. He constantly searches our hearts, looking for hurt to take away, looking for holes to fill with his love. It's me who closes the door to my heart, and it's me who lets doubt creep in to block his love...and halt the conversation.

Yet I know God hears my prayers. I know that, on my own, I'm not righteous, but that because He made me righteous, He listens to my prayers. He actively, openly, willingly, lovingly listens to my prayers and answers each of them in a way that's best. Even though I've done wicked things which I can never hope to justify, He still listens to me and is faithful to me even when I've been unfaithful to His word.

Sometimes the world beats us down and it feels like God is punishing us for our wrongdoings. There's even truth in remembering that, if we close our hearts completely, God turns us over to the consequences of our actions and allows them to work as they will in our lives. He does that out of love, though, to teach us lessons that will, with prayer and perspective, bring us back to his wise and divine love. When we begin to see that perspective, we are open to prayer and to opening our hearts again to Him as He lovingly, longingly desires us to do. When that happens, He's always ready to listen, help, and love us again. He never abandons us, and he never does these things out of spite or retribution. God cares for us, loves us, willingly died for us. Today, busy as it is, I'll do well to remember that and to ask yet again for His help to get me through.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 29 September 2010

He who listens to a life-giving rebuke will be at home among the wise. Proverbs 15, verse 31.

We all hate being upbraided. I know I do. All through my recent time off, I've dreaded going back to work. I've dreaded it because, when I went on vacation, I was in the middle of a project that was turning into a no-win situation. The client wants to fix a pricing situation yet doesn't want to commit the resources to doing it. On my way up to Indiana, I was fielding phone calls from the project team. They are indecisive and don't want to be led to any particular solution. We would meet, discuss options, come to consensus, break consensus, and agree to meet again. This was our norm for several weeks until frustration set in and my vacation came up. As the project manager, I simply ran out of time to finish the solution before going away for a few weeks of hectic time off.

When I got back 'on the clock' today, I expected to be upbraided. I expected to be rebuked for being out of contact. Yes, I was on PTO, but the customer being the customer, and the customer always being right, and me being a consultant, well, you get the picture. The last few days, people from work tried to call me but I insisted on not taking calls because I was on paid time off. When I finally got to a place where I could take calls, I lost cell signal, or I got into my destination too late to call back during business hours. This morning, I finally made contact with my team and put out small brushfires about how we're going to move forward.

Did I get a rebuke? Yes, a slight one. I felt bad about having been incommunicado, and I felt that, even though I had been on paid time off, I should have done more to touch base. My manager chastised me for not better communicating my plans, and I accepted her chastisement. In reality, what else could I do? Was the rebuke deserved? Only partly, but I find that any criticism is good criticism, even when it isn't fully merited. I don't know if that would make me at home among the wise, but I find I appreciate honest criticism. I dread confrontation, and I especially don't like confrontation that involves rebuke; who does? Yet I value it. I value knowing when I'm near the white lines, and I value it when someone who cares about me tells me honestly that I have erred.

I wish I knew how to impart that value to my kids. The two still at home are teenagers, and teenagers being who they are, they are mouthy, disobedient, and defiant. They – especially the younger one – are in the age where rebuke is not appreciated. They don't appreciate being asked why their grades are so low (or what they plan to do about correcting that); they don't appreciate being reminded they are late after curfew; they don't appreciate being asked yet again to make their beds and put their things away. I'm sure I went through a phase where I was a difficult, crabby teenager, though I don't remember ever being so blatantly disrespectful; perhaps my memory is just selective. No matter, I wish I knew how to impart the value of correction to my kids because I usually feel like I'm doing a bad job at it. I wish I knew how to help them understand that it's not about the bed, the dishes, or the ten pairs of shoes lying about: it's about the attitude of serving and the heart behind it.

Someday they'll understand. Someday they'll see the value in having someone who cares for you remind you that you're human. Someday they'll appreciate having someone who loves them remind them when they've done wrong. They probably won't like being upbraided anymore than I do, but maybe someday they'll see the value in it.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 30 September 2010

The fear of the LORD teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honor. Proverbs 15, verse 33.

There's that word "fear" again. The ancient Israelites must have been a frightened people because they were always in some kind of danger, they were rarely satisfied, and they feared their God...except that they didn't just fear him in the sense of anxiety or trepidation. We've talked before about how the 'fear' mentioned in verses like this one is a respect form of fear. Knowing that lends a wholly different sense to the verse talking about respect and humility.

Anxious fear combined with humility equals humiliation. Respectful fear combined with humility becomes honor. Respect coupled with humility manifests itself in high regard. I think of the cavalier, the person who would humble himself before doing anything dishonorable. I think of a knight of old, who would serve in strong yet humble terms, submitting to the honor of someone over him. And I think of Christ, who became as humble and respectful as a man could become in order to uphold the honor of the Father.

(Pardon the pun) I think it's instructive that the verse mentions how respect for God teaches wisdom. The respect is part of wisdom, but it's also a way by which wisdom is taught. I hear it a lot that we have to give respect to get respect; that's very true, even when it comes from a teenager trying to throw it in your face. We do have to give respect to earn it; we DON'T have to give fear to earn it, and that's a healthy thing to remember too. But in order to give respect, we have to learn. Specifically, we have to learn the best ways to give respect in a way that's meaningful to the person we wish to respect. And, we have to learn how to do so in a way that builds up and isn't self-serving. Such a task should be done in deference and, yes, humility (more in a minute).

And what of that term 'honor?' It's one of which our generation has lost track. I have long cherished the ideal of honor, and I've long wanted to be the kind of man who could give honor to the woman he loves, bring honor on his family, and serve in honor those around him. All too often, however, I have fallen far short of those goals, instead bringing dishonor and hurt. If you use me as the standard by which to judge the generation, it's easy to see why we've lost sight of what honor truly is. It isn't face time, it isn't some gang concept, and it isn't coercive deference. It definitely won't be found in hip hop culture, on Jersey Shore, on the streets, or even in some churches. And yet, honor is still very much a sought-after thing in our world. We still look for honor in our relationships, our men and women in the service still very much understand the concept of honor, and we look to live our lives (for the most part) in terms of honor and honorability.

Then it's no coincidence how the verse says that humility comes before honor. To be honorable, one must first render honor. And to be honorable, or honored, one must be humble. God asks humility of us, and he asks us to honor him with what we think, say and do. He knows that a penitent heart is an honest heart, and that a humble person is one capable of giving great love. Perhaps a lack of humility is one of the reasons why our culture struggles with the concept of honor. I know I have, and I do.

These things were on my heart long before I opened the Proverbs today and looked at a topic on which to opine. Today starts my forty-fifth trip around the sun, and I think that respect, humility and honor are good words with which to start this next year. They are things with which I've struggled of late, and concepts that both convict and guide. I could do with developing some more respect for my God and my betters, and I could do with spending more time in humble penitence rather than boastful pride. And I would very much like to live a life with and in honor. Here's to hoping you can do the same.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 1 October 2010

To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the LORD comes the reply of the tongue. Proverbs 16, verse 1.

How many times have you wanted something that you just couldn't have? Ever wanted that new car? Hoped for the job? Dreamed of getting away? Fallen in love? How many times have you made plans in your heart only to find that they don't come to pass? Or, how many times have you thought about something, but when you go to talk about it, it just comes out wrong? Listen to Taylor Swift: this is a common occurrence.

To man belong the plans of the heart. We have free will. Plain and simple, we are free to think, plan, hope, wish, dream and desire what we choose. Not all of those things are positive; not all of them are healthy. Some are sinful, some are sinful wolves in sheep's clothing. Some are just fine. All are open to us. God made us with free will to plan what we will, then that equal will to do what we would dream.

Except that every now and then things don't go according to plan. In my experience, things RARELY go according to plan. More often than not, I think about things and plan out exactly what I want to say...then I mess it all up in the delivery. I even do my share of self-talking, and while all that preparation and rehearsal is helpful, very rarely do I get it 100% right. From the LORD comes the reply of the tongue because we should never forget: He has free will too.

And his free will trumps ours. It's a privilege of being God, that whole getting to set the rules thing. I truly believe God operates in both the strategy and tactics of our lives. He's the general planning the campaign across a wide theater, and he's the corporal moving from trench to trench. He's in the forest and the trees, the big picture and the not-so-big one too. I believe that, every now and then, when I say or do things it's because I've gotten a nudge from above. Every so often, things don't go quite according to my plans yet, more often than not, they go just fine. So fine, in fact, that I can't conceive of things having ever turned out differently.

I was telling someone just the other day that I have a bag full of dreams and now that I'm in middle age, I'm learning which dreams are good ones to work towards, which ones are just dreams, and which ones I need to give up. That last part is difficult for me to do because I've spent a lot of time in this life dreaming, planning for ways to be who I wanted to be, have the things I want, and love who I wanted to love. Invariably, God is in the details, and He searches my heart and nudges me along here and there, remembering my dreams but putting His plan for my life into motion. At the end of it, I'm learning that, to give up on one dream doesn't mean settling for less. To submit to God's leadership in my life is to accept a hand-up from the Almighty and a welcome into being so much more than I ever imagined I could be within the confines of my vivid, yet still limited, imagination.

And yet he still gives me the free will, the active imagination, and the heart of love to dream, wish, hope, and plan. I suppose He lets me scheme too, though I try to avoid such nefarious terms for such a wonderful gift. He does it out of love because he wants us to always come back to his love, to live in it, to bask in it, and to dream our dreams in it. Then he wants us to trust all of it to him and watch him work wonders in our lives.

Mexicans have a proverb of their own, one with which I agree: if you want to hear God laugh tell him your plans. I think that He has a lot of good, hearty belly laughs from mine, except I don't think His laughing mocks me. Instead, I think of God laughing at my plans, knowing he has something so much better in store. More than that, it's not just in store: it's in progress. I won't be giving up my planning, hoping and dreaming any time soon, and I promise that I'm gonna do my best to make the best of them come true for the people I love most. I don't believe God asks us to give up our dreams or our plans except where they conflict with His own. I rest assured in that promise that God will still make the words that come from my mouth, or the words that I type in this column, say what He thinks is best to advance the Kingdom he has prepared for all of us. That's something worth planning for.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 4 October 2010

Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and your plans will succeed. Proverbs 16, verse 3.

What more can you say about this? It basically says "God always blesses us when we involve Him in our lives." But notice a few things:

- It doesn't say "sacrifice." Commit, don't sacrifice: that's one of the favorite sayings of a good friend of mine. He was always telling us "commit, don't sacrifice," which was his way of saying "give me your best, and don't act like it's something you forced to give up!" I read the verse to mean something similar. God wants our best, our A-game, and He wants us to want to give him our best, not feeling obligated to do so. He wants us to appreciate, not depreciate, His gifts to us
- "Do" can mean any number of different things. It can mean actions we take. It can mean what we think, what we plan in our heads, to ourselves. It can mean our dreams and even just things we hope for. Whether it's a personal activity or the project of a hundred people, whatever we do succeeds when blessed from above.
- We're talking plans and they can be long or short range plans. It can be something you just thought up or something that's been on your heart since you were four. Something that was said in church was that our prayers of intercession should be constant, like a part of our daily conversation. For big things and small, we should involve God in all of our plans whether it's going to the grocery store or going to Africa.
- How do you define success? Is success getting what you want, or is it getting what you set to get? Is success the culmination of the plans, or is it something you didn't expect yet is still very much a blessing?
- And how do we commit? Does it entail a vow in front of a church? Or some kind of blood-brother initiation? If those work for you, go ahead! Maybe in some situations it's called for! Personally, I think we commit to the Lord through prayer, through earnest, honest, forthright prayer. It's just like making a promise you mean to keep with a family member or a close friend. We talk with Him about what it is we want.

Now, to put a different spin on it, try putting "don't" in front of "Commit" and how do you think the verse would read? If we don't commit things to God's involvement in our lives, is it a reasonable expectation that they will be successful? If we spurn the creator of the universe, should we think He will listen to us when we need him? We shouldn't, but we do, and He does.

This year, I've been at the center of some big plans: vacation plans, reunion plans, personal plans, plans made over a long time, plans made on the spur of the moment. They were plans of the heart and plans of expedience. I'll testify that where I committed them to God they went extremely well, and where I tried to hide from Him they didn't go very well. I've come to believe it's no coincidence when that happens. It isn't that God sets out to foil our plans where we don't involve him; He isn't some petulant adolescent and He doesn't hold grudges. Instead, I think it's the natural order of things: a perfect order frustrated by the stain of wrongdoing that flies contrary to the perfection of love that is our God. It's that stain of wrongdoing, the stain of sin, that makes the good plans go awry. When I try to wrap my plans in that, they just don't go well.

And yet...

...And yet, even in that, even in the times when I don't commit to the Lord whatever I do, He still manages to turn it around and bring good out of it. Think about that one for a minute and even the most skeptical, bah-humbag Scrooge among us has to admit that some force in the universe almost always manages to buy good out of bad. It's no mystical force of gravity: it's God. It never fails to amaze me that, no matter how I muck things up, God turns them around and makes the best of them. Think back on your own life and I'm betting it's mostly true for you too.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 5 October 2010

The LORD works out everything for his own ends – even the wicked for a day of disaster. Proverbs 16, verse 4.

Think back to a verse from a short while ago and I mentioned “God must be punishing me.” Here’s yet another example of how that must be true, right? If God works out everything for what He wants, surely He must be doing so to mete out punishment to those who deserve it! And knowing that, He must surely WANT to punish us! After all, if I were God, that’s what I’d want to do to dirty dog sinners like me!

Oh the things we could discuss from that little rant! Thank God I’m not God, and thank God for his never-ending mercy, even when discussing logical rhetoric. And that line about him meting out punishment for deserving people? WHATEVER! If we deserve it so much then we acknowledge it so, by God, let’s do something about it and stop whining! This is the point where I envision God to be sitting back, laughing, saying “I love you, guy, but you aint seen nothin yet!”

What goes around, goes around, goes around comes all the way back around; Justin Timberlake sang that (in a song that’s particularly good to listen to at the gym when doing pull-up’s on a Tuesday morning). I think that’s also another colloquial way of saying what the verse is saying. What goes around comes around BECAUSE everything starts and ends with God. Subscribe to the account of creation and it all starts with God hanging out and speaking everything into existence; subscribe to the theory of evolution and you can account for everything except those pesky forces called ‘gravity’ and ‘life.’ For them, you need something outside, a.k.a. “God.”

Therefore, since it all starts with an omnipotent God, isn’t it logical to assume that it’ll all end with Him too? In-between then and now, the LORD works out everything for his own ends. As I mentioned yesterday, he’s in every stage of my plans, turning wrong to right, making the best out of the best and the best out of the worst. I choose to think that, if God can indeed make the best of things, then Him working out everything for his own ends means that He’s going to do it for the best of ends. Even if I’m only along for the ride on some things, it’s a good ride and I’m safe in believing it’ll all turn out alright when it’s over.

I’m no Pollyanna and I’m not spouting platitudes. I really am the chief of sinners and if you knew half the things I’ve thought, said or done in this life you’d be shocked. There have been times when I’ve felt that I was indeed the wicked man living out the day of disaster because the consequences of my actions were too much for my soul to bear. Often, I reaped the wrongs I had sown and shouldn’t have been surprised when more wrong came on me because of it. It was as if I felt God’s hand against me, disbursing punishment on me for the vows I’d broken, the wrongs I had done, and the people I’d hurt. We may think of hell as an eternity of fiery physical agony. I prefer to think of it as an eternity of God’s hand against me, specifically his grace withdrawn from my life.

In those dark hours, I took comfort (as I do now) in knowing that He was still in control. The LORD, God, the creator, Christ almighty, the great Three-in-One himself is still very much in control of everything that’s going on. I stubbornly slip and fall, but He’s always there to pick me up, show me my errors, and bid me to do better in trying again. It’s like he has set the chess board with moves for both of us to win, and he’s sitting back to say to me “your move now.” The more I live the more I believe he isn’t disinterested in our lives, but is truly in the details, both here in this room while I type these words and there in yours while you read them. He’s over the forest and beside each of the trees, and he makes both grow for his own ends. Remembering he does so for good means to me that He is all good, and that my life is good for having Him in it. Remembering how he uses even imperfect men like you and I to do things that contribute to His perfect plans reminds me that even pitiful me was bought back for a purpose much greater than pity.

I’m not God and I never will be. I can only juggle a few balls while He can juggle a whole ball-pit full of them. The bad times in my life never last, and while they do indeed seem bad when they’re happening, they aren’t punishment. Often they’re consequences of decisions or actions I’ve made; even when that isn’t the case, I don’t need to say ‘woe is me’ and get all dramatic. Instead, I need to step back and remember that God is still in control, working in my life for His own ends of love, life, and eternity. He has those in mind for all who would simply listen and believe in Him. Doing so avoids that personal day of disaster; doing so is the only real means to an end.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 6 October 2010

The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished. Proverbs 16, verse 5.

Now and then we've talked about pride here. Pride of itself can be a healthy thing. It is a foundation of dignity, and plays deeply in our self-respect, in the respect we have for others, and in our work ethic. Pride in our families, pride in our country, pride in our job, pride in our homes: all can be expressions of love, even selfless love.

That isn't what this verse is talking about.

You know where it's going, don't you? You figured it out from the moment you finished reading the first line. This is talking about those who let their stubborn pride overtake that love. This verse is talking about people who replace selflessness with pride. On the surface, it may seem innocuous when I think about people I've known. There's the stubborn man who is bound and determined to do things his way no matter whether it's the right way or not. And there's the teenager who has a similar stubborn streak, a streak of "my way" determination that would set a mule to shame. Or there's the woman who stubbornly refuses to compromise on letting her kids be themselves, hovering over them like a helicopter in trying to exert her control. I know people who are stubbornly devoted Christians yet are unyielding in how they view people who practice that Christianity in ways different from themselves, insisting the others are akin to apostates. And there's the man I see in the mirror who looks back at me knowing he, himself, has done many of those same things.

God detests that. It doesn't unnerve him. It doesn't just upset him. He doesn't mildly dislike it. He detests it. Strong word, detest, don't you think? That word, 'stubborn,' is the key, to why God would detest it. Stubbornness is, I think, pride taken to an unhealthy level. Stubbornness, when taken to an extreme, is just a flavor of selfishness. It's a way to project "me first" and "I know better" to a world that may offer a different point of view. It's a state of the heart manifested in an outlook and our actions. That's what God detests, when we push Him and everything He is out of our lives and replace them with the self. Adam & Eve found that out, and their original sin was nothing more than a way of saying "no." God knew it even then, though, that they would try to replace Him with themselves; it's really a subtle form of idolatry. I think that's what stubborn pride represents to me: a subtle form of idolatry. It puts personal pride above submitting to the one of whom we should be rightfully proud. It's me first.

And yet...the men at Valley Forge, the Alamo, and the Battle of the Bulge were stubborn. The single mother determined to survive and give her kids a better life is stubborn. The struggling church that refuses to go under because it believes there are better days ahead is stubborn. The man and woman working so hard to preserve their marriage are stubborn. Those are undeniably good things; are they all destined for punishment? Perhaps, or perhaps not. I don't know what punishment God has in store for wrongdoing; that's for Him to decide. I tend to think that we get much of our punishment here in this life as the negative consequences for our negative actions. We have to remember, though, that any kind of punishment given here is also instructive, designed to teach us to give up foolish ways and return to what we know to be right.

Stubbornness and pride are not vices when they are given in submission to the higher ideals of God's wisdom, love and commitment. They aren't destructive, and to me they represent a heart of giving and selflessness. The attitudes of the redneck, the teenager, the woman, and the churches I mentioned (as well as my own), well, if that attitude is selfless then maybe a gut check is in order. When the world around me closes in and threatens what I hold most dear, when the challenges of getting by every day are difficult at best, and when I'm presented with tasks or opportunities, stubborn pride can be a healthy thing that will let me bring out my personal best. It can help me to resolve to not give in to lesser things, or to resist temptations I should avoid, and it can boost my sometimes lagging self-esteem. The trick, I find, is in not letting it get the best of me and turn me into an arrogant cuss

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 7 October 2010

Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for; through the fear of the LORD a man avoids evil. Proverbs 16, verse 6.

I guess I haven't feared the LORD enough. I guess I haven't respected God enough. I know I haven't avoided evil, therefore I also haven't loved God enough. What's more, I definitely haven't demonstrated my faithfulness therefore God surely can't love me in return.

Lots of "I haven't's" in that rant, you know. Perhaps that's the root of the problem? Sin is a subtle thing. Sure, a Stalin comes along and slaughters 30 million Soviets and we can all easily see that's sin. Those loons from Westboro Baptist twist Christianity with their disgusting protests and we can easily see that it's a sinful perversion of both a right and a saving faith. And when you finish the liaison, you realize that, yes, adultery is a glaring and painful sin with grave consequences. Again, easy to see.

The sneaky part of it is that sin is more subtle than that, and it sneaks into our lives when & where we're vulnerable. It hits us in our weak spots (because the Devil is a good boxer, a common-sense adversary and an undeniable coward). It exploits us where we're easily exploited. It starts with the flirt, the off-hand remark, the anger flare, the white lie. Even before that, it starts with the thought of "but..." or "no" when those thoughts aren't the best solution at the time.

And those thoughts are, I believe, behind all those "I haven't's" that I listed above. Those things are all about me, not about serving, not about others, not about God. They're self-serving and self-focused in ways that try to deflect blame. They try turn around the simple acknowledgement of my sins into some Alfred E. Neumann version of saying it's not my fault.

Here's where the good news comes in; it's really what puts the Gospel into action: we don't have to take it.

We don't have to take the emotional consequences of our wrongdoings any more. We don't have to take the evil in our lives. We don't even have to take all the physical consequences because we can avoid those subtle lures of evil with respect, faith and love for and in God. There is real peace in being able to turn away evil, to turn from wrong, to deflect the powerful attacks of the deceiver. It's peace and it is also a pump-you-up-like-Ted-Nugent-rockin-the-house kind of adrenaline to know that the King of Kings has your six. We don't have to take the punishment that God has in store for the unrepentant proud because He already took it for us.

Wanna know the catch? It isn't easy. It really isn't easy. You'd think that falling in love with God would be easy. After all, we fall in love with other people quite easily. You'd think that having faith in His always true promises would be a piece of cake. You'd think that avoiding the pitfalls that lead to our doing evil would be easy since we learn our lessons every day; get burned so you don't touch the burner, right? Your thinking would be wrong; I know mine sways from time to time. It's tough to remember God's promises and his love when, in His patience, he lets us do so many things contrary to them. It's even tougher to live in a way that glorifies them when we're knee deep in a world full of muck and temptations.

I'm right in there with you!

It really isn't easy. Admitting our wrongdoings is tough. So is admitting our shortfalls, our weaknesses, and our need for someone to help us. I really haven't done enough at keeping my end up in how God himself implored each of us to be perfect, to love fully, and to submit to Him fully. That's why He gave us faith and love: so we could believe in the fact that He made it right for us where we couldn't. Respecting that fact and living through that love makes deflecting the evils possible. I can't do it alone and succeed. With Him, I won't fail.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 8 October 2010

When a man's ways are pleasing to the LORD, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him. Proverbs 16, verse 7.

Once upon a time there was a man who tried to do his best in the things he did in life. He tried to be a good partner, he tried to be a good father. He tried to be a good worker, friend, brother. He tried his best at all these things over and over. In truth, he really was good at some of them, all of them in fact at various times. In truth, he wasn't good at everything, and in some things he outright failed even when he gave it his all. Yet he wasn't pleased with himself and kept trying again and again to find out why. Why couldn't he let himself be satisfied? Why couldn't he let himself be pleased with who he was, what he'd been blessed with, who he'd made himself to be? He wanted to do the right thing, he wanted to always do his best and be his best for the people around him, and he wanted to succeed.

Yet he admitted that he didn't always have the proper focus. Turns out there were things he'd done in life of which he wasn't proud. He hadn't fully cherished the people he loved most, and he had hurt them with things he had done and said. When he tried to make amends, it didn't always work out well. When he gave his heart, it didn't turn out the way he expected. When he thought he was doing things that were pleasing to others, even pleasing to God, it didn't turn out that way either and he felt beaten down. When it came time to make important decisions, he felt paralyzed and hopeless. And he forgot to let happiness happen. It was hard to put off the past and to leave it behind and do better going forward.

Try, try again. And then there's the Yoda spin on it which says, "No try. Do." Where is God in each of those? Answer: yes. He's in both, and outside them too. I'm great at trying, even great at doing, yet I'm not very good at trying & doing with the right focus. Another quote said, "you can't please everyone so you got to please yourself." Ricky Nelson sang that years after singing hello to Mary Lou, during the years when he was trying to search for a new identity. I think Ricky was onto something yet way off base as well. Indeed we can't please everyone so we should try to do our best, yet if that's the only end goal in all our living then we are hopeless and hollow. This I know too well.

I admit it: I envy those who live lives that are pleasing to God. It's not the unhealthy coveting brand of envy; it doesn't keep me up all night either in jealousy or unrelenting remorse. I don't obsess over not pleasing God in all I think, say or do, and yet it very much concerns me too. A recent set of Bible studies we've been doing focuses on how worry is a distraction from our relationship with God; that worry is a subtle sin of its own, a me-first focus in a small but important way. I don't spend all day worrying about how the things I've done aren't pleasing to God; maybe I should. I envy those who live lives that are pleasing to the LORD because I would like to know how they do it so I can do it myself and teach it to others. I do let myself worry about this; maybe I should worry a little more?

You see, I'm just as much the man in the once-upon-a-time story as you are. I can't speak for what you've done – or not done – but I'm guilty of some ugly, heinous things in this life. Cursing, violence, adultery, lying, cheating, hatred, deceit, lust, distrusting, lack of faith, envy, slander, lewd behavior, obsession, unforgiving, grudges, addiction, greed, malice, guilt, not letting go, even murder in my heart: I'm guilty of all these and some more than once. I try, try again and yet often I fail. And I know I can't please everyone – heck, I gave up trying that a long time ago – but I know I'm unfulfilled when I focus on pleasing just myself. Couple that with all those ugly sins I just mentioned and I find it awful hard to believe I'm living in a way that's pleasing to the LORD.

And I would like to change that. I'd like to put His considerations first in my life. It's a daily process of contrition and redemption, of practicing to make perfect. Right now, I'm up against a life-changing decision and I'm trying to make that decision with the best information possible while doing what I believe is best for those around me. It's easy to see that now because it's a big thing, yet I lose sight of the fact that EVERY decision we make is a life-changing decision. The only way to 'get them right' is to involve God in them all the time whether they're big or small. God got right with me at the Cross and he reminds me of it through verses like this one. Now I need to open up and let Him work it in me.

I would like to live the kind of upright life that could be commended even by those who oppose me. You can't be me without living a life where you step on some toes, and I haven't gone through all these decades without making some enemies. I would like to live in such a way that they could look at my life and say to themselves, "what that Terry does must be pleasing to God. I'd like to know how to do that." Once upon a time I tried every day to do my best, but life is no fairy tale. In living it up and living it out, I continue to do that, continue to try and to do my best in whatever I do. I don't always succeed, and sometimes it really, truly hurts. Sometimes I make terrible mistakes. That's when I'll do well to remember that God wants to be involved in everything I do and that He's always willing to help me try again if only I open my heart to him.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 9 October 2010

Better a little with righteousness, than much gain with injustice. Proverbs 16, verse 8.

Proverb or platitude, this is good advice. Sometimes, when I've acted in ways that are unjust, or I've gotten things in unjust ways, I look at myself in the mirror and can't look back. Guilt is a terrible thing to live with, and I think it's a manifestation of having gained much via injustice. I have done enough terrible things in life to have piled on guilt that's tough to swallow. When you're knee deep in the elusive joy of reveling in your sins, it's tough to see past them and understand that, in reality, you're gaining through injustice.

And yet, I can't say with certainty that I've been very righteous either, and there are times when I look around at what I have and am ashamed for the way I've treated it. Sure, I could be talking about the things I own, my home, cars, possessions, etc. I wish they were in better shape and newer. No, the real object of my shame is the people in my life. I'm ashamed to squander friendship and love, and I'm ashamed to have shamed the people I love most in ways large and small. God put wonderful people in my life and I've treated them shabbily. Yes, I know I've also done good things as well, but when you're contemplating the other side of the coin for the good of seeing how truly wonderful people are to you, it's not a bad thing to stay on the other side for just a few minutes. I regret having brought hardship, shame, anxiety, fighting, worry and discord on the people I love most, and when I contemplate this I feel anything with righteous.

Thank God He has a different perspective on things. Thank God He washes all that away through the blood He didn't have to shed for despicable me. Thank God he lets me see that I've been blessed whether with a little or with a lot. Thank God I can say better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 11 October 2010

In his heart a man plans his course but the LORD determines his steps. Proverbs 16, verse 9.

This is one of those “God really is in control” verses, don’t you think? That’s a saying we talk a lot about, especially when times are tough like they are now. “God is in control” we say as a way to make ourselves feel better. Maybe it’s a psychological salve, something we tell ourselves to delude ourselves into thinking that we aren’t responsible for the small wrongs or inactions we do (or don’t do) that put us into our daily calamities. Or maybe it’s something we say to make others feel better so that we don’t feel so bad ourselves. And maybe it’s something we say to simply pass the buck; see ‘maybe’ number one.

Or, maybe it’s actually true! When we’re trying to find our ‘me-first’ justifications for all these crazy things we do, I think we lose sight of the simple fact that God really is in control. He’s in control of the trees that sprout in the ample forests. He’s in control in the sick rooms of Africa. He’s in control when couples argue, and he’s in control when they kiss and make. And God is in control of thermonuclear fusion, traffic accidents, first grade math class, the butterflies you get in your stomach over presentation you have to give, doing the dishes tonight, when the dryer breaks down, grass growing in the park, construction supply lines, and the old man sitting on his front porch having a cup of coffee.

We really are me-first-driven. That was the subject of our sermon yesterday, how lust for anything (not just sex) drives so much of our motivations. I believe that lust goes hand in hand with its step-sister pride, feeding our ‘me-first, it IS about me’ attitude. We make our plans and we forget the simple, universal truth that the LORD still determines our steps. Remember that Mexican proverb: if you want to hear God laugh tell Him your plans. It too is true, and it leads me to believe even more that God does indeed have a great sense of humor.

Hand in hand with that are some other simple truths to keep in mind, though. One, God doesn’t plan our steps because he is the eternal control freak. If you really love your kids and give them the freedom to make bad decisions, you’ll understand this one. Wisdom and love aren’t freakish, and the control they impart is self-control. God plants them in our hearts because He loves us as independent, loving people free who love Him because we choose to, not because we’re compelled.

Another thing to remember is that not all plans are bad, and that it’s not a sinful thing to want to make them. Indeed, going all the way back to the beginning of time, He gave us free will and a world in which to exercise it. It’s a wise thing to plan out projects to improve your lot. It’s a wise thing to consult God’s directions when planning out decisions or those same projects. And it’s a reflection of love to live out our lives in accordance with plans well made and founded well in the wise love of He who loves us because He too chooses to do so.

Yet another thing that goes hand in hand with this is remembering that God isn’t a selfish get-out-of-jail-free card for us. When He determines our steps, He does so at a very fundamental level. He does it in ways that reflect our innermost beings. He wants our hearts, not just our attitudes, and He works with us at the core. If we selfishly think “I can do what I want and God will forgive me” then we delude ourselves. While God is always patient with those who struggle in repentance, even that massive patience would reach its end with people basely determined to freely choose the opposite of contrition.

Finally, I think it’s healthy to remember that our lives are a dance. God plays music for our hearts. In His wisdom and love, the plan He makes for our lives, the way He determines our steps, plays out like notes on a sheet of music. They flow together, they make a beautiful melody, and that melody we live can be in a choir of harmony with the music playing from the billions of other lives here on this third rock from the sun. We dance together, sometimes in pairs, sometimes in

a line, sometimes in a great big mosh pit, but dance we do. He plays the music, He spins the tunes, and He dances on the floor with us both as lead and as partner.

I used to be intimidated by this Godly concept of Him defining my life. I thought it somehow cheated me out of my choices, and that it would foil all my hopes and dreams. In truth, I still struggle with that from time to time, feeling God guiding me in one direction while the things for which I hope and plan pull me in another. Perhaps that's a feeling with which we all struggle, but it's a healthy struggle, you know. And, yes, I'm still intimidated by God, but now more out of respect and love than fear. From time to time, He reminds me that His control is self-control of my heart. He whispers in my ear and speaks to my heart "Come walk with me," and I find that His path is always lit with knowing, understanding, challenge, and love.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 12 October 2010

The lips of a king speak as an oracle, and his mouth should not betray justice. Proverbs 16, verse 10.

When I read this verse, I think about our leaders and I think about my own role as a leader. Yesterday was parent-teacher conference day, and I got to go visit my teenage son's high school teachers. Son has always been a difficult though diligent student, and there isn't a malicious bone in his body even though he's a brawny, muscled tough guy. All of his teachers said he could improve academically; all of them liked him a lot. One of them practically fawned over him, giving compliments about his attitude and his demeanor.

Then I read today's verse, and I think that my son has followed good leadership in his life. I'll brag: some of it has been mine. I haven't always been a patient or even affectionate father, but I've tried my best, especially of late, to be an understanding and listening dad. I've watched my Ps and Qs, and I've tried hard to raise my voice only when it was absolutely necessary. Just the other day we had a big argument over mopping the stupid floor (he hadn't done so after cooking all day), and at the end of it I felt about 2 inches tall. I forgot that I'm the king in his world, and I should speak as an oracle, divining truth and wisdom to him, and that all I say and do should be just. Little transgressions like not mopping the floor when you mess it up should be kept in their proper context.

I think, though, that most of the leadership he models has been from elsewhere. His mother; his sisters; other family; teachers; coaches; other parents; other kids. He's learning to be a leader and a reliable, solid young man by modeling what he sees and hears others do. You might remember my proud proverbial on him several months ago, the one about his service on the Indian reservation this summer. He learned leadership by learning followership; how to speak by listening; how to love by serving. He's learning how to be a man one teachable minute at a time. Personally, I think he's doing just fine.

Most leaders I know are just men and women. All the hope & change you want isn't going to make the man on the podium more than just another Joe Blow trying to muddle his way through a job for which he is little prepared. All the education in the world won't necessarily make a learned professor into a wise man. All the prayer in the world won't make a sinner clean...though some faith in a redemptive savior will. And all the words I can type here or in any book I write may not be wise words for people to take to heart.

I'm not a king. I'm not a president nor am I presidential timber. Most times, I'm not even much of a leader. I am a father, though, and I work hard every day to take verses like this one to my own heart; to remember them in what I say and do so that my son and his sisters especially will learn lessons that will always serve them well. It means that everything I say and do is a lesson for them. The good and bad, the way I comport myself, my mannerisms, my beliefs, whether I stand up for the little guy or let myself get steamrolled by others: every moment is a learning moment and every action a teachable one. That's a pretty heady responsibility...

...but I'm not in it alone. I have the love of others. I have family and friends. I have each of you and these words. I'm blessed to be part of a church that, for the most part, tries its best to live out what it preaches. And I'm a friend of God. I slip, stumble, and screw up, I'm human. Through it, though, I too am learning and being led. And through that, I'm leading the best I can so that the future leaders behind me can pick up the torch and carry it forward when I'm gone.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 14 October 2010

Honest scales and balances are from the LORD; all the weights in the bag are of his making. Proverbs 16, verse 11.

"It's not fair." Ever hear that from your kids? Ever say that? My kids throw it at me, usually when confronted with a chore they don't want to do during Teen Mom or Sons of Anarchy. "It's not fair that I have to do the dishes when X didn't do them yesterday!" "It's not fair that I don't get paid to scoop the catbox!" "It's not fair I can't go to the mall tonight!" "It's not fair"...you get the picture.

Who am I to judge fair or unfair when honest measurements are a thing of God? Practically speaking, the verse talks about weights and measures. In a barter economy such as that of the late Bronze Age, weights and scales would have been important. Other than gold, without money, how else could you estimate the worth of something? What could that possibly mean to us today (even though so much of the world still honestly lives in times just removed from the Bronze Age)?

Well, is it really much of a stretch to construe the meaning of this verse to go beyond weights and measures? Is it much of a stretch to read the verse to be talking also about how God measures our hearts?

We judge and are judged daily. It's a fact. I do it and so do you. I always get a chuckle out of people who say they don't judge because, if that were true, they'd be walking around naked and alone (and some people, well, I don't want to see naked, ya know?). We constantly make judgments in what we think and do, and some of those aren't bad. It's a right and proper (and Godly) thing to judge the character of each other by our actions, then adjust our own behavior accordingly. To self-preserve and build up others based on those judgments is a proper and Godly thing to do; to judge and lord over others is wicked.

And if we do judge honestly, we are using the scales and balances given to us by God. Truth, morality, love, wisdom, honesty, virtue: all these are measuring standards instituted by God for our use in living our lives. We use them by living by them, and we live by them by using them in how we interact with each other. Like it or not, that whole 'living by them' thing involves judging. I don't need to punish you to judge your sins to be wrong; you don't need to punish me to know that things I've done are wrong too. But it's a proper thing for us to observe, know, and love each other by applying God's tools into our lives. We do that by judging.

God doesn't judge fairly either. He always judges on the side of honesty, holiness, wisdom and love. He's never expedient, and he's never into half-measures. God doesn't compromise on those things, he doesn't water them down to save feelings or build up self-esteem. He uses them with us, in love and partiality. I believe God isn't impartial with us. He is fully biased in our favor, loving us unconditionally while, at the same time, upholding the perfection of his love, holiness, honesty, and wisdom. It's something we ourselves haven't done, and maybe can only emulate. Yet emulate we do, and we model our lives after His example, doing our best to live up to His standards using those weights and standard balances He gave to us.

In other words, we judge ourselves and each other against them. And that's the fairest thing we can do.

In my judgment, that's a good thing. Some day, I want out of this beautiful, wondrous, dynamic, challenging, and thoroughly sinful world. Just the other day, someone and I were talking about heaven and I remarked that I want to go there but not just yet. To me, that isn't a sinful thought, and it wasn't intended as such. I'm still wrapped up in this world (with all those adjectives to describe it) and I'm still in the process of loving and learning here. There are things I still want to do, goals to attain and services to give. And family, friends, and people to love. I am still on the path of learning how to be more like God by judging myself against His standards; how often I find myself irrevocably lacking. Yet try again I do, and judge my thoughts, words and actions (and yours) against His weights and measures I do, and will. It isn't always 'fair' but fair is, I believe, an overused and undervalued word. I'll stick with wise because that, too, is a good thing.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 16 October 2010

Kings detest wrongdoing, for a throne is established through righteousness. Proverbs 16, verse 12.

Boy, good thing I'm not a king, eh? I mean, my laundry list of wrongdoings is longer than most. Or so I believe. You've read about some of my indiscretions and I don't really feel like airing any more of them today. I'm in a down mood anyway and I don't feel especially inclined to air more of my sins here today. It's dull reading, it isn't necessary, and at some point someone is going to say "just deal with it already will ya!"

So I'll leave it at saying it's a good thing I'm not a king. Kinda gets me off the hook, you know, for that whole detesting wrongdoing part. I doubt I'll ever be rich and famous, so I doubt I'll ever really be in the limelight (though I do confess and affection for the feel of said glow upon one's skin). I'm just another nobody, just another guy from the middle of nowhere and I seriously doubt I'll ever be mayor, Congressman or president. That's a good thing because I don't want to see the lives of good people dragged through the mud on my account.

It does have me thinking, though, that even though I'm not a king, is it okay if I detest it too? I mean, this one really ought to be simple, shouldn't it? The obvious answer should be "of course!" but is it? Christ forgives us our sins, all of them. Even the most insecure and rebellious of us is forgiven of all sin, all wrongdoing, all error from the deliberate to the things we don't even remember. Every wrongdoing is forgiven because, as the ultimate king, He detests all wrongdoing and did everything possible to remove it from His kingdom.

The consequences, though, well, those are another matter. Those He leaves with us to deal with as we will. He doesn't do it out of malice but, instead, to teach us and others how to live our lives using the words, tools and examples He left behind. Knowing that, who among us could not detest wrongdoing? Who of us, myself included, could help but to hate the evils we keep on doing?

And yet we do them. We keep on doing them. We don't seem to learn and we don't seem to change. We keep on making the same mistakes over and over again whether it's out of love or out of real malice. So I ask, again: is it ok if we detest the wrongdoings too? I think we really do. I actually think that most people really do, and that most people want to improve, to do better because lives (like thrones) are established as solid through righteousness.

So what are you prepared to do? That's one of my favorite movie lines, you know. It's from "The Untouchables." Sean Connery confronts Eliot Ness about all the corruption and crime around him and pushes him to the limit asking "what are you prepared to do?" It's a good lesson for each of us, I think. Me included. If we detest these damn wrongdoings, our sins and our imperfections, so much, just what are we prepared to do about them? Are we prepared to stand up and be counted? Are we prepared to make changes in our lives? Are we prepared to cast aside things that are poisoning us and others and move forward? Are we prepared to endure all the hurt that will happen when people push back, or the world closes in? What are you, what are we, prepared to do?

God was prepared to watch his only Son, his real life and lifeblood, be murdered for a bunch of filthy malcontents to live forever. He was prepared to remove Himself completely from Christ's life so He could endure hell on earth that we wouldn't have to endure it forever. Are you and I prepared to do what we can do to truly detest wrongdoing, learn from it, and move forward?

I'm the worst of hypocrites. I've said, done, and thought things that are despicable. I pay the penalty for them in the consequences of them every day, and yet the spiritual, even the emotional, toll for them has been paid in full for me. I owe no further debt for my wrongs. Believe in it and neither do you. And yet I'm still a wrongdoer and, when writing these things, a hypocrite. Time to stand up, then, and be prepared for battle.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 18 October 2010

Kings take pleasure in honest lips; they value a man who speaks the truth. Proverbs 16, verse 13

This verse is true. Mixed in the middle of the book of Proverbs are all these verses about what kings like and what kings want and do. On first read, I thought they were odd & out of place. Reading them in total, however, I think they fit perfectly, and it's what I needed to read – and confess – this Monday.

I am a liar. I'm nothing but a damn, dirty liar. I have lied to family and friends; I have lied to strangers. I'm Bill Clinton, Harold Hill, Jim Carrey and Don Draper all wrapped up in one real-life middle classed package. I have lied about things large and small. I've lied about love, about home, about work, politics, income, smoking, drinking, hope, change, confidence, knowledge, faith and being the kind of person I would want to be. I make promises I can't keep, share things I shouldn't, and I even say things to make other people feel better whether they're true or not. I have lied for petty gain, for gainful advantage, and for the advantage that position gives me, and it has all left me hollow inside. White lies or big fat bold whoppers: they're mine because I'm a damn liar. I'm blood-scarlet red with the color of my lies.

What's worse, I'm not who I seem to be. I am the king of deceit, wearing a face I want you to see so that you think I'm all together and great at what I do. Inside, I'm full of rot, rotten with deceit from my core on out. I'm a master of deception, putting on my game face like cheap actor's makeup. I smile and you'd never know my smile was false. When people ask me how I'm doing, I lie and say "I'm fine" or "I'll get through" when inside my heart is breaking. I live a hidden life and only a very few people have ever broken through to see me for who I really am. Some have run away repulsed; only a very few stayed to try to help set things right.

I get comments about these columns that are thankful. People say some of the nicest things to me about them, and some praise the writing and what I say. And they may not know it but the people who give such wonderful feedback are praising a liar. My lies, my conduct, would disappoint the people who put their faith in me, and I would be eternally embarrassed (and maybe punished on my own) to stand in front of my parents or grandparents and listen to the litany of lies I've told in this life. I can't imagine what God must think. No king could take pleasure in what I say, and I wouldn't be the kind of man any king – or maybe any of you – would value.

No king except the King of Kings, that is. I keep reading what I know is true, about how He cares and washes all that away, and I know in my heart it is indeed true. I accept it and confess it as truth, and that's no lie. What is a lie is the life I lead around it because all those things I should be doing – being moral, being upright, practicing what I preach, being honest – those things I still fail to do. Sure, the Apostle Paul struggled with those, about doing the evil he no longer wanted to do, but, you know, I'm not the Apostle Paul. I'm just some average guy in the middle of nowhere who is consciously aware that I'm nothing but a dirty dog liar.

How about you?

I don't want to be this way, and I know the way to change leads me again to the Cross. I know it's going to hurt a lot. This isn't the life I was meant to live. I wasn't meant to be the master of deception: I was meant for something better; I was designed for something better. I want to be better, especially in the middle of depression and a whole slew of coming changes that could really be blessings in disguise. I want to live in the truth, and that's no lie.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 19 October 2010

A king's wrath is a messenger of death, but a wise man will appease it. Proverbs 16, verse 14.

If this isn't a warning about the power of leadership, then there isn't one.

There's our government. What about government? It seems pretty obvious, don't you think, that this is a reminder about the power of government. Should we kow-tow to the president, blindly following wherever he (or soon she) will lead? Should we accept whatever the government dictates as being divinely ordained because, after all, God himself instituted the practice of kingship? How do we appease the wrath of the government? I would think that simply obeying the law is the best way to appease the wrath of the government...unless such laws are unjust or deprive liberty. Then I believe it is the citizen's right – and in our system of government, duty – to institute change through the ballot box, through protest, and through the constructive means available to us, guaranteed by our Constitution. The 'king' only has power delegated to him and, if he abuses it, then we keep him in check by checking that power. If we aren't responsible and careful, that power can become dreadful and difficult to check.

There are our managers. It's not really so different. They are authorities put in charge over us. Like kings and presidents, some are good and talented, some are not. In my experience, the best managers are those who lead loosely, allowing me the latitude to do my job while keeping me within the confines of rules and policy. Sometimes a manager must be directive; most times subtlety is the order of the day. Heaven help me if I ever crossed my NCOIC in the software shop for which I worked in the Air Force. He could be a taskmaster and brutal, yet the flip side of his style was that he was also intensely loyal and intensely focused on doing & being the best for all his people. That can be very inspiring. To appease him, all of us who worked under him learned to bring our A-game all the time because that's what he did for us.

There are our parents. My running song this morning was "The Night I Called the Old Man Out." Garth Brooks. It's a song about a son who confronts his father and the two end up in a fight. "Son this is gonna hurt me more than it hurts you but somehow I just couldn't help but doubt." My dad wasn't that type of man, and neither am I (though my son does keep insisting in his teenage bravado that he could take me down...little does he know that I simply tolerate his boasts ☺). I know men who are, though, and some are just; some are just overgrown bullies. All are parents, though, and as divinely-instituted practical mentors for our kids, we are given both position and wrath to dispense for the good of the children. It's not to abuse or control or assuage our insecurities: it's to bring them up in ways that will serve God and others in the greater Kingdom and build them into upright, productive citizens. My dad may not have been a tough guy, but I still knew there were lines I shouldn't cross, so I rarely did so and only when I knew there was a terrible point to be made.

There are leaders in every group. Some people are natural, some are appointed, some walk into it by chance. All are the people to whom we gravitate and submit our actions. With position comes authority, and with authority comes direction. Sometimes direction means wrath. When leaders have the interests of the mission or the group at heart, their focus is to do what they believe to be best for that. Sure, this is idealistic but so are most lessons worth learning. Sometimes a leader has to whip people into shape to get the best out of them; I think of basic training, or the Bruce Tuckman dynamics of forming, storming, norming and performing. For those to be effective, leaders must lead and, yes, sometimes that means wrath until the team performs in a manner that prevents, or appeases, that wrath from being displayed.

This morning, I was reading from the book of Amos, chapter 4. Through Amos, God the ultimate king talked about how his people had strayed time and again, incurring His wrath. He mentioned all the things he had done to rebuke and correct their behavior, all the severe trials he had let come on them: all to teach them to come back to Him in everything. God let loose his wrath on his chosen people – and on us as well – out of agape love because He wanted to help and hold them. I have been both leader and follower, and I'll continue to do both of those things throughout the rest of my life. Going forward, I'll work to remember that humble service appeases the wrath of those above and need not be given with the heart of a beaten slave.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 20 October 2010

When a king's face brightens, it means life; his favor is like a rain cloud in spring. Proverbs 16, verse 15.

There are many ways you can read this last Proverbs 16 verse about the characteristics of kings.

Take the positive angle first: when authorities are happy, they bless others. "Ain't nobody happy if momma ain't happy." If Momma is the authority in your house, you get this one. My family has often told me that my grumpy, angry moods put them in the same mood, and it's true. Just ask them: kids will tell you the truth in brutally honest ways. When authorities over us are pleased, they deal well with those under them. It's much easier to bring bad news to your boss when they're happy than when they're already in a foul mood. It's much more pleasant to talk with mom or dad when mom or dad are pleased than when they're on your case. It means life: abundance, blessing, refreshment, replenishment, and maybe even that life itself. Consider Abraham Lincoln, care-worn with the worries of preserving a nation torn in two, who when given most opportunities, took the time to quickly pardon the executions of soldiers sentenced justly and unjustly alike.

Then there's another read: when authorities are pleased, peoples' lives are improved. There's that whole bit about with authority comes power. When the authorities are pleased, they are more likely to exercise that power constructively. When there is displeasure, watch out. Does this mean that we, as people under authority, are just supposed to blindly serve without interest for ourselves? Of course not. But, by and large, when the boss is happy, people around them benefit from it. It's the logical next step of that concept of Momma being happy. Happy ruler? Happier people.

And don't forget another interpretation: what about that rain cloud? It could be a little, puffy gray rain cloud that showers down rain in a needed, blessed refreshing shower. It could also be a black, violent spring storm, gushing down torrents. Both water the earth; both are 'rain clouds.' Figuratively speaking, both could result from the pleasure of a ruler. The happy pleasure of the authority can bring welcome blessings on the people around him like a rain cloud delivering needed moisture.

Finally, you could take the flip side altogether and read it for a literally inverted message, like looking at a photo negative. When authorities are angry, their disfavor is like a drought in the fall. My front lawn is a crispy mess right now because all the watering in the world won't make it look healthy without some help from the clouds. I could look at that as a sign of God's displeasure with how I live my life, and it would also mean He's taking that out on others because of me. Or maybe that he's taking it out on me because of others. That's a stretch. Consider, again, Abraham Lincoln who, while the most compassionate and thoughtful of leaders, actively sought a general with a will like his own to pursue the Civil War to the only completion that could preserve the Union, namely the extermination of the ideas of secession and slavery through the brutal butchering of all who would support those ideas.

If only we had a Lincoln today.

There is any number of ways you could read the verse. I suppose that's one reason why the verses are written the way they are: for different people across the eons of time to find meaningful interpretation. I don't do well with authorities; in fact, I'm intimidated by them (or, more appropriately, by the power they hold). I don't like to get too close to the boss because he could be my drinking partner one day and the hammer that strikes me the next. Yet I also know that by living my life as I should, and by doing my best at my life-tasks, those in authority can wear a happier face at the prospect of me. And they can rightfully wear a face of coming scorn and wrath when I withhold my brightest and best.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 21 October 2010

How much better to get wisdom than gold, to choose understanding rather than silver. Proverbs 15, verse 16.

Solomon wrote this about the choice he made. It must have been an easy thing for him to write, considering he had asked for wisdom instead of material wealth. If you don't know the story, the gist of it is that Solomon, king of Israel, was given a rare gift by God Himself: the privilege to ask of God for anything and it would be given to him. Instead of wealth, Solomon asked for wisdom. A pleased God then bestowed on Solomon more wisdom – and subsequent wealth – than any human being before or since has ever known. The proverb was probably written at some time in the middle of Solomon's reign, before laziness and sloth took over and Solomon, like all of us, slipped and fell, and turned away from the wisdom he'd been given.

So let's consider knowledge. That's what Solomon said because knowledge is better than getting gold and understanding of it is better than silver. He's saying that what he knows to be true is more valuable than the most precious commodity of the earth. Wealth in his time was measured particularly in gold – some things never change – and he was saying that what he knew, what he was privileged to know and privileged to be given by God, was more valuable than anything of wealth on this planet.

And what was it that Solomon knew? Easy: it was what he wrote about as wisdom in the other proverbs we've discussed here. Solomon discussed wisdom as being a gift of God, and how true wisdom was knowledge of God's real, divine, boundless love. Real wisdom was of God. Real understanding of how the world works was a reflection of the love God has for each of us. It then isn't a stretch to say that, the answer to any question we might have is ultimately found back in God's wisdom. Take it all to God. Go to any church and you'll hear that same common-sense advice.

If you read the account of how wealthy Solomon became, you get an idea of what he thought of that wealth. Sure, it kept meat on the hearth and a warm bed to sleep in but, from reading this Proverb and others, I suspect Solomon knew all that wealth wasn't worth a dime compared to the knowledge of God imprinted on his heart and mind. The wealth could be fleeting. Later in life, when Solomon turned away from God, his wealth diminished and his kingdom was split in two. It's a sad thing to read, sad because it didn't have to happen. It was preventable. When Solomon was blessed, his kingdom and his subjects were blessed; when he fell away, the kingdom and his subjects suffered.

Just like our petty sins, it was preventable. You and I don't need to do the wrongs we do, yet do them we do; say that five times fast. They're wholly preventable, wholly avoidable, wholly unnecessary if the knowledge we live by from our hearts is the wisdom of God above. They're preventable, but it turns out that we're really no better than some old Hebrew king. Thank God one of his Hebrew descendants came along and rectified the situation.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 22 October 2010

Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall. Proverbs 16, verse 18.

You know this verse. Even if you aren't a Bible scholar and (like me) don't remember book & chapter for much, you've heard this verse. The King James version is "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall." That's the version I hear most. Like so many of these proverbs, this has common sense applications beyond the ecclesiastical (which, to me, proves how common sense is based in faith in God).

Think about it: if you're like me, when you get too big for your britches, someone or something brings you down a notch. When I'm full of myself, I'm at my most confident. If I'm not careful, I'm also at my most vulnerable. For me, pride enables me to remember my achievements and to remember my self worth. I have done things that are good, of which I should be proud. I am a good man at times, and I'm not all bad despite the bad things I've done.

That's probably about where I should leave it because it's healthy without being haughty. As soon as I start getting haughty, problems start. Without being fatalistic, it's almost as if I can sense that something's going to go wrong. The bottom is going to fall out; things are going to fall apart; something bad is going to happen. Eeyore takes over from Pooh Bear, and I can just tell that something is going to take the wind out of my sails.

Fate or pessimism? The latter, to be sure, and I don't really subscribe to the notion of fate. I do, however, subscribe to the notion that this proverb says our disposition can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Pride, when not used well or held in check, can blind us to things that can hurt. Think of anyone you know of who has lost something for which they worked hard and, chances are, at some point there was pride involved. I'm not talking about things that happen randomly or by chance. Think about it and I'm betting you'll find some dose of unhealthy pride was involved.

I think it's important to recognize, too, that it's pride that 'goes.' It's not pride felt. That's the difference. That's what delineates between doing something from an unhealthy motivation and a healthy one. Pride that 'goes' out, pride that is engaged and active: it and not a heart of love or service becomes the motivation for our actions. That kind of pride can indeed become a dangerous thing. When it's the motivation for what we do, I think it's a 50/50 shot as to whether or not it will succeed.

Equally important is that the proverb describes a spirit. It's not just pride in an accomplishment, or pride in a task. It is the attitude, the heart, the will that goes before the fall. If it all starts with attitude, then it shouldn't be surprising that one focused on pride isn't really focused at all and is bound for trouble. Play in any sport – or in business, warfare, and relationships as well – and the coach will tell you "keep your eye on the ball." So it is with pride. Keep focused on what it is that is motivating you – love or love of self? – and success will, by and large, be yours. Lose that focus and trouble starts.

I'm a proud man. I'm proud of a great many things; read my writings here and you can tell that. There's plenty of which I am, ought to be, and will be proud. I would gladly trade all that pride, however, if it threatened those I love. I would now equally trade it if it meant preventing my downfall, or the downfall of others. And I would gladly keep it in check, or eliminate it all together, if my pride was hurting someone else. That's a proud boast to make, but I hope I'm making it the right way. That's my intention, and it's one I'm proud to stand behind.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 25 October 2010

Better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud. Proverbs 16, verse 19.

I'm starting on new projects, both at work and in my personal life. At work, one job is ending while another new one is beginning. I'm moving into a new company, working at a new position in a new city. It's a time of change and it's thrilling as well as a little scary. In my personal life, I've finished one book and I'm starting back on another one that was also on the back burner for awhile. The book I've just finished is a fun read, and I've gotten pleasant reviews on it so far. The new book has me even more jazzed than the first.

You've heard me brag about my pride. Now would be one of those times when I could really get the big head and be full of myself about the blessings in my life. About being loved, about being blessed, about reaping the rewards of hard work and capitalizing on opportunity. I might even be justified in doing so...except that I'm thinking that would be the wrong thing to do.

It would be the wrong thing to do because we are all the oppressed. Each of us has wronged someone in life. Each of us has been wronged. Each of us has been hurt by wrongs that have happened in our lives. While a healthy dose of pride is a great thing now and then, I'm thinking that this cusp of change in my life is a good time to be lowly in spirit instead of one sharing in the plunder of things with the proud.

I suppose that's why I struggle with the whole jock culture of our world these days. I'm watching the Cowboys fold like a cheap suit again, watching the adrenaline-pumped Giants get into each others' faces and do their petty end zone dances. I suppose if I made \$5 million a year I'd want to do the dance too, and perhaps I would do it. I like watching football because there's a lot we can learn from the sport, in teamwork, in struggle, in battle.

I'd also like to think we can learn a lot about plundering with the proud. About good sportsmanship, and a humble, hard earned and well-deserved victory of a team that made fewer mistakes and played a better game. I don't like the Giants but, let's face it: tonight they played much better than the hometown team. And yet there's that element of winning in humility, losing with grace and honesty, and not plundering.

In olden days, a winning army would plunder its enemy. Even God himself ordained that the Jewish slaves of Egypt would plunder their captors (to demonstrate God's power). It was customary. We did it ourselves in wars gone past. Plunder is a regular part of most divorce proceedings, and if you've ever been part of a corporate buyout (as in how Hewlett Packard ravaged EDS...just sayin) then you'll have to admit that the new company usually comes in to plunder the old. It's a natural thing for us as sinful, fallen, and victorious humans.

And it's also sometimes wrong.

Just like it would be for me to gloat over a new job that is likely to be better than the old one. I'm thankful and proud to be where I am. Having said that, I'm inclined to say no more about it because I think the better posture for me to assume is one of humility. It would do me well (and lay the foundation for success) if I would remember that I've been given blessings and that it's my role to improve on them, be a good steward of them, grow others through them. And it would do me well to remember that, as good as it is, it's only a shadow of the better things to come. Self-reflection and thankful humility will always trump the dance in the end zone, even when you've earned your time in that spotlight.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 26 October 2010

Whoever gives heed to instruction prospers, and blessed is he who trusts in the LORD. Proverbs 16, verse 20.

It's 5:25 on the left coast of America. I'm about 90 minutes away from going to work on my second day with this new client. I've done health systems configuration for ten years and my career as a whole stretches back a quarter of a century. I am the only person to have ever configured one major payer system to price claims without error for a full year. I have a masters degree in education and am a hair away from starting a doctoral program so that I might teach in college. I'm a self-published author with four books under my belt and I'm already at work on my second novel.

This morning, all that and a quarter still won't get you a cup of coffee.

Today, I'm in learning mode. My job for the foreseeable future is to shadow a complete stranger and watch her do her job. She's teaching me the very basics of a new system and how her company does its business. I'm the new guy around here and nobody yet trusts me to even clean up the break room. My skills are suspect, my record is debatable, my past is my own but in the context of what they do on the job, like Bogey said, it doesn't mean a hill of beans in this crazy world.

That's for the best. My job here is to get back to the basics and give heed to instruction. Whatever that instruction may be, my job here is to watch, listen, take notes, and learn.

I really do dream of teaching in a college somewhere. With my right wing proclivities, I understand my career in academia may be short-lived and rocky, but it's my dream all the same. The more I live and the more adults I teach, the more I see that most post-elementary instruction is simply building on the basics. We learn new tasks, new things, new ways to think, of course. But, most of that is simply building on a foundation already laid down. If that foundation is solid, the new instruction takes hold.

The foundation that is most solid is learning in the LORD. Trusting that he has an active role in our lives, that we are indeed more valuable than sparrows yet he knows us just as he knows them. He teaches us what we need to know to live and succeed. His success is our success, and that success isn't always measured in money. When we learn through him, opening our hearts and minds to possibilities of where He will lead us, we prosper. More than that, we become able to serve the greater kingdom in ways we might never have conceived on our own.

Yet every now and then we all need to get back to the basics if we hope to excel in our learning. The catchy management buzz-words for it are "putting first principles first." It means cutting to the chase and taking care of your primary business first. I've found that, invariably, that means getting back to the basics. Simple principles, simple concepts, basic arithmetic, the basics of love: you don't even have to live in Luckenbach, Texas (with Waylon and Willie and the boys) to understand that. When you learn the basics – hey, when you learn anything – you put your trust in understanding that what you're learning is reliable. You can go back to it and it will still be just as it was; it will still be. You build from the ground up and what you build, what you learn, then becomes reliable on its own.

Nothing and no one is more reliable than the great I AM.

Today's task will be to review what I learned yesterday. I'm still getting into the systems at the client site, setting up email, working on their data sharing site, learning the web portal and such. It's really basic stuff, far beneath someone with so much knowledge and experience. Whatever. The real basic truth of it is that it's exactly where I need to start and it's exactly what is right for the task. One day soon, I hope to be productive, reliable, and an integral part of what is done on this job. I value being one of the go-to guys in a group, someone you go to for answers and help. Getting to that point takes time and mastering the basics. Thank God for that.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 27 October 2010

The wise in heart are called discerning, and pleasant words promote instruction. Proverbs 16, verse 21.

No surprise here that the Proverbs advocate teaching most things with a velvet hand. "Pleasant words promote instruction." How true is that! Think back on the best teacher you had in school. I'm betting they were the best because they taught good, strong lessons with good, strong, yet pleasant, instruction. They taught in such a way as to build you up while not blowing smoke at you (i.e. that whole self-esteem boosting focus thing), and had firm standards enforced with that velvet hand. The hand might be holding a hammer, but it would only be swung in caring.

Or your parents. If you get/got along well with your parents, were they overbearing, impatient, yelling parents who enforced their will by bending yours, or were they understanding, supportive and pleasant parents who enforced what they believed to be right by firmly, calmly teaching lessons? Yep, I'm betting on the latter. Sure, I learn a lot from the stern disciplinarians and even from the drill sergeants; both have their place in our lives. The lessons that serve me best, though, are those taught by the people who taught in firm, memorable yet understanding tones. I believe that makes me typical, and it's why we try to create a pleasant atmosphere for learning.

Of course, if you talk to people who have taken my classes, you might hear that I can be loud, that I throw Twinkies as rewards, and that I vary my voice from soft to sometimes very loud. My opinions are strong, my language peppered with trivialities and irreverence, and that I work hard to keep people on their toes. I give my best to get their best. My philosophy is to do anything and everything, and to use any means (fair or unfair) to teach the lesson that people might learn it in ways best for them. That can be, well, interesting...but it isn't unpleasant. I reject the idea of demeaning people, or teaching in ways that tear down without building up.

I reject those things because I want the people around me to be discerning. Generally, I believe people see through false fronts. People can tell if you're tap-dancing or if you aren't comfortable with your material. They can see right through you if you're disingenuous even though Abraham Lincoln was right about fooling people some of the time. By and large, people can tell if they're being snowed because most people are wise in the heart about things important to them. Some of it is street wisdom; some of it is the wisdom of learning; some of it is wisdom from God.

And that's the important point, don't you think? Being wise in heart is a gift from God, taught through pleasant words that encourage, that can tear down but only while building up. We discern because He gave us the ability to learn and to take important things to heart, using them to enrich others living lives focused on the greater good. For that, we're called wise, and with that wisdom we're able to teach others as the circle keeps on turning.

These days, I think about grandchildren. No surprise there, either, since I'm quickly approaching middle age. My kids are growing up and moving out, and I think about what kind of father I've been. When I think about that, I think about what kind of grandfather I'd like to be some day. I want to be a kind yet solid man, one who loves to hold kids on his lap, read stories, teach them how to whittle wood, and work on cars with them. I want to be the kind of grandfather my grandkids will always cherish because that's the kind of father I wanted to be. In truth, I haven't always been that kind of father, but I've given it my best and hope my kids understand. These days, I think about being the kind of grandfather, the kind of man, who teaches and loves in pleasant words and actions, building up the hearts closest to me and being a pleasant witness for all. God grant that whether I'm a grandfather, a father, or whoever I am that I might be that man who encourages discernment.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 28 October 2010

Understanding is a fountain of life to those who have it, but folly brings punishment to fools. Proverbs 16, verse 22.

Don't you just love the people who have all the answers? I'm not talking about the know-it-all's or the nerds (like me) with their hands up in the air all the time (or, as FloRida said... "in the AYER AYER AYER AYER"). No, I'm talking about people who really do seem to know a lot. They have understanding. They are generally successful in things about which they have that understanding. I admire those people. All my life I've wanted to be like them, to be someone reliable, someone knowledgeable, and to use that knowledge to serve rather than be served.

So, the verse is then also saying that fools don't have understanding, right? It's saying that folly and understanding are mutually exclusive, right? Basically, the verse says that fools don't know what they're talking about isn't it?

And if you don't have understanding, are you just out of luck? Are you just screwed? I mean, let's be skeptical here: "to those who have it" can sound a lot like "if you aint got it you aint got it." If you don't have it, you don't get it. It's the economy, stupid, right? Duh! I hate feeling left out, and if you read this part of the verse just right it sure feels like I'm left out again.

Then there's the other angle. What about those of us stuck somewhere in-between? Take me for example. There are some things I know and I feel very comfortable in saying that. It's not just bragging: it's the truth. There are some things I know, and in some ways I'm on that part of my game better than many people I know. There are also some things in which I am the biggest fool around. There are some sins I keep on doing over and over, and there are some worries I just never seem to give up. It causes me lots of pain and grief. I'm stuck in-between. What I understand is a fountain of life, but I suffer the punishment for my follies.

Is that you, too? Are you stuck somewhere in the middle like I am? Do you sometimes feel that you don't have it, that you just don't understand no matter how much you try? Do you feel like a fool for who you are, what you want, things you've done, and do you sometimes feel like you're being punished for that?

There's good news for both of us. When I'm feeling all anxious, all beaten down and worthless, and when I'm feeling at my lowest, well, those are the times when I feel most that God himself, His only Son, wraps an arm around me and gives me a big hug. "Lighten up, Dave," I think I hear Him saying, "and have a little faith. I've got you." It's a Max Lucado moment, to be sure, but it helps me get by knowing that the understanding I have is from Him, and that kind of understanding is the fountain of life talked about here. It refreshes, waters, cleans, sparkles, and flows freely. It's a thing of beauty and a thing to be used. And it's a gift from God because it is of God; it's His true wisdom.

I really do admire those people who have all the answers. They seem to know the right thing to say at the right time. Chances are, when you ask them you learn that they learned the hard way what to say and when to say it. Chances are they have lessons to teach from days when they feel all anxious and foolish just like I do. It makes my admiration all the stronger. That's the kind of person I want to be.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 29 October 2010

A wise man's heart guides his mouth, and his lips promote instruction. Proverbs 16, verse 24.

I believe a wise man's mouth will speak in love and truth, and that he teaches just by living as he says and does. There, I've paraphrased the proverb in a way that is more understandable to me.

So does that mean that, when we say things we don't mean, or when we are mean to each other that we aren't wise?

Maybe

And does it mean that whatever we say and do can be teachable, good or bad?

Maybe

And does it mean that what we say out of wisdom and love will always guide what we say or do?

Again, maybe.

In fact, we all know there are plenty of 'maybe's' involved just in living day to day. To me, morals are absolutes. There really is a yes or no answer to every question, and for every issue there really are right and wrong ways to react. Black & white, up and down: there really are absolutes. The gray Mister In-Between comes into play in how we interpret them and make our choices.

And those choices are what bring me back to the proverb in that it's a good reminder that I need to let loving, divine wisdom guide what I say and do rather than my pragmatic practicality. Where love lives, so lives sin. Where sin rules, love does not. They, too, are absolutes, yet love is both the right end of the spectrum and the force that covers over everything done in the name of the other. The choice we each get to make and re-make is to choose how we will let love govern our lives...

...even when it means saying things that are mean, or doing things we wouldn't want to teach, or living the practice of our lives in ways that we're not equipped for.

It's Halloween. Sunday night, kids will come trick or treating. Some will be Belle, some will be Jimmy Johnson, some will be ghosts and witches. Some will be teenagers. Me, I don't care much for Halloween. It's become too sinister and overblown. But I like to see the kids smile, so the evening will be spent on the front patio, a fire going in the fire pit, handing out candy to the little ones as they come by. A kind greeting and a compliment on the costume will be given to each kiddo who comes up, along with candy or a bag of pretzels. That way, even in a holiday for which I care little, words of kind instruction can come from my mouth to those who may not be expecting them.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 1 November 2010

Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones. Proverbs 16, verse 24.

This is a first for me. I'm writing this sitting in seat 8E on AA flight 2401, bound west for Los Angeles. I like to get these done early, but since I had to be at the airport at 5 this morning, there was little opportunity to write it ahead of time. So, your proverbialist is sitting in his middle seat on the full-to-capacity flight to LA. Please forgive my whining; it's to make a point.

It's hard to write this today. Really, it really is, because I'm scrunched in this seat. The guy on the aisle has his elbows shoved into the arm rest so my left arm is jammed into my side. The guy on the right is trying to sleep and is snoring; thank heaven he's crossed his arms and isn't in the "middle seat elbow zone" (which, if you've ever flown much means that it's common practice to give the guy in the middle a bit more elbow room because if you're on an aisle or window, you have a direction in which to lean; aisle guy doesn't understand this). Finally, the lady in front of me has her seat leaned back, meaning that my laptop is jammed into my guy and I'm more or less looking down at the screen, hoping the characters I'm typing somewhat represent the king's English. See: it really is a difficult thing to write today!

Soon as we took off, I was irritated. TSA guy at the airport wasn't very kind; are they ever? Crowds were rushed. Had to gate check my bag (which I rarely do because they get all chewed up by baggage handlers). And, then, I got assigned the middle seat despite having status with good old American (which, they will tell you, has never filed for bankruptcy. Nor have they ever been given a Good Housekeeping award for good service). Today, in my middle seat at 37000 feet, I'm not really in a sweet-to-the-soul word kind of mood. My words aren't too much like a honeycomb today, are they! You probably picked up on that vibe, eh?

Three words can sum it up: shame on me. Shame on me for wishing aisle guy were armless. Shame on me for calling down silent curses on whoever assigned me this seat. Shame on me for being so self-centered that I lost the forest for the trees this morning. In the middle of my selfish feelings about how poorly treated I've been are the oh so obvious blessings that sailed right by me while I didn't have a clue.

I'm on a jet plane headed west to a new job that offers more blessings than any I've ever had. I'm not driving 2000 miles, or going to a job I don't understand or dislike. I'm not in a wagon and I'm not walking. I'm on a jet plane whizzing across country. And the new job promises to be great. It's a huge salary increase to do the same kind of work I've always done. My family will benefit from this in ways I can't fully predict, but I know it will indeed be a huge blessing no matter what it is.

I just had a good weekend. Sure, I was sick from shots I had been given on Friday and, sure, I wasn't in a mood to do all the hundred things that needed to be done over a quick weekend but, you know, it turned out to be a good weekend all the same. All that I needed was provided for me and those I love were safe and well. There was time and money enough to get done what needed to get done. I spent time with my loved ones, and I went to a great church service yesterday where I experienced one of the rare times that the message got through to me and I actually felt a connection to what was being said. That's a huge blessing.

In fact, everything that happens is a huge blessing. Here in my middle seat, I haven't been acting Christ-like, and I haven't been thinking Christ-like thoughts. I let the deceiver steal some of my joy and get me wrapped around the axle of selfishness. I need to do better. I need to speak and think in ways that are pleasant to others and sweet sounding instead of whiny and focused on the man in the mirror. The man upstairs knows better.

So, instead of feeling sorry for myself, I'll put on a different hat. I'll ignore the lady with the leaned-back seat and be thankful for her comfort; maybe she needs it more than me and, after all, she paid for a middle seat too. I'll think of aisle guy as an opportunity to meet someone new instead of another strange elbow jammed into my side. And I will say a few silent prayers of thanks and help for the people around me. It could be worse: the flight crew actually just called for a doctor, so someone on the plane must be sick; I'll pray for them too and hope you do as well. It could always be worse and even if I don't always get what I want, I don't have to be a Rolling Stone to try very hard to get what I need. In fact, I don't have to try at all: God provides whether I try or not. He always does. That's a sweet thought with which to spend the rest of this flight. It's a great way to go into November remembering that the yearly holidays start in just a few short weeks.

And for the return leg, I'll make sure I ask ahead of time for an aisle so I can be kind to someone else.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 2 November 2010

There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death. Proverbs 16, verse 25.

Go with your gut instinct. As men, that's what we're taught. As a rule, if your gut instinct is grounded in something more than flesh – namely, if your instincts are grounded in the moral wisdom of God – then your instincts are probably good enough to get you in the ballpark. We men are taught to think on our feet, to act rather than react, and to do our best to lead. We're action, not inaction; we're doing rather than just standing on the sidelines.

And guess what? If we aren't grounded in that saving wisdom then it isn't worth anything.

Here on planet Earth, every day brings thousands of choices. Get up or stay in bed; soap or body wash; eggs or cereal; comb or brush; pay rent or buy groceries; stay faithful or stray; O'Reilly or Maddow; passing lane or the middle lane; fish tacos or a burger; boxers or briefs (or bikinis maybe): you get the idea. Every day is made up of thousands of choices which, cumulatively, bring us to that common point in every day known as 'midnight.' At midnight, today ends and goes in the record books while tomorrow is yet unwritten. Our days are the sum of our choices, and our choices determine what and how we'll face that unwritten day ahead.

Will your choices today be the best ones you could make, or did you leave something on the table? Were they right or wrong? Do you think your choices bring life or death to you? Sure, turning onto I-5 near Sea World instead of closer to the airport seemed like a trivial choice to me, but who knows what was lurking around each corner...until I actually turned it? There is a way that seems right in every choice. The older I get the more I find that the way to discern between what seems to be right and what probably is right is to involve the Almighty in my choices.

I think that's what the Proverb is saying. What to us seems right is foolish and leads to separation from God. What to God is right may seem foolish to us but, in the end, it leads us to unity with God. The way to choose between the two is to involve Him in that choice and then trust that, wherever it takes us, is the right way for us to go. To do that, we hone our talents, we understand our limitations, we confess our failures and weaknesses, and we do the best we can with the information available to us. We use our talents for the greater good instead of using them for the greater gain. Yes, sometimes that greater good does mean personal gain, and sometimes personal gain isn't for the greater good. There is honor in any choice as long as we involve our creator in getting from here to point B.

As an example of choices, today is election day. No matter who you vote for, for heaven's sake please vote! Judge your vote by your heart, by what you truly believe is best for our country, and go out there to vote accordingly. A good friend of mine is running for Congress, and even though we're on opposite sides of the aisle, I'm rooting for him from afar today because my friend has done what seemed right to him and he took a stand. In his case, the day will tell whether it leads to higher office or back to his regular office. No matter, I admire my friend for standing up to be counted and to try to make a difference by doing what he believed was right. If the voters of his district select him today, they will choose a good and able public servant who will represent them in ways he honestly believes are in their best interests. If they choose the other guy, well, no comment; I don't know much about him because I didn't spend nights at sea with him like I did with his opponent. I'm sure he's a good man, but he isn't my friend, and I support my friend even as we disagree on some things. I admire his tenacity to run for national office in this day and age when that means so much mudslinging for you and your family. Yet he saw a need in his community and he rose to confront the need. The way that seemed right to him led to the ballot box, and today the voters will decide. My friend's choice leads him forward, not down to death, but I hope to bigger and greater things.

You and I may not be running for higher office. You and I may not have much of a plan for getting through today. And you and I may be rightfully burdened by the cares of this moment. Every choice may seem like a struggle between right and wrong and both lead down to the grave. On a Tuesday that's the cusp of real hope and change, whether it's an election or not, how about we change our ways for the hope that is a promise? How about we choose to involve our creator in all we conceive, then see what road he leads us down? My gut tells me that's the best choice I could make. I'm down for that journey. How about you?

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 3 November 2010

The laborer's appetite works for him; his hunger drives him on. Proverbs 16, verse 26.

I'm starting at a new job. It's a new position in a company for which I'll be doing largely the same work I've done in other places, only it's for much more money and I'll actually have something to do. For the last few months, well, I've been in the doldrums, working for a good company that didn't have much work to do. It's true that good things came of it, namely that I've had a chance to level out, start putting my house back together, and finish a book on which I've worked for six years.

But in these last few months, I've been hungry. After the hardest year of my life, I've been hungry. Famished even. No, it hasn't been just for food, although my appetite for that ebbs and flows with my activity (and I'm still down over 30 pounds from where I was a year ago). Instead, my hunger has been for something more. In starting a new job, I think it's time to evaluate that hunger.

I want to serve. In my new job – in any job – I want to serve. That's what I miss most of all from the military: the vocation of service. The most rewarding time in my life was just over a year ago, serving unpaid for a week in Communist China, working as a common-sense missionary. I want to carry forward that attitude into whatever job I do and serve the greater good. I'm a perfectionist and I'm driven. I want to use those to better the lot of my group and our purpose – our mission – and, in doing so, better those around me and myself.

And I want to excel. I want to do my best and rise as high as I can from that. Do I want to be management? Maybe, but only if that can be effective service. Do I want to be self-employed? Maybe, if that means I can exercise more control over my vocational destiny. It's part of doing my best: I want that best to rise as high as it can go, not for the sake of power or affluence or influence, but instead for the sake of being the best I can be. Excellence is a product of that, and I want to excel.

Finally, I want to matter. Isn't that the cry of every person who's ever lived? We cry in frustration at a world frustrated because of sin: our sins, the sins of others, things we didn't even do. We cry out to the universe that we want to matter, we want to be remembered, we want to be known as important because we are important. I turn away from my conservative Lutheran brethren who would remind me that we are miserable sinners. We are. Yet that's not how God sees us. He sees us as important, as worth saving, as worth experiencing the death He, as a perfect God, could and should not have experienced. I want to matter because, to God, I do matter and I am important. There is such uncontrollable joy in knowing it that I can hardly contain it. I want to matter by living my life reflecting thanks for how He views me. I want to pay that forward, pass it around, and always move forward with it.

That's the kind of hunger I read from the proverb today. The hunger to serve, to excel, to matter drives me on to go into work and give it my all. Sure, during boring meetings later I'll have to remind myself of these things. And when I see people doing small things, acting in small ways, I'll need to fall back to these positions. And when negativity threatens to cloud out the sunshine I'll have to remind myself that clouds bring needed rain that grow into love with the sun's warmth. Those things happen in new jobs and old yet today I choose to do like that old Army slogan says and "be all I can be" by feeding that hunger with food that's more than just tasty. I want to serve, to excel, and to matter so that others can then do the same.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 4 November 2010

A scoundrel plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire. Proverbs 16, verse 27.

I don't like to admit it but I have a nasty side. When I fight, I can say very mean things. When I get upset, I go silent and if that bothers you, I'll know it and it doesn't bother me that it bothers you. Usually I'm fairly easygoing but underneath that tepid exterior is a man of raging insecurities who doesn't like to expose them to the sun. Hit me where it hurts and I'm bound to hit back and I'll try to hurt you worse. I know how to cut to the quick and while I don't do it often, when I do it's memorable.

In other words, I'm a scoundrel who plots evil. I don't like to admit that but if I'm going to be honest with you I need to. I'm a scoundrel. Like other scoundrels, I've done evil things. My language is sailor-worthy; I'm a multiple offending adulterer in fact and in mind; I've stolen and cheated; I'm a chronic liar; I envy, covet, scheme, deceive and hurt people I love and people I don't. I use people, and I've done so at work, in friendships, even in the most personal ways. Worst of all, I squander love. I reject real love, real devotion, in favor of my own selfish needs. I ignore people who love me and hurt them desperately when I do so. Say it because it's the truth: I'm a scoundrel.

Here's another thing I don't like to admit: it's ugly and I'm ashamed of that. It's not who I set out to be, and it's not the kind of man for whom I would like to be remembered. I don't like to think that I've actively plotted evil, that I've done things that have been deceitful, or harmful, hurtful or evil. I don't like to think that some who read my words scream "hypocrite" or that my words are scorching fire, burning people who read them.

If I'm going to be honest with you, though, it's all true. Talk with the people I've wronged and they'll tell you.

It's a bleak thing to walk around knowing that you aren't snow white and innocent. It's a hard thing to go through each day knowing that your sins deserve the terrible things that happen in your life, and knowing that there are people whose lives are worse for your having been part of them. It's a heavy burden to bear, and sometimes, late at night when you're all alone in a strange place, it feels like the walls are closing in and you really are the scoundrel plotting evil, the man speaking words of scorching fire instead of the man known as a loving healer.

Thank God it doesn't have to be so. Thank God that He saw through all I've done, all my BS, and washed me clean. He gave me a get-out-of-hell-free card and continually encourages me to play it again and again. Thank God He did what I couldn't because sinners like me are everywhere, making a sweet and beautiful world into a complicated and unfriendly place.

He doesn't do it so that I can guiltlessly go on ruining things; He wants me to turn from the things I've done and do better. I try. I honestly try even as I honestly fail. I try because He wants me to, because it's the right thing to do. He does it because I've so irreversibly corrupted my life and he wants better for me. He believes in me...

...just like He believes in you. He looks at you and me and sees right through our plotted evil. He ignores our scorching words. He doesn't condone them because He doesn't have to: He did the ultimate end-run around them at a place called Calvary. He did that out of divine love and eternal wisdom. He did it understanding what would happen to us if He didn't. He talks to my heart and says, "Yeah, that's some pretty bad stuff you've done, that's for sure. But know what, Dave? It doesn't matter now. I set it all right. Don't worry about it anymore." All He asks is that we believe in Him.

I'm a hell of a sinner. I really am. I really don't like to admit it but the funny thing about it is that when I don't, it stares back at me in the mirror. It saps away at my soul; it steals my joy. And it doesn't have to be this week. I can be better and I can do better. I can do better because He already did better and is better. Even a scoundrel can honestly admit that.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 5 November 2010

A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends. Proverbs 16, verse 28.

If ever there's a word that has rightly gotten a bad reputation it is "perverse." Dictionary.com assigns it five definitions: willfully determined or disposed to go counter to what is expected or desired; contrary; characterized by or proceeding from such a determination or disposition; wayward or cantankerous; persistent or obstinate in what is wrong; turned away from or rejecting what is right, good, or proper; wicked or corrupt. In our world, mention the word 'pervert' and chances are you think of a sexual predator, some sicko with a kinky, dirty, disgusting mind and even worse intentions.

Not nice is it?

And what about gossips? I hate gossip. I really do. Having been the target of so much of it through my life, I loathe gossip. And yet, who's as much of a gossip as the pecking hen at church who just can't wait to dish the dirt? Me. If I open my mouth about someone and pass on something that may just be untrue AND I know it is, I'm a gossip. I've done it. Have you? I bet I know the answer, and I bet you do too. I live with teenage girls so I hear a lot of gossip. They watch "Teen Mom" and "Jersey Shore" so I hear even more as these popular shows vomit the gossip out through the peephole into Paradise.

You've heard me say it before: less and less do I believe in coincidences. I believe in an active God who fluidly moves through the details of our lives. I believe He's at work in these words, in my room here in California, on the road with every driver, in our offices, in our heads, and in every nook and cranny of planet Earth. Believing that, I find it hard to believe there are coincidences and chances where human interaction is involved. God – and sin too – are at work with and in us, molding and shaping our lives. One works for our good, one works to turn us away from the good.

Knowing that, it's no coincidence that the proverb ties perversion and gossiping together. The contrary person who is obstinate in doing wrong stirs up dissension and that same type of person separates close friends. The perverse person and the gossip are one and the same; the gossip is perverse. That's not saying that gossips are sexually immoral though some are; reference the aforementioned TV shows. And it's not saying that perverts are all about spreading slander, though many do, especially in election season.

Still, the more you read the verse, the more I bet it repulses you like it does me. It repulses me because I don't like to think about perverts and gossips. I don't like to be constantly exposed to the soft underbelly of human behavior where disease of the soul takes root. It's one reason I avoid most of those reality shows.

What's more I find the verse repulsive because I find I've been perverse and gossiping in how I've dealt with my brothers and sisters in this world. I've been – I am – wicked and corrupt. And I've been the kind of person who has separated friends, or done things that put my loved ones in uncomfortable, hurting situations. We shouldn't do that to people we love, yet we do. I do; I have and I do and despite my best efforts to change, chances are I'll slip up in the future.

I try to go to church every weekend. I need to go even as the church I attend is still replete with unforgiving souls and bad memories for me. Still, my family and most of my Texas friends go there, and if I left now I'd be leaving them and their caring support behind. I can't bring myself to do that. This last weekend, the preacher said that 'if you have it all together, you don't need to be here.' He was right, and he was preaching to a congregation rife with perversion and gossip. I was one of the room full of people thick with a week of sins that dragged them down. What do you call a dysfunctional group of sinners, murderers, cheaters, liars, gossips, perverts, adulterers and generally bad rats?
Answer: a church.

Yet I went there then and I'll go back again. I pray and I worship because I can't help myself because my behavior has been perverse and the encouraging words I offer full of gossip. Thank God for midnight, when the day full of that comes to an end and a fresh tomorrow yet unwritten presents us with opportunities to try again and do better. Thank God for the opportunity to turn from the wrong into something better.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 8 November 2010

A violent man entices his neighbor and leads him down a path this is not good. Proverbs 16, verse 29

This verse is smack dab in the middle of two verses about perversity. And that is willful wrongful doing. You may remember that verse 28 talks about perverse people stirring up dissention while, in a flash forward, verse 30 talks about the perverse intentions of people who will talk to you with a wink and a nod. You read a few days ago that I don't believe in coincidences, so I don't believe it's a coincidence that the Proverbs talk about the willfully wrong person, then how a violent man lures his brother or sister into wrongdoing, then how people who are perverse will be deceptive. It isn't chance; it's the way things are meant to be.

So what is violence? Is violence the obvious thing, the thug who's good with his fists? The man who can't control his temper and the one you always hear screaming at his kids? Is violence just war, or is it the bully at school, the threats of physical harm, or the woman who constantly beats her husband and children?

Or is it something more subtle? The serpent in the garden was crafty, but I wonder if he wasn't also violent. There was true malice in the way he willingly deceived and misled the innocent woman there. She was doing no harm, yet he willfully did harm to her. He didn't need to use a hammer, or a club, or a gun: he used sleight of hand through crafty words. Isn't that violent? I mean, the downfall of all humankind forever... isn't that violent?

Was Hitler a violent man? He was a frenzied, charismatic speaker, and his views were so far wrong they could never be right. Something was wrong with him before he went to the trenches in World War I, but something for sure snapped in him there...and yet while doing his duty for the empire, he managed to win the German equivalent of the Medal of Honor...twice, the second time for saving his commander. Supposedly, in private, he was a calm, almost charming but compelling man who couldn't bring himself to eat meat because he didn't want to think of animals being killed. Does that sound violent, even though he could obviously fit well in verses 28 through 30.

And is violence a perverse thing? It's a thing of nature, you know. Tornados, dog fights, earthquakes, metastasized cancer, and wasps are all things of violence. Perversity seems to creep around hand in hand with violence, doesn't it? I mean, how many times have you scratched your head at the simply 'why' of just why some crimes occur? Why would someone murder a child? Or why would perfectly reasonable men strap bombs onto themselves and blow themselves up in Israeli supermarkets? It's not just violence: surely there is perversity in that. Surely there's something just plain wrong with them.

I think it boils down to evil. Whether you're talking the serpent in the Garden, Hitler in Berlin, Al Qaeda anywhere or your neighborhood bully, I think the common denominator is evil. Petty evil taking hold in everyday lives, then manifesting itself as evil is bound to do. We try to think that, in our modern world of sterile medicine and electronic wizardry, evil is vanquished and is just some concept of ignorance that we outgrew sometime back in the Middle Ages. I disagree with that. I think that, today, evil is far more subtle, and far more elusive and dangerous. It seeps into our lives through deviancy defined downward, through the internet, the coarseness of our language and the even coarser forms of entertainment. Whether it's the child molester, the school bully, or the abusive spouse, I believe that evil still exists today just as much as it did that day when the serpent coaxed Eve into thinking she was hungry for a snack.

Yes, the longer I live the more I believe there are no coincidences, and that it's no coincidence the verse about violence is hand in hand with the verses about perversity. I also don't think it's a coincidence that we're reading this now; maybe this is something of which I need to be reminded at this time in my life. Maybe you do too. I also, then, don't believe it's a coincidence that the verse is part of the Proverbs itself, or even the Bible. One is a book of common sense advice handed down through the wisest man in history. The larger volume is simply the handbook for life, complete with lessons on how to live with, and through, every emotion and possibility with which we could be faced. Whether it's the manifestation of evil or simply a display of perverse intentions, violence is something with which we all must contend every day. Here's hoping you have little of it in your week to come.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 9 November 2010

He who winks with his eye is plotting perversity; he who purses his lips is bent on evil. Proverbs 16, verse 30.

Let me begin this with an apology. If anything I have said here has hurt or offended you, or if I've said things to which you took exception, I'm sorry. My intention here is always to write things about these verses that I find helpful; lessons I'm learning as I contemplate these age-old pieces of wisdom, and things I want to pass along as help. It's my hope they're helpful to you, and that they encourage you in some way.

But in this life I've been accused of being a smooth talker, of being able to string together words and use them to unkind ends. Throughout my life, I've been accused of using them as a hammer, and as a tool of deceit, and as a way to get what I want. It's a blessing and a curse to be able to do that, just as I think that must be the case with any talent. I'm not the best at it, but I can hold my own and I have to always be cognizant that what I think, say, and do reaches far beyond just the keyboard in front of me.

Because if I'm not careful, you might think I'm winking at you, plotting perversity. You might think I'm saying one thing and doing another, or that I'm sending a different message than what I'm really intending. That's an evil thing to do. Plain and simple, it's evil; it's wrong. That's not my motivation, but I'd be lying to you if I said I've always been innocent. I have said and done different things, and I have used my talents for ill-gotten gains, and there have been times in life when I've done that with a wink and a Cheshire cat smile.

That's sad because I like the Cheshire cat. You might think it odd that I like to expose my thoughts here in these messages yet I like to keep some things held close, where only I know what I'm thinking and the face I present to the world is a smile of knowing. I like to think that's not all bad because I think you hurt and get hurt if you expose too much. I've done that in the past, and good rarely perseveres because of it, so it's a way I work to turn from. Still, it's a foolish thing to think we can hold everything to ourselves because, inside, God sees us where we really are. He molds and shapes us and wants only good for us, even in the face of all the wrongs we do.

I work every day to make sure what I think, say, and do isn't smooth talk or a misuse of my abilities. I'm an imperfect man, living an imperfect life in an imperfect world; imperfection is bound to result. Yet I don't want to hide behind the veil of imperfection as a way to hide from the responsibilities I have to not hurt others. When things I say hurt you, I want to know, and when things I write hurt others, I want to know. I want to do what I can to right any wrongs I cause, and I want to change my behavior if it causes anyone pain. That's a tall order, but I'd be a hypocrite if I simply kept on doing something that deliberately hurt someone else, then preached here a different message.

Instead, the better path is to be forthright. The better way is to wink at you only in friendly acknowledgement. A surer path is to not smile in such a way as to hide my evil intentions but, instead, to change my ways; to turn from evil and submit to doing what is right. To smile a smile of genuine caring. We're all thick with sin; it's in our nature from the time we're conceived. We don't have to be consumed by it, though. We can change, we can alter our paths, we can learn to think in different ways, and we can be better than we've been. I think everyone's life journey takes them along paths where that happens; I know mine has. At the end of it, I want to be able to look you and God himself in the eye and not wink or nod, but to wear a smile of responsibility and true happiness.

You don't need to be a Cheshire cat to be able to smile like that.

I started with an apology, so I'll end with praise. I'm thankful for the opportunity to share in this way, and that both you the reader and the medium of this venue are available to do so. It's a gift I hope I never misuse. There's enough hurt in the world without piling on more. To do so would be a wink nodded in perversity with only evil intent, and that's not my goal here. If it ever becomes so it will be the last time I write these things. I'll pray instead that we're both built up and strengthened to fight the good fight against the prince of evil instead of each other.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 10 November 2010

The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests the heart. Proverbs 17, verse 3.

I was set to write about Proverbs 16, verse 31; even had it started already about someone very dear to me who I really want to share with you. Then something happened last night that made me change my mind because I believe something important was put on my heart from it. I'll share the other verse another time.

I'm extremely conservative and I have strong political beliefs. You've probably guessed that from reading here. I hope you've also seen that, for such a politically engaged man, I steer clear from talking about them in these messages. I don't do it because I think it's unimportant or because it's such a sensitive subject. We should be free to talk about anything, especially in a column where I'm choosing the subject matter. Instead, I do it because I believe the message delivered here in these interpretations is more important than some political spin. What I believe about politics may very well differ from what you believe about politics and that's ok. Heaven is big enough for both of us, and when we get together, it won't matter what small political philosophies drove us here on Earth. Out of respect for whatever you believe, I hold that it's your right to believe it and that whatever constructive ideology drives your beliefs is just as valid as what drives mine.

Last night, I lost a friendship with someone whose beliefs differed from mine. We didn't know each other well and hadn't been friends for very long. She de-friended me because I had said something (that I thought to be) innocuous about a politician, supporting him. We each knew the others political beliefs were strong and opposing, but decided to be friends anyway. When she ended the friendship, she did so saying that 'I may be a nice guy but she couldn't do it.' I said nothing that attacked her beliefs, mocked them, or belittled or denigrated them in any way. I simply said a kind one-liner supporting someone who I thought was of noble character.

Afterwards, I had conversations about how I thought what she did was highly intolerant. She professed a superiority about what she believed, and unabashedly put her beliefs on her public pages for all to see, yet she couldn't tolerate someone doing the same thing but from the opposing side. I saw what she did as intolerant and hypocritical. Good friends reminded me, then, that they too disagreed with many political stands I take, but that it's our right to do so, and that (in this time of the politically left ascendant) I must probably feel as they did through years when the right held the reigns of power. There's a lot of truth in that.

But what my ex-friend did made me mad because what she did seemed small. How dare someone put politics before human affection? If I were injured, would she stop mouth to mouth if she learned I had voted Republican? Would it matter whether or not if she donated a kidney to me if she learned I had supported the former president? Would she stop to help a Samaritan like me in need, or would she be one of the priests of hypocrisy who walk on by? It really bothered me because, while those examples may seem extreme, in reality they aren't. Scripture is a lifeline. It's a guidebook for living full of tools, sayings, history and advice for living, to be sure. But boil all that lighthearted stuff away and you see that it deals in life and death issues. It is God passing life onto us who are bound to death. He doesn't care, literally won't give a damn, for our political beliefs or the things that divide us here because his love and wisdom are beyond that. He wants all of us in the same heaven because He knows none of the petty things we cling to here will matter there. There won't be any Democrats, Lutherans, whale saving hippies, San Francisco liberals, soccer moms or sanctimonious authors in heaven. Instead, there will be men and women united in the love of Him who loved us first.

He gives us his love while testing the heart. Democrat or Republican, conservative or liberal, right or left and right or wrong: the crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests the heart. What things we espouse here may define our system of values but the LORD will refine them away. They will be purified and what isn't pure will be burned away, discarded. What remains will be pure, cleansed by belief from the heart in the pure love of the Savior. There is nothing here of value that can stand next to what love He gives to us as His free gift. It's not to say He doesn't want us to stand for what is right (even when it can be left). But those things will matter very little in the real long run.

And here's the hardest thing to say: He does all this because He is intolerant. He isn't intolerant of liberals, conservatives, Jews, Muslims, Catholics, Martians, Baptists, homosexuals or people who wear flip flops on airplanes. He is intolerant of anything that could sully that perfect love and wisdom He so wants to share with us. He refuses to budge on that, and because it's the best thing possible, He wants it for us. To that end, He refuses to tolerate anything that injects impurity into that love. In the magnifying glass of love, my conservative beliefs are just as impure as my ex-friend's radically left San Francisco liberal ones. Both are impure and would be refined away to leave the love underneath them as the only thing to remain.

So why can't we all just get along? Because we're different, because we're sinful, and because God likes variety. I pity my ex-friend for her intolerant actions in ending our friendship because, for a self-professed free-thinker, she couldn't

tolerate thinking outside her confined little box even to accept something that was a harmless observation. I think what she did was wrong, and I think it limits her, belittles her standing. She's still my sister in the faith, even as I don't know what she does or doesn't believe about God. The gift of God's wise love is hers just as much as it is mine or yours, and He wants her to cherish that gift just as much as He wants me to. And she's still just as needy of redemption as I am. And I hope to see her in heaven where none of this will matter.

Today's devotion said that 'we are incapable of surviving on self-confidence alone.' Conservatism won't redeem your soul and liberalism may just ruin it. Switch those words around and they might seem just as true. We are incapable of saving ourselves and sharing true love with each other. Thanks be to the Almighty, then, who uses his wisdom to refine away the slag and leave behind the pure metal jewels of faith, hope, and love.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 11 November 2010

Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city. Proverbs 16, verse 32.

Ninety-two years ago today was the end of World War I. No war had ever happened on the scale of this one. War had been going on since Cain and Abel, and there are some who think war is a naturally occurring animal tendency. It is a part of human nature, and some say that warlike behavior is innate within us. Every so often war would occur for any number of reasons, and when it did, it would clear out population, remake the landscape, and eventually restore new order. Not to make light of it, but it was no big deal.

That is, until the holocaust of World War I. Decades later, we can't fathom single battles in which a million men were murdered for no gain. We forget all the causes, and we forget that nearly 10 million soldiers and 7 million civilians were slaughtered in the name of human vanity. There had never been a war like that, where the true brutality of the human spirit was unleashed and coupled with new technologies and brash incompetence. Since the Armistice, there have been even more terrible wars, many of them directly or indirectly resulting from what happened in 1918.

Today, 92 years after the war ended, there is one American serviceman left who was in France on the day it happened. Several years ago, my family and I contemplated visiting this man just to meet him. I wanted my children to meet a man who was a living link to that cataclysm. His name is Frank Buckles, and he served on the Western Front in 1918. He had sailed to Europe onboard the Carpathia, and spent the trip talking with crew members who had been aboard ship the night it rescued survivors from the Titanic. During World War II, as a merchant mariner, he was held prisoner by the Japanese for years, enduring yet another terrible war and terrible hardship for his country. I wanted my kids meet this man who had lived through so much because he was the last man standing from that time and they would never have an opportunity to meet another. Sadly the meeting never happened and it's doubtful that it ever will.

Today, remember Frank Buckles and the millions, Triple Alliance and Triple Entente alike, who served with him. Remember the millions of soldiers who served in World War II and Korea, wars themselves that are becoming distant memories. Remember the soldiers from Vietnam, and my brothers and sisters from the Gulf War, and especially the heroes serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Know that you will never find men or women who love peace more than those who willingly volunteer to serve that their service might protect liberty and those they love. You will never find people more trained and prepared to fight war that long-living peace may reign after victory. Nobody in their right mind wants war, especially those who will fight them. And nobody who fights war could want peace more because they understand the costs involved. Ask any man who has volunteered his life what this proverb means to him. I have an idea what the answer will be.

To the parents, families and friends whose sons and daughters are serving at war today, as a veteran I salute you and them, and thank you for sending them off to fight where we couldn't. I pray for their safety and your comfort, and that they may usher in swift conclusion to the terror of war and return home on wings of eagles. They are the patient men who would rather live in that patience than be the warrior taking the city. But they put on the armor of the warrior that the rest of us may live in that patient peace. Your sons and daughters are the best our country can offer and they are heroes. Thank you for them.

I am a warrior. I proudly gave service to my country in the best years of my life and given the same choices, I would do so again. These days, I'm more focused on earning, raising my kids, and restoring sanity to my family. I have the luxury to live in patient peace and to pursue my interests because there are heroes serving in our military standing guard and taking fight to the enemy. We are free because of their service, because of mine so many years ago, and because of the service given by my heroic brothers and sisters with whom it was my humble honor to serve.

And we're free because of men like Frank Buckles, the last of the Doughboys and the last link to a world gone away. He has lived most of his life understanding the truth of this proverb, that it is better to live in patient peace than to have to live as a warrior in the horror of war. First-hand, he personally saw that horror, twice. When he passes away, he will be buried in Arlington, our nation's most hallowed place and that terrible war in which he served ninety years ago will finally, peacefully be laid to rest with him. Though I've never met him, thank you sir for all you've done for your country.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 12 November 2010

Gray hair is a crown of glory, it is gained in a righteous life. Proverbs 16, verse 31.

Once more I'll use the words here to introduce you to someone you probably don't know. Yesterday it was the last veteran from the First World War. Today will be someone I know.

Allow me to introduce you to my third grade teacher, Mrs. Mary Winn. I've known Mrs. Winn since I was eight years old. Even then, she looked old to me; I suppose most kids think like that. She was in her mid fifties when she taught me. Today, she's 89. Today, as an adult, she's still "Mrs. Winn" to me; I can't bring myself to address her by her first name. It just wouldn't be right.

She was my homeroom teacher at Jefferson Elementary in Clinton, Iowa. As in most elementary schools, whoever was your homeroom teacher was the teacher who taught most of your subjects. So it was in Mrs. Winn's class. I remember very little of the things we learned that year; my family lived in Clinton less than 12 months before moving elsewhere. I can't exactly tell you what I learned in mathematics, reading or history under her tutelage though a number of memories remain. There was an Indian program where all of us in the class wore Indian headdresses that we'd made ourselves in a Kachina dance. I remember her telling how, as a young girl, she met the tallest man in the world, one Robert Wadlow, way back in the 1920s. At Christmastime, we danced in a school program to "Babes in Toyland;" something I can't quite picture happening in schools today. We studied a unit about Thomas Jefferson, the namesake of our school and Mrs. Winn's hero. And I remember a spelling test where everyone in the class except one girl (Tracy Quinn) failed to correctly spell the word "drawer;" I think I spelled it "droor" and still struggle with it to this day.

And I remember feeling loved. I had friends, and I was a friend with all the kids in the class. After we moved, I received a package at my new home with cards and notes from each of the kids. I was having a rough time in the new school and the care package meant the world to me. To this day, I remember sitting in my room, crying because I missed my friends and I wanted to go home.

That memory is still tender and it is so because of Mary Winn. In all my years I've never known someone who taught more through selflessness and caring strength. She put her all into teaching her students, doing her best to take each of us under her wing and let us know she cared. Times were different and kids were more well-behaved in school, and I like to think that's as much because of the example set for us by people like Mrs. Winn as for things we learned at home. She made learning special because she made us feel special, important, and valued. And she didn't do it by playing amateur psychologist or using a bunch of speculative learning theory. She did it by caring.

Mrs. Winn and her husband, James (himself another extraordinary person and teacher), befriended my parents and they remain so to this day. Mr. Winn died several years ago, so she is alone, a widow still living on her own. I can't speak for how much that loss hurt; I'm sure there aren't good enough words. Yet she endures, even perseveres, and when I think of my wife's favorite Bible verse, from Romans chapter 5, I also think how it applies to Mrs. Winn. In her life, suffering produced perseverance, perseverance character, and character then produced hope. My teacher embodies hope.

And I think of her when I read today's proverb, how her gray (actually white) hair is a crown of glory gained in having lived a life of righteousness. She had a full, long marriage, given to a man to whom she was perfectly matched. She raised two children and lived long enough to bury them as well, yet did so celebrating their lives rather than wallowing in the devastating loss. And she passed on a legacy to hundreds of children who spent a year in her care, learning lessons of love that would serve them all their days. As her alumna, I can testify that was the most valuable lesson of all.

A few weeks ago, I saw Mrs. Winn again. On my way home from a family reunion in Minnesota, my mother and I stayed at her house, still impeccably kept by a woman still living in her prime. She was a gracious host who neither lived nor moved with the decrepitude I would have expected from someone who, a few months from now, will be enter her tenth decade. She cooked meals for us, serving squash that she bragged she had just harvested from a garden she planed herself. We were entertained with her showing off dozens of things she had made, and with stories of things she had done. We stayed only one night but it was one of the most satisfying nights of my life.

I shouldn't have been surprised but I was amazed that, despite a career of nearly seventy years, she's still going strong. I suspect that, when death finally catches her to reunite her with her beloved husband, it will have to do so at a full clip because she doesn't show any signs of slowing down soon. Mrs. Winn still teaches part time (3 or 4 mornings per week)

though she's been formally retired for over two decades. She leads, not just participates in, a group of bell-ringers who give several concerts per year. She knits and crochets some of the most beautiful quilts you'll ever find. And she was telling us of her plans to drive out to California to see her grandchildren because she was going to babysit her toddler great-grandchildren for a week while her grandson and his wife took a cruise. She even mentioned something about a return trip to Europe; I think it would be her seventh time overseas.

I think back over a life of lessons I've learned, and I think that much of my love of learning them I gained from the third grade year I spent in Mary Winn's class. A number of my school teachers meant a lot to me; Mrs. Pickens, Mrs. Herbert, Mrs. Kennen, Mr. Dorsett, Miss Erickson: each of them taught me that it was a privilege to be a student. They wouldn't know it but before them was the woman from third grade and she was one of the best ever. I'm still friends with several of my fellow students from that year. And I still live in celebration of ideals I learned that year. Diligence, devotion, respect, friendship, caring and understanding: they aren't just words. They are a code by which to live life, and they're a code I learned from Mrs. Winn, the lady with the white hair of glory, gained lovingly in a life replete with righteousness

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 15 November 2010

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD. Proverbs 16, verse 33.

Last week I was in a discussion about luck. One of my favorite people had a tough task to do, and I wished her luck with it. That led to further discussion. I said it was more of a courtesy that I wished her luck because, as I later explained, I don't really believe in luck. Usually, I'll say "be well" or "do well," "do your best," that kind of thing. That wasn't always the case; I used to believe quite strongly in luck, letting it serve as a way out of my lack of preparation for things. Time was that I believed in luck, chance, fate, and all the good things that could come from playing the numbers. I think it was Mary Chapin Carpenter who sang it: the stars might lie but the numbers never do.

At least that's what I thought. The deeper I dove into my faith in God, though, the less I believed in luck. Sure, things happen that, to us, seem like random chances. We meet people out of the blue and friendships start. Something happens that, to us, seems like exactly the right thing that could happen at just the right moment; the reverse of that is true as well. We wake up in the morning and just feel lucky. The more I contemplated what I believe about God, the less I believed that those random things were truly random. I began to see that it's impossible to believe that God is active in the details of our lives and still hold that only random acts of wily luck are what determine those details.

The more I contemplated what I strived to understand, the more I believed that what seems like luck to us is standard procedure for God. It isn't some stellar revelation: to me, it's just an observation of what is. I know that God has plans for each of us; He knows the strategy of our lives and the direction in which we're moving. Over time I've come to believe that He's also more involved than just being an interested observer. I've come to believe that He nudges us towards directions in which he wants us to move, then allows us the choices as to whether or not we'll move those ways. When we mess up, He lets us learn the consequences of them, and He does it as loving instruction and not as punishment. He does that because He knows what real punishment is and He wants us to avoid that. When we do things that are pleasing, we reap rewards. In all things, He blesses us by never letting go and never backing out of those details. I've come to believe that it isn't luck that puts opportunity in our lives: it's God.

In other words, I support what the verse here says because I see it is oh so true. Things we see as gambling, chance, or luck are God moving in our lives. He's like the breeze blowing, the stream that waters the field, and the air all around us. He helps, supports, defends and sustains us, and He is always at work to make the best of our lives. It's because of love.

So what about the other random stuff that happens? Tornados, terminal illness, fender benders, fighting, robbery, bills we can't pay, kids who won't do their homework: aren't those God moving in our lives too? No, I don't believe they are. I believe the negatives in our lives are the consequences of living in a fallen world, a world that wasn't created for hurt, pain, loss, or anguish. We may not cause those things, but they're loose in the world and they wander into our lives. They affect us and hurt us, and they happen quite a lot. Sometimes it seems they happen by chance, sometimes it seems by design.

Where God comes into the picture is in always offering us a way. If it is by design and it is from God, isn't it undeniable that with bad things always come choices to cause good to happen? I can honestly say that, with every negative or hurt that I've caused or endured, there have always been choices open to me that told me right from wrong. Sometimes it seemed like they were the lesser of two evils, but I think now that the choices were ways for God to offer me paths towards healing, paths away from further destruction. Sure, those random things still seem to happen; I don't cause all calamity that happens in my life. But I do choose how I react to it, and as long as I make those choices in good faith, clinging to what I believe about God, then I do the best I can to live out that faith and make it more than just Sunday morning words.

Last night, I had a dream about hell. It was, well, quite disturbing. The scariest part of it was how calm the dream was, how reasoned it was that I was in hell because I deserved to be. I had said and done things all through my life that weren't in good faith, and I had been a hypocrite, squandering the grace given to me and rejecting the love of Him who just wanted me to love Him in return. I had gotten what I deserved, and I was in hell, separated for all time from love, comfort, and joy. Was that dream just random thoughts and synaptic connections reconnecting the pathways in my subconscious? Or was it a message from God saying "come back to me?" Maybe it was just blind luck. I don't know; I honestly don't. I choose, though, to look at that particular dream as the dice cast in my lap, offering me a choice as to whether or not I choose to do better. I can flaunt God's good grace as I so often do, or I can get with the program and begin to do better. Perhaps the dream is a decision from God to act in the details of my mind, saying "I don't want this for

you. Come back to me.” At least that’s how I’ll look at it, and maybe tonight I won’t wake up in a cold sweat again. To paraphrase someone I know, “good luck with that one, Dave.”

Lots of people believe in luck and to be honest I don’t see anything wrong with that. Solomon did; so did the ancient Hebrews and Christ’s disciples who, when they couldn’t reach decisions, cast dice to make the decision for them. They didn’t do it to leave those decisions up to chance: they cast lots because they honestly believed God would make His will known through that method and that it would a way for Him to actively break the impasse they’d reached. I look at that as faith, not luck, and I hope I can do the same. After all, I too am not beyond flipping a coin every now and then. Not a bad thought with which to conquer a Monday. Whatever is up ahead of you this week, do well, do your best, and if it helps you, good luck with it too.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 16 November 2010

Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting with strife. Proverbs 17, verse 1.

Peace. We all want peace. Remember "Miss Congeniality," and how all the ditzzy pageant contestants said they wanted world peace? Well, I guess I'm with them in that a little world peace these days would be a great thing. It's unlikely, especially when there are wackos in the world who want to kill us just because of who we are, but it's a nice goal. I want peace as much as the next guy.

But more than world peace, I want some peace in my life. I spend most of my nights alone. I'm a traveling consultant and I usually spend three or four nights per week in strange hotel rooms in even stranger towns. My days are busy, especially days like yesterday when I was up at 0400 to catch a flight to California. I work all day, travel and drive a lot, and am usually on the go. It's a profitable life and I am fortunate to have a good career, but it comes with a price tag. For my family, it means separation. For me, it means the same thing plus being alone. It isn't a very peaceful existence.

Because I'm gone so much, even my weekends are hectic. Take this weekend, when I was running errands, doing tasks, or otherwise eating up the time between Thursday night and Monday morning. If there was a free minute, I filled it with something. My time was not my own because I had things to do, things that had to be done in the few hours I was actually home. Just like being alone, it wasn't a very peaceful time.

And inside, I'd like some peace there. Inside, I'm all emotional turmoil, rarely letting people in and holding in things that I'd do better to let go. I've done what is evil and failed to do what is good. I know I'm forgiven, but it's still so hard sometimes to let it all go. There's a lot that I hold inside, deep inside, and it never sees the light of day because facing it still hurts so much. Yes, I'd like some peace there too.

You'd think that, by now, I'd have learned that it's better to have peace with little than to have a lot and no peace. I'm forty-four years old and ashamed to admit that I still haven't fully learned that lesson. That old brass ring still looks shiny, and I'm acutely aware, maybe too much so, of all the responsibilities on my plate. When I get home on the weekends I still let myself get all wrapped around the axle over things that really don't matter very much in the long run. Yes, it's important to keep the house clean, get the laundry folded, and get the errands done. In the context of eternity matters most, though, let's be honest: those things are small potatoes. It's important to teach our children, by doing, lessons they'll need to remember when they're adults. For me, it's hard to remember that they learn just as much by sitting at the feet of Jesus as they do from tidying up their rooms. It's that whole Mary versus Martha thing.

Real peace comes with listening to what God is telling us. Peace in my day to day life comes from living out His Golden Rule and from sharing the way He loves us with others, especially with strangers. It comes with living by example. Peace in my family comes with listening rather than talking, calm instead of rashness. Peace inside comes with those talks with God that I usually brush off to the side and tell myself "I'll do that later." There is no later and He is listening now. Peace comes from letting go. And world peace? Let me tell you that I don't think it comes with some worthless piece of paper, yet God can do amazing things with even the simplest tools.

So today I'll keep that in perspective. I'll remember this verse and remember that it talks about peace and contentment. It tells me to count my blessings instead of counting my shekels, and it reminds me that the former is always more bountiful than the latter. Finally, taking it to the next logical step, it reminds me that pursuing a living for the people I love, even for my own satisfaction is, of itself, a righteous thing when I do so using faith as my guide. God blesses us no matter what we do. If we do our best and use our talents righteously, then we might just be amazed at all the wonderful things that result whether they're dollar signs or not. I'll work to keep that perspective because that perspective will keep me in check with my work. To paraphrase Mr. Frey, that's a peaceful, easy feeling that I know won't let me down.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 17 November 2010

A wise servant will rule over a disgraceful son, and will share the inheritance as one of the brothers. Proverbs 17, verse 2.

This verse is taking some real brainpower for me to unpack. It's late at night, or early in the morning, and my brain isn't working too hard. I've never had any servants even though I've done disgraceful things. My family isn't wealthy, so a large financial inheritance isn't something I look forward to. Maybe it isn't talking about just those physical aspects of life, though. Perhaps there's more to it than just meets the eye.

Perhaps the first part of it is saying that we should expect the unexpected. Admit it: we all do disgraceful things. Even the most upright of us sometimes does things of which we aren't proud, things we wouldn't want to see on the front page of the local paper. Those who work with us closely see what we do, and sometimes they speak up, sometimes not. Sometimes the people around us give us correction, and sometimes they just let it slide. Those who work for us most definitely see what we do. We want to be admired, want people to model us, but sometimes it just doesn't happen. Sometimes we slip, fall, and we do things we wouldn't want to be known for, wouldn't want modeled. And people see that, especially people who support us. They see it and they keep score.

I think the first part of the verse says that those people are wise if they learn from our mistakes. Sometimes that means using what they learn to their advantage, and sometimes that's to our disadvantage. Not to sound too tough but, ya know, that's the breaks. It happens. There have been plenty of times in my life when others have profited from my mistakes, and there have been plenty of times when others have risen because I have fallen. It happens, and just because it happens doesn't necessarily mean it's a bad thing.

It's not necessarily bad because it means that justice is done. People get what they deserve, and good people are rewarded. It isn't a call for vengeance or retribution, and I don't read the verse to be license for us to take advantage of each other. Instead, I think it means that the world can be a harsh place. For the most part, when someone wins, someone else loses. Those who strive to do their best are, by and large, rewarded while those who don't try usually falter. I read that whole sharing in the inheritance clause to be an endorsement of hard work and honest effort. Those who put forth that effort share in the blessings of good rewards.

So how is it that so many unscrupulous people get ahead? To be honest, beats me. I haven't yet become cynical enough to think that everyone is rotten to the core. There really are people with bad intentions who will rise to the top of the heap and work like crazy to stay there. I mean, how else do we account for the Congress? All kidding aside, of course there are bad characters who will lie, cheat and steal, backstab, gossip, and do whatever it takes to get ahead. I'm comforted by the fact that what goes around eventually does come around, and that justice wins out in the end. There comes that whole part about people watching, and God is not indifferent. Good eventually does win out and evil will one day be vanquished.

At the end of it, I still don't know if that's exactly what the verse is getting at, but I'm content enough to believe that it's at least somewhere in the ballpark. I'm down a few brain cells from contemplating it, but perhaps they weren't being put to good enough use anyway. I don't need servants, I don't need wealth, and I also don't need to constantly look over my shoulder being paranoid that someone is after what I do have. What I really need is just to walk another day in grace and be thankful for the chance to put this one into practice. That's something that doesn't require much thought at all.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 18 November 2010

He who mocks the poor shows contempt for their Maker; whoever gloats over disaster will not go unpunished. Proverbs 17, verse 5.

Times are tough. There's no doubt about that. We are all trimming our belts (and believe me, I need to trim mine more!) and it's so hard this year to make ends meet for most everyone I know. But you know, there's the saying that's even truer today than I've ever known it to be before: there's always someone who's worse off than you. Things can indeed be pretty bad with sinking incomes, rising prices, job loss, and uncertainty everywhere. I know people who are out of work, and I know people who juggle late bills just to be able to buy food. I don't believe the lies told by the government or on the news: things aren't getting that much better and if you believe history, they're soon likely to get much worse. That means people are hurting.

The poor are among us, my friends, and they are us. They're not just the homeless living under the bridges or the single parents struggling to get by. They don't just live in the sticks and they don't just shop at the dollar stores. The poor are our neighbors, our best friends, our family members. They might even be us.

What's more, it's not just a lack of wealth that makes us poor. There are people who need encouragement, people who are distraught and sad. Friends, family and strangers who are struggling to find meaning, to find understanding and compassion. There are people who need love. Wherever there is a dearth of compassion and love there is poverty. If you've ever done without love and understanding, you know what I'm talking about. If we stand by and do nothing when there's something we can do, then don't we mock our Maker?

One hundred five years ago my grandmother was born in a Salvation Army hospital in Minnesota. She grew into the most caring, loving person I ever knew. She used her life to give love and reflect the love of God to others, even when she lived through so much heartache and hurt. I knew her when she was down, but even then she never let it defeat her and she always talked and acted for others, not herself. My grandmother had need but she always shared and loved. In her honor and memory, I ring bells for the Salvation Army every year. I'll do so again here very soon. It's not to gloat or show off what I can do: it's to celebrate, encourage, and share the kind of love she had for me and others. It's to honor our Maker and heal the hurt of disaster. If it weren't for strangers who gave their love and treasure, my grandmother might never have lived. For her and so many other reasons, every day is the time to do something about it.

So, I'm using this verse to challenge you to action. This season, let's do more with our words than just speak them. Next week is Thanksgiving. This season, let's give thanks by giving to each other. Invite a neighbor. Give an extra gift. Donate food to a food drive. Volunteer a couple hours to go serve at a shelter. Be a bell-ringer. Buy the fixin's for a full dinner for someone you know who's in need and donate to them anonymously. Read to your kids. Do something for someone with less. Talk and listen. Even just pray; really, earnestly pray. John Lennon sang it out loud: "and so this is Christmas and what have you done?" Christmas is still more than a month away. I'm challenging you to go DO SOMETHING to show how much you care because I believe you do care. Find a niche and fill it. Use just a little of your time, talent or treasure to help someone who needs help and do it with the thankful, giving heart of a servant. I'm not challenging you to become Mother Theresa: I'm daring you to be yourself.

Give, love, and serve. I challenge you to do it soon, do it now. In doing so, you'll reflect the love of your Maker and share it with others who need it. I'll do it. What say you?

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 20 November 2010

Children's children are a crown to the aged, and parents are the pride of their children. Proverbs 17, verse 6.

I had breakfast with my youngest daughter yesterday. We hadn't had time to catch up on things, she didn't have anything to do in her first class of the day, and I didn't have much going on with work, so I took her to breakfast. We all lead busy lives. With my being gone so much, and her working two jobs while still in school, we don't connect much. Relationships, housework, downtime, chores and a thousand other details eat up most of our time. For just a few minutes, we sat at an IHOP and talked, really talked, about things we don't consider very often.

It got me thinking about two things. First, I began to think how this will be the rest of our lives. In just a few months, she'll graduate and life will take her down her own road. I don't know exactly what she wants to do to start out her journey; to be honest, I don't think she does either. It's a point of frustration for us, but in time it will play itself out and the universe will unfold for her as it should. Wherever life leads her, our time together will be shared in fits and starts, in stolen moments like our breakfast. She isn't a little girl anymore, and being a dad I know part of me will always see her as one. I still see her in the blueberry dance outfit, and sucking her thumb in bed. I still see her crying when we left Colorado, and on Christmas mornings with her hair all frazzled. Or sitting at the breakfast bar at home, doing her makeup and saying, "Daddy would you make me an omelette....PLLEEEEEEEASE?" (said, of course, with a cheesy smile and those batting eyelashes). She's a grown woman now, sharp, talented, bright, and completely gorgeous. She, her sister, and their brother are no longer the little children I've loved for so long because they're growing into the women and man I hope to love for even longer. For the rest of our lives, we'll take only a few moments now and then to fellowship together, and while I will be sad that those moments can be far in-between, I'll rejoice too that these wonderful people are equipped and loved to live good lives of their own making. Their mother and I had a part in that.

The second thing I considered how true this proverb is. During our breakfast, I hadn't yet read the verse, so when I got home and did so, I was struck by how much it had hit me. I don't yet have grandchildren; I don't think of myself as old enough to be a grandfather even though many of my classmates and friends already are. My children are the crowning achievement of my life, and while I live I hope I have loved and shared enough for them to know that. Nothing I do in this world will ever make my life more meaningful than to have shared love in their lives: love of a parent, love of a child, and the love of God Himself. Nothing could ever mean more.

When the time comes, I hope their children know that too. Someday, they will likely have kids of their own, kids who, I hope, bring them as much love and joy as they bring to me. I do what I do and live the life I do to work for success that, in part, is theirs from which to benefit. I do it because I love them, and one day I hope to be able to do so for their children as well. I want to be a grandparent like my friends Danny and Beth, or like my uncle and my sister, or even my mom. They're all selfless and giving, sharing and loving. Someday, whenever that happens, I want to share that love that nurtured my kids – and nurtured me – with their kids. I want them to know how wonderful they are, how cherished they will be, and very special they are to the God who loves them so much.

I hope that, in doing this, they have pride in me too. Moms love their kids unconditionally and with caring ferocity. The secret we don't talk about much is that dads do as well; we're just wired different. Part of that wiring, I think, is that we want those whom we love to be proud of us. My love language is 'words of affirmation' and I do what I do to love by affirming and being affirmed. I do what I do so that those I love will be proud of me. It's not a thing of vanity: it's an act of love. I hope that all I do shows my kids especially that I love them so very much and would do just about anything to secure that love for them.

When we finished breakfast, we went to the store to get a few things, then I took her to school. Of course she tried to con an Ocean Water out of me (a Sonic drink...if you haven't tried it, I highly recommend doing so). I passed on that option because, after all, we'd just had breakfast and my wallet needed some its own affirmation. I dropped her off at school, then went out to tackle my own day knowing it started it out just right. Daughter and I may not have much time to spend together, but I cherish the moments when we do because they make all those spent apart worthwhile. Going forward, I hope to do the same with her sister, and her brother too. Brother, in fact, wants to go to the gym this afternoon to abuse his old man and show off all the moves he can do; he's an affirmer too. There are only so many hours in the day. I thank God He gives us some of them to consider what matters most.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 22 November 2010

Arrogant lips are unsuited to a fool – how much worse lying lips to a ruler! Proverbs 17, verse 7.

Now I'm confused. I thought arrogance was foolish. And, watching our current politics, I've come to think that most in government are liars. Some of our leaders are downright arrogant and, to me, they're foolish. And there are plenty of them who seem to brazenly lie with ease.

Still, it ain't braggin if you can do it. Dizzy Dean said that, and he should have known. On the surface, that's a cocky, arrogant statement to make but if you dig deeper, I think you see that there's truth in it. If you are practiced, if you develop a talent, if you are committed to using that talent to its fullest ability, and if you do what you do fully in loving submission to the Almighty, then there's nothing at all arrogant or bragging about saying such things. There's nothing foolish about it either, because it's the truth.

Maybe that's the point, then. It aint braggin if you can do it, because it's the truth. If it's the truth, then it doesn't work well with fools because truth is never foolish. It can be harsh, cold, hot, convicting, liberating, reflective, honest and brutal. It could even be considered arrogant, cocky, maybe even a bit condescending (or at least how it is presented). But it is never foolish.

Or perhaps it's also a common sense warning. There's always someone bigger than you and it hurts to be knocked down a notch or two. Fools talk and fools brag and if a fool isn't careful they will eventually find themselves cornered. Ever been in a bar fight? They usually start with fools. Most fools I know, including the one I sometimes see in the mirror, shouldn't brag if they can't do it and yet brag we do. And it often doesn't end well. Maybe this is just a warning to clam up.

So why is it worse to be a lying ruler than an arrogant fool? Perhaps it has something to do with abuse of authority. This morning's devotion talked about submitting to authorities and how submitting to righteous authority reflects how we should submit in faith. If the authorities, whether they be bosses, leaders, or temporary occupants of the Oval Office, lie and abuse their authority, how much worse is it for them than to simply be an arrogant fool? So many politicians are arrogant and, in my opinion, so many of them look foolish. How much worse, then, for someone with authority to abuse the position and power entrusted to them through deliberate deceit. You can overlook a fool for overcooking his abilities, but a ruler knows fully what he or she can or should do. What comes around goes around and it'll eventually go around hard.

The longer I write about the proverbs, the more I see the same things re-occurring. Arrogance, wisdom, foolishness, lies, authority: the same themes are discussed over and over throughout the book. Sometimes I do indeed get confused about them but reading in context of the other verses helps, as does using one part of Scripture to interpret another. Through doing that, it becomes clearer, less confusing.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 23 November 2010

A bribe is a charm to the one who gives it; wherever he turns, he succeeds. Proverbs 17, verse 8.

Smooth talkers like me, beware: this one is all about us.

Have you been bribed lately? Has someone given you something to do something for them? Have you been bought off by compliments, flattery or smooth talk? Are you easily swayed into doing things that you wouldn't otherwise do by people whose motives might be questionable at best? I have some bad news for you: you've been bribed. And it's a noble thing of you to want to think well of the person who bribed you. After all, I believe we all try to see the best in people. It just doesn't work though.

There really are people in the world who are users. There really are people in the world who will say and do things just to hurt you. There really are people in the world who are hurting so badly themselves that they truly think they can only feel better if others hurt like them. There really are such people because, to be honest, I have been one of them. I have been one of those people who is co-dependent, looking to fix other people's problems because, in reality, it's me who has the problem. I've been a sweet-talker who uses his words to make people feel better in hopes they'll make me feel better too. Thus, I agree with the proverb as a sad commentary on the sinful nature of people because I have been one of them.

Do you agree with it?

Are you a sweet talker too? Are you one of the people who has used your words to get what you want? Have you been co-dependent like me? Have you ever manipulated anyone? No need for confession, here. I don't need to know your particular poison; it's between you and God. That's the thing about it, you know. Other people may be impressed with my fancy words or my smooth talk but there's no hiding from God. He knows what's in our hearts, and He knows why we say what we say. He understands our motives, and He loves us in spite of them. He knows that all our wrongs permanently separate us from what's right and good and that all the smooth talking in the world won't talk our way out of punishment...

...if we don't change. If we don't turn from that and start using our words and our time earnestly, honestly living in faith in him, then we're done for. You can't bribe your way out of hell, and you can't bribe your way into heaven. Change, however, is something you can believe in. Real hope and change, not that slimy version sold by smooth talking, sleazy politicians means using our words to encourage, build up, support, care and love each other. Such things aren't commentary on anything: instead, they are foundational. They serve as the building blocks for real success. And they don't need deceitful charm to work. They need love because they are love.

I don't like admitting that I have done and said ugly things. I also don't like admit that I've been taken in my smooth talking predators smoother than myself, that what they say and do really hurts. You don't see them coming. The blessing of it all is the clarity to look back on that and see where you've acted in the same way towards others. Then you can learn from it; then you can change. Then you can do better, be better, say better. Then you can build instead of destroy, and love instead of bribe.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 24 November 2010

He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends. Proverbs 17, verse 9.

Chapter 17 of Proverbs contains a lot of (what I believe to be) common sense, practical wisdom. They aren't just sayings or advice about wisdom: they are verses we can put into practice. Granted, it isn't easy, but when was it easy to do anything that matters in life? So this verse is exhorting us to cover up for our friends, right? My teenagers get that; this is the kind of thing they understand. You cover for me and I'll cover for you; very Jersey Shore.

Um, no. Especially since, if you have spent any time watching Jersey Shore, you see way too much of the repeating-the-matter-separating-friends bit. Gossip and selfishness do that.

No, this is love. This is the test of love. It's putting into practice something practical that is very difficult but is deeply meaningful. I wrong you, you forgive me. You wrong me, I forgive you. Sooner or later, we'll do something wrong again. Maybe it's a big thing or maybe it's small. Maybe it's something personal or maybe it's inadvertent. Sooner or later, you or I will commit some offense and we'll be at the point of conflict. What to do?

The proverb offers good advice: let it slide. Don't sweat the small stuff. Cover over the offense with forgiveness. Cover it with love. I'll cover you in prayer and forgiving love that will render meaningless whatever offense was committed. What's more, if it's worthwhile, I may confront you with it in love immediately. I may come to you and say "this is why it's wrong" or "this hurt and here's why." I won't harp at you about it, and I won't use it as a weapon to beat you down. Instead, I'll lovingly tell you why it means something to me and ask for your help in remedying the situation. I'll ask you to do the same to me. Chances are we'll compromise. Chances are I'm not perfect either and may have done something to bring it on. Either way, I won't hold it against you. I'll cover it over in love because that's what Jesus would do.

Even better: I won't hold it against you and I won't bring it up again. In our lives, we all hold on to too much baggage. God knows I do and at 44 I'm only now starting to really let go of the crap that I've held onto for decades. It feels good to let down the weight, to get it off my shoulders, and I see now what a fool I've been for carrying it around for so long. I don't like feeling like a fool. What's more, I really don't like making you feel like one either. I don't like seeing someone I love and care for feeling small, or controlled, or belittled. So I won't hold your wrongs against you, and I won't bring them up again out of the blue. I've done so many things wrong in life that if you or anyone else held all of them against me, I couldn't face it. It would be too much and I would break. If it weren't for loving forgiveness, the weight of my sins would be more than I could bear.

So I won't hold yours against you and I hope you'll do the same for me. I choose to do that because I choose to love you instead. I choose that because love is a choice. We don't have to cover our offenses in love; we could exist without that. It wouldn't be much of an existence, though, and those stumbling blocks would always be in front of us. I want to let go of them. He chose to love. To quote Max Lucado, He chose the nails. He didn't have to and he wasn't asked to. He did it anyway to cover over all those offenses that weren't even His. He did it so close friends, brothers, and sisters, would no longer be separated. He did it to unite us, to move us forward, and to demonstrate love that transcends all understanding.

In the middle of all the common sense wisdom of the Proverbs is love. It binds them together, it points us to itself, it is the motivation for us to have faith and do better. It wasn't something we deserved; it is pure grace. As my friend Bill said last night, "it's like setting off a grace bomb," a huge explosion of undeserved love that forever changes the landscape of our lives. I think that's what covering over our offenses does: it changes our lives. It changes how we think, feel, and love, and it does so because we all need that love. We all need to have the burden taken from our shoulders, and we need the intimacy of the heart that forgiveness and love impart. The strange part about it is how hard it is to let go, how hard this can be to put into practice. The reward is worth it. On this day before Thanksgiving, I'm going to remember that. Hope you do to. Safe travels if you travel today; have fun no matter what you're doing.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 25 November 2010

A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity. Proverbs 17, verse 17.

Happy Thanksgiving and many blessings to you, friend reader. Hope you don't mind if I skipped ahead a few verses; we'll go back to the sagely proverbs tomorrow. Then again, tell me I'm wrong when I say that this is a very true statement of faith.

Today is about giving thanks. Like the first Thanksgiving in the 1620s, we give thanks to God for His blessings, for His sacrifice, and for his provisions for us. Foremost in my mind this year is the love of friends and family. It has been a heck of a year and it isn't over yet. With everything that has happened and everything we've been through, I don't know how I could have survived without the listening, affection, understanding, and caring from people in my life who loved me even at the worst of times. Even when I didn't deserve it. I have said things and done things of which I can't ever be proud, yet there were people who 'were there for me' even when I didn't deserve it.

That's a statement I have come to both respect and dread: I'm there for you. What does that really mean? Will I travel 2000 miles to be by your side if you get sick or get into trouble? Maybe. Will you come to my aide (again) if it's 2 AM and I'm distraught to the point of despair? Maybe. Can you and I count on each other to support each other, depend on each other, defend each other, and count on each other no matter what happens? Again, just and only maybe.

I say maybe because, well, things happen. "It" happens, and we all know what it is and what it feels like when it rolls over you. And you can be sure that it rolls and rolls downhill fast. Don't we all know that? It has rolled over me a lot this year. I know a few of you who are reading this and I think, from time to time, it has rolled over you too. When it rolls over you, whether you deserve it or not, you need a friend. This year, it rolled over me and I needed friends, and I found them. I found people who loved at all times, who loved without approving of my transgressions, and who loved through understanding. "It" smells in lots of difference ways and yet people loved me despite all of that.

Brothers (and sisters) are born for adversity. What does the country song say? You find out who your friends are. When you cause bad things to happen, when you get into trouble, when misfortune finds you, or when your heart is broken, you find out who your friends are. You learn that, in your adversity, you have brothers and sisters you never knew you had. People step up to defend you, to help you pick up the pieces, to learn to live again, and to tell you that God isn't done with you yet.

Today is Thanksgiving and today I give thanks that there is a God who redeemed me from all the wrongs I ever did. He bought me back from oblivion and saved me from the damnation that my misbegotten deeds deserve. One of the ways He reminded me of this was to send brothers and sisters who cared for me and helped me to care again. I'm thankful for loved ones, family, friends, even strangers who got me through tough times this year and helped me to believe again. They are people who helped me cling to faith, to believe in the power of forgiveness, and to believe in myself again. They helped me know what love is and to remember that friends love at all times and brothers and sisters are born for adversity. Today I'm thankful for them, and for all they've done. And for you. I'm thankful for you.

Thanksgiving Day 2010 finds me sitting down with my loved ones here in north Texas. We've had the traditional turkey, way too many side dishes, and desserts that are going to require many hundreds of sit-ups to work off. It's gone from 80 degrees yesterday to 40 and sinking, and in a few minutes I'm going to go build the first fire of the season in the presently-clean fireplace. We're watching the Cowboys trying to lose, and there has been drama, and there will even be some moments of unshakeable melancholy. No matter, I'm thankful for today. I'm very thankful to be where I am, to have the love I do in my life, and I'm thankful to be forgiven of all the sins that are mine alone. It's a real blessing in a world of increasing adversity. I'm thankful for you. Have a great holiday.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 29 November 2010

A rebuke impresses a man of discernment more than a hundred lashes a fool. Proverbs 17, verse 10.

Are you discerning? Do you figure things out? Do you read between the lines for meaning? More than that, do you learn for meaning? Do you try to get to the bottom of things not for control but for understanding?

I'll reveal a secret: I don't consider myself to be very discerning. I'm an educated man, and I'm given to knowing a lot about a lot of things and a little about others. I've been around the block a few times, and this ain't my first rodeo. Please understand I'm not bragging: it's just the way I am. I enjoy learning and always have, and I consider that to be one of my strengths.

All that being said, I just don't consider myself to be very discerning. You might (rightfully) call me an educated idiot. I try to not let it be so but I still find that I can be easily blindsided. What insights I do gain I gain through exposure to lots of facts or to reality. Once I know something or see the big picture, I understand it. Call it a 'big 'duh' moment.' I am slow, however, to recognize faults or traits in some people, and I'm also slow to recognize when I am in over my head or when things I say and do affect others. Maybe this is a secret you don't want to know about me, but I expose it to make a point.

I'm impressed by rebukes. I'm impressed when someone takes the time to correct me because, quite frankly, I need a lot of correction. I do best when I can see the white lines on the road. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to know that, when someone calls you on a point, you should listen. People rebuke us for many reasons. They do so to attain power, to make themselves feel better, to gain advantage or status, and to simply correct. If they care for us, however, if there is even a modicum of love in the relationship, then people will sometimes do the courageous and loving thing of rebuking us for cause.

I consider myself to be one of the more 'confident' people you'll ever meet. I have been rightfully called cocky and sometimes even arrogant. Sometimes those are incorrect labels; sometimes they're true. I feel confident in what I do know, I have faith in my faith and in my abilities, and I'm comfortable in my own skin about many things. I can be insecure, but not about basic principles. I know what I believe and I'm confident in saying so.

Yet I deserve rebuke now and then. I say things and do things that are wrong and I need to be brought up short on it. I've been rightfully called destroyer, despicable, deceiving, and a damn dirty dog; why is it that, like Dave, all those harsh words start with a d? I've been called other things too; I've been called many names and some are true. Usually, when things are said in anger, I let them slide yet there are times when I deserve it. That's another important D-word in the context of this verse: deserving. I find that I deserve rebukes when I get them from people who care for me. For all our sins, we really do deserve punishment. I do.

Yet instead of that punishment there is salvation. Hand in hand with that comes loving rebuke. And when that happens, I value it. It hurts to admit that you can be a destroying, despicable, deceiving damn dirty dog, but sometimes, through small things and large, that's what we can be. God bless the person who brings that to my attention. Or to yours. If their heart is in the right place, they're doing it out of affection, then it is something to value, to cherish. I count myself fortunate to have such people in my life, especially when I, like the green ogre, am like an onion, with stinky layers that enwrap each other to keep in the good and keep out everything altogether.

It's true that there are people who project on us and try to bring us down by rebuke. Some people work to make themselves better by tearing others down. It's also true that there are people who easily find fault in others and honestly believe they are helping by correcting and rebuking all while making glaring mistakes themselves. I find that, in both those cases, they are me and I am them, and while it's usually easy to identify them, it's also best if I let the small stuff slide. Where there is love and caring, though, if principle or danger is involved, the correction can indeed be in order. I appreciate it when people do this for me; I hope they do if I return the favor. It is done out of love. I may not always be the sharpest knife in the drawer but even I can discern that.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 30 November 2010

An evil man is bent only on rebellion, a merciless official will be sent against him. Proverbs 17, verse 11.

I don't know that I've ever known a truly evil man. I've known men and women who have done bad things, I mean really bad things. Some were good people who did bad deeds and, yes, some were genuinely bad rats who did things you'd expect of rats. I'm sure you know a few people like that too. I'm sure you know good people who have knowingly done things that were wrong, and sometimes they knowingly did them understanding what was involved. I'm sure you've known some bad characters too: people so despicable they and their behavior were below contempt. Sometimes you may have seen them in the mirror. I have.

One thing that I don't think I've ever really known, however, is that genuinely evil man. I understand that Hitler and Stalin were quite charming in person, and that Chairman Mao was aloof if arrogant. Yet those three men would be considered evil because they were responsible for the deaths of tens – maybe hundreds – of millions of innocent people. Charles Manson could be tender and hypnotic to the girls who loved him; who among us could also say he wasn't evil? Jack Abramhoff? Bernie Madoff? Are they evil? They knowingly swindled millions from unassuming citizens? Isn't that evil? At one time, Tim McVeigh was a quiet, exemplary soldier before he turned into a ruthless murderer? Evil. Osama Bin Laden? Evil incarnate today. Fred Phelps and his band of thugs from that so-called church in Kansas? Evil.

I've never personally known anyone like that.

So why is it that people can still be hell-bent on rebellion, on doing what is contrary or wrong, and we don't think of them as evil? I've lied, cheated, philandered, deceived, and hurt good people, and I've never even been to Chappaquidick. Am I evil? I hope not, but, yes, I've done evil things. And when I have, I've found justice to be swift. I get what I deserve. I have, and it hurts. I don't think of myself as evil incarnate though maybe others do. I'm sure none of those men I mentioned thought of themselves as evil even though we might. Why is it that even small things can be evil even if we don't intend them to be?

I sometimes think it is because you can't parse evil. It either is or it isn't. I think we delude ourselves if we try to rationalize evil, thinking that it's a thing of the distant past. We kid ourselves if we think of evil as some Middle Ages concept. Even things like demons. Today we rationalize them as psychoses or disorders. We might even put them on reality shows. Personally, I believe they're still out there, just as active as they ever were back in the day before skepticism became a social talent. Personally, I believe Satan is just as active today, just as scheming and dangerous today, as he was to those two naked people back in the garden. He exploits our weaknesses and gets us to do things that we normally wouldn't do. You know: evil.

Because of that, I think we forget that you can't parse evil. You can't play with it like fire because it will burn. We can't embrace one kind of evil without embracing other kinds. We can't excuse one evil without opening the doors to others. And we shouldn't kid ourselves in thinking we can get away with it. You may not know all my sins and I don't want to know all yours. That doesn't matter: God knows about them. We kid ourselves if we think He doesn't. He has a very long memory. For those who don't regret their evil, that merciless official awaits. It may not be today. We may not run into him tomorrow. We may even elude him for years. But he is waiting and justice waits with him. Wait long enough and the official may be standing at the pearly gates. From that justice there is no escape.

Thank God, then, that none of that is necessary. Thank God for mercy, forgiveness and redemption. Thank God for not just second chances, but unlimited chances that come with genuine repentance and real change you can believe in (not the sleazy political kind). Thank God that, for just the free price of saving faith, God himself can look at us guilty as all hell and see only someone immaculately clean, someone completely forgiven.

I'll save that topic for another day.

In my short life, I've said and done things that I knew were wrong. Even evil. I've done things I regret, and sometimes I've done wrong in the name of love. I've known people who have done worse than myself, and I have called them friend. I may not have ever known anyone who I thought was truly evil, but I've seen enough of what petty evil can do. I've had enough of the rebellion that evil incites; all it ever got me was hurt. Going forward, I want to do better. Going forward, I want to be better, and to be someone better for my kids and the people who come after me. Starting today, with faith, time, and forgiveness, I hope to do just that.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 1 December 2010

Better to meet a bear robbed of her cubs than a fool in his folly. Proverbs 17, verse 12.

Thank you Sarah Palin. Mama Grizzly herself is no match for me. Whether or not you like Governor Palin, I'll include her to make a point.

A couple of weeks ago I watched Governor Palin's reality show. One of the vignettes featured Clan Palin fishing next to a riverfront where a brown bear was feeding. Suddenly, several bear cubs walked out from the tree line and it became clear that the feeding bear was a mama bear. She became quite protective of her cubs and, to the delight of some (I'm sure), seemed to menace the fishing politico. Personally, I thought it made for interesting but mediocre TV; the kind of television done better by Marlin Perkins. A nice tourist promo for the last frontier but, in my book, little more beyond that.

But I think about it now in light of the verse. I've seen mother bears and cubs up close. As a boy, I spent time at my grandfather's vacation home in northern Minnesota. I remember, more than once, waking up early to see black bears traipsing around outside, looking for food left out by careless residents. One time, I awoke to a ruckus and sneaked a peak out of the window only to be met by the direct gaze of a bear looking right back in at me. Yep, I was shocked and quickly jumped back. The bear, a small one, looked at me with that Alfred E Neumann grin that all bears seem to have, then dropped down on all fours to resume his search for trash. I watched him walk away when he was soon joined by another cub and a larger bear (which I presume was his mother).

Good thing I was safe behind the walls of the trailer. I was only a kid of seven or eight, and I don't think the bear cub, up close and personal, would have been much of a teddy bear. He might have been all vacant and cute looking, especially if I fed him fresh garbage, but I'm betting all that cuteness would have disappeared when he didn't get what he wanted. Or if mama bear showed up all irate and ready to start something. I think about that now, and think that, like Mrs. Palin's TV melodrama, it makes for an interesting memory.

Better to meet those bears at feeding time than to meet me when I'm at my best – and worst – as a fool. A hungry bear will eat you alive only once. It would hurt A LOT when she and her cubs rip you to pieces, and a painful death would seem welcome just to get you out of all that pain.

Meet up with me when I'm a fool in full bloom and the hurt just won't stop. Hitch your wagon to my star and you're stuck with my good and bad, including my mistakes and my emotional train wreck when I can't seem to get my own emotional house in order. I have my strengths but there's no denying this: I make lots of mistakes too. I don't always have my act together and I'm not nearly as great as I may seem to be on the surface. I'm a flawed individual, and I have lots of baggage. That baggage is sitting beside me 24/7 and from time to time I get into it, rustle around through all the dirty laundry, and reshuffle it without doing anything substantive to clean it up. I have a lot of dirty stuff to deal with. Do you really want to get all that on your hands?

And guess what? I'm no different than you. You have your own stuff and you have to deal with it. I'm betting that it gets pretty dicey for you to do so. I'm guessing that you have your own scars, skeletons, and stuff packed up in your own rollerboards that you wheel around from place to place just like me. Does it hurt too much to have to keep going through it every day, and does it hurt even more to think about having to deal with it? Or to let it go? That's hurt with which I can identify. Yep, we aren't so different after all.

Maybe both of us should exit the building and walk outside to wrestle those hungry bears. Maybe we could ask Sarah Palin to go along. I'm sure she has her own junk in the trunk too. And I'm sure there are plenty of people who would tune in to watch Mama Grizzly wrestle a real grizzly.

Or how about we take a third way we haven't talked about? How about we let the bears go their own way and find their own food? God will provide them with what they need just like He does you and me. It'll be fun to watch them walk away and someday we'll have stories to tell our kids. And, instead of opening up our baggage, how about we just let it sit there for awhile and listen to God instead? How about we sit at the feet of the Master and listen for a few minutes, letting Him build us up, equip us in ways we didn't imagine? We could take a load off and just relax for a short break, and get what we need instead of what we think we want. How about we let Him help us learn to deal with all our stuff? Sure, we'll still have to deal with that baggage some time; it isn't going away and that laundry needs to be washed. But not just yet because

there are lessons we each have to learn and tools we need to get the job done. We'll be the better for it, and we won't have to wrestle the bears. I bet they have fleas anyway.

We can even invite Governor Palin to join us. Just like you and me, she needs it too.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 2 December 2010

If a man pays back evil for good, evil will never leave his house. Proverbs 17, verse 13.

I could say that I've had a crappy week. So many things going on, so much hectic change in my life, so much stuff on my plate and so many things to worry about. Through it all, I'm trying to work on my self control. The sermon from this last Sunday was based on developing fruits of God's Spirit (from Galatians 5). The almost-pastor vicar challenged each person to pick on and pray on one trait, work on it, develop it through the week. That verse (22) says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." I picked self-control, because I believe I should exercise more self-control in my life, more discretion, more control over my own actions. So from not smoking to not drinking (as much ☹) to not posting as much on social media or on the phone, I've been trying to work on my self-control. More appropriately, I've been working the ground of my heart to let God work on my self-control.

You might ask, "How's that workin out for ya, Dave?" I'll admit: at times, it's tough going. I find it hard to resist the urge to be flippant online. That nicotine craving is always there. I want to chat, talk, and text just as much as I always have. And I've still got a good cold, meaning I'm medicated and don't sleep very well. And I'm on company travel, away from home and away from the rest that home can bring. So, I added another stressor to my plate and, well, it's put me on edge. It seems like God isn't working on my heart at all, and He isn't helping me to improve my self-control because I'm just as tempted to pay back evil for good as I always have been.

I really want to cut off everyone I pass on the road; 1.3 million people live in San Diego and it seems all of them drive on Interstate 5 at the same time. I want to cut them off, weaving in and out of traffic, even when they let me in. And I'd like to tell them with my finger that I think they're number one. I want to tell the people at work to just get it together and finish the blasted documents we're working on instead of tossing them around and around and never reaching a decision. And if I want to get on Facebook and post all night long, well, what's the harm in that? Besides, people WANT to hear from ME! For God's sakes would someone please pass me the Marlboros???

But, you know, that just wouldn't be right. It would be paying back evil for good. One of yesterday's themes was about petty evil. To be sure, all these are small, petty evils. Nothing real big here. I could even rationalize that I'd be within my rights to do some of these things, especially the work thing because there is some dysfunction there. I deserve it, ya know?

Not really. It would be paying back evil for good. These petty evils are evils all the same. The conscience works with the conscious and I'd be conscious of doing wrong when I didn't need to. We remember when people do good things for us, but easily forget that, the absence of bad can also be good. So if people don't do anything bad to me, in a way, they're doing me good. My petty bad things would only make things worse.

And evil would never leave my house. If we let ourselves slip up over and over, and if we indulge our nature to do small things that we think we have a right to do, I think we're fooling ourselves. Just as good soil is tilled with nutrients, care, and organics, bad soil is made by sowing poison. You can sow it all at once, which is expensive, or you can do it a little at a time, which is even more expensive but much easier. Get it in there and it's awful hard to get it back out. Better, then, to not till in the poison at all. In other words, it's better to exercise a little self-control. I don't want to salt the earth of my life. Especially not when I'm feeling a little down.

Besides, I think back now and I realize that I'm kidding myself if I think God isn't always working to improve me, especially in the area of my self-control. He always answers every prayer, even when we don't realize it. I've been praying for a lot of help with my self-control and, surprise of surprises, I've gotten it. It's been 2 weeks without smoking, and I slipped up only once last week (gladly rationalizing it that someone needed my bonding to smoke with them ☹). I actually do feel better. The annoying cold or allergy attack isn't nearly as bad as it could be. I've gotten quite a lot done at work. I've had about half the wine I usually drink. And I hope my online posting isn't trivial or petty; I'm trying to encourage others and build them up while whining a whole lot less. I find I post less and what I do hopefully has more meaning. In lots of small ways, He has been working to improve my self-control because, if I let myself see it, I see the evidence in other ways. I believe that praying and working to improve on one of those Spirit traits is evidenced by an increase in the others. Not only does my self-control improve but I can see it in more love, peace, patience, faithfulness and goodness in my life. Work on letting joy into your life and the others will increase as well. A rising tide lifts all boats, after all, and that isn't a taxing thought. God has been at work in my life, just as He's been at work in yours. So maybe it isn't such a crappy week after all: and all because I'm trying, in my little ways to not pay back evil for good. Not an easy thing to do but worth the effort.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 4 December 2010

Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out. Proverbs 17, verse 14.

I hate fighting. There has been a lot of arguing and fighting in my life this year. I've brought a lot of it on myself, and brought that discord into the lives of the people I love. When we argue and fight, we expose ourselves by exposing our feelings and the things that bother us. We open ourselves to being vulnerable, and I think that when we do so, we do whatever we feel we need to do (in the moment) to protect ourselves. I think that's why it becomes so to bring up matters that are ancient history (or at least we thought were settled) when we're in the thick of a fight.

Hence, I'm loathe to start them. I have a hard time backing down when I do. People who know me well can see when I'm upset because I go quiet. When I go quiet, people who don't know me as well tend to either leave me alone or press me even harder saying, 'what's wrong?' I'm loathe to start arguments because I agree with the proverb that it's like breaching a dam: still waters safely stored behind solid walls would rush out through the breach. The proverb then says that we should just drop the matter. It's telling us to basically 'suck it up,' isn't it?

Not quite.

It says to not deliberately start a fight; it says we shouldn't instigate. Dictionary.com defines a quarrel as "an angry dispute or altercation; a disagreement marked by a temporary or permanent break in friendly relations." This proverb says we shouldn't start those angry disputes or altercations and disagreements. We shouldn't look for ways to start quarrels because they break friendships, and breaking friendships causes disharmony in the Kingdom.

Notice that it doesn't say "forget about it." Scripture implores us to forgive everything but Scripture also doesn't tell us to be unwise and forget. Forgetting our sins, or those that happened against us, could be bad in itself. If we cavalierly forget them, we open ourselves to them again.

And it doesn't say "if you're threatened, drop the matter." Dropping it also doesn't say that we shouldn't stand up for ourselves when we are wronged, or when we are confronted. If we are wronged, we should indeed confront those who wrong us. If we are confronted, we have the choice of how to respond. And if we are threatened, we have that same choice coupled with the imminent challenge of danger. To simply drop the matter could be dangerous for us and for the party making the threat. It would be discouraging and imprudent.

Should we give in on points to preserve the peace? Maybe. I suppose the best answer (one that I say falls within the proverb and within scriptural dictates) is that we should surrender points if we believe fighting for them isn't for the common good. That's a subjective call for each of us; your level of tolerance is different from mine, and what bothers me may not bother you. What we will each fight for is different. If surrender on a point preserves the good and works for you, then it's up to you whether or not to do so. Christ confronted and yet never surrendered on points of faith or principle, but he also let many small things slide. That's a good example to follow and Christ-like advice: don't sweat the small stuff.

Should we turn the other cheek? Again, another maybe. It may be that, to do what's best, we decide to ignore wrongs or expose ourselves further to quickly settle them. It's another subjective judgment call; there is no template answer.

I believe that, after reading these verses, they all point back to faith as the ultimate benchmark. We should incorporate faith into all of what we do. That includes fighting and arguing. I hate fighting and I'm loathe to do it, but sometimes we have to. Sometimes we should. When those times become necessary, weaving faith into it seems like the best way to argue with honor and to settle issues instead of letting them fester.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 6 December 2010

Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent – the LORD detests them both. Proverbs 17, verse 15.

Guilty as hell. It's Monday morning here in North Texas and I'm guilty as hell. In fact, it's very EARLY Monday morning here in North Texas and I'm still guilty as hell. What am I guilty of? Too much to list here. My sins, like the prince who encourages them, are legion. I'll spare you the maudlin laundry list; you've seen it before anyway. The funny thing about it – which isn't so funny – is that the laundry list I air in public is woefully incomplete. The real juicy stuff I won't reveal.

I'm betting you're the same.

And yet I cut myself lots of slack every day. Psychologically speaking, it's unhealthy to keep beating yourself over the things you've done. There's something good to be said for letting go because the past is over with and there really aren't any do-over's. Discount the ecclesiastical side and there is still something healthy to forgiving and moving forward. The problem I run into, though, is that I find it all too easy to say, "well it's over and done with" and thus minimize the things I've done. Especially the real juicy stuff. Peoples' feelings matter. People matter. I find it way too easy to acquit myself, telling myself that "there's nothing I can do" or "that's just the way it is." It really is what it is and I'm as just as much a prisoner of my choices as I am convicted by the consequences of them. Nothing can be done about it, right?

The LORD detests that. It's a thing I can understand because I detest it too.

And do you condemn the innocent too? Be honest with yourself: ever flip off someone on the road? Ever think ill of the homeless person you see on the street? Do you ever harbor bad thoughts for someone who did you wrong? Or even those who did right by you? Ever look down on a family member, classmate or friend? And do you ever callously turn away from people who really do look like they need help, rationalizing that there's just nothing you can do to help?

Am I the only person who says and does things like this? News flash here: it's called 'condemning the innocent.' The LORD detests that too. I bet that, because you're a person of conscience, someone inside you detests it. I do.

Yet like the Apostle Paul, the evil that I do not want to do, this I keep on doing. I keep on letting the cad off the hook (whether it's Bill Clinton, OJ or me) while I keep on condemning the innocent through my inactions and my actions alike. When I withhold my love, I condemn the innocent. When I take no action yet I am able to do so, I condemn the innocent. When I unjustly let it slide, I acquit the guilty. And when I repent yet refuse to change my ways I acquit the guilty man in the mirror. Through it, I'm guilty as hell...

...except...

...except for that saving grace. Except for that which came after all these Old Testament proverbs, I would be lost. I would indeed be guilty as hell and headed on a one way ticket there. The LORD still detests all our wrong-doings, and He still demands perfection. He still expects our best and knows we can and should give it. After all, He made us in His image and He always gives us His best. Why can't we? That's the question of the ages to which the only short, saving answer is "grace." Merciful grace acquits the innocent. Merciful grace condemns the guilty but removes the guilt. Merciful grace demands punishment and sees it removed through the simplest act of saving faith. Saving, merciful grace never lets us down, never condemns, and always acquits.

And except for that saving grace I would indeed be a lost soul. So would you. He gives it to us. How about we do the same?

It isn't healthy to continually beat yourself up over things you've done; I've spent years, especially this one, doing it. And it isn't healthy either to cavalierly dismiss those wrongs either. What's unhealthiest of all is to reject the free gift of grace and mercy given by a God who only wants the best for us. There's been enough unhealthy, accusing, condemning sin in our lives. How about we get healthy? How about we let go of the guilt and start letting our lives be repaired? After all, folks, it's Christmas.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 8 December 2010

Of what use is money in the hand of a fool, since he has no desire to get wisdom? Proverbs 17, verse 15.

I didn't write about this verse yesterday because I didn't know what to make of it. I started it out as a rant against my irresponsible teenagers (who, in fact, are actually three of the most industrious kids who could ever make a parent proud). Last night, I went to a meeting about the mission trip I'm taking next month and it helped to shed some light on the verse.

You see, you and I are fools. Me especially. I'm spending hundreds, even thousands, of dollars to go on a mission trip to Africa. I'm having trouble raising the funds and it has kept me up nights. But I have no doubt that the rest of the money will find its way. It's not up to me to decide it: it's up to God and He'll provide a way. I'm a fool for not trusting that because it's so obvious: it's how things always turn out. Yet in this time of hard economic realities, flux in my personal budget, and lots of dynamic change, aren't I a fool for even going? Someone with good common sense could rightfully say, "if you have to, just write them a check, but for heaven's sake you don't need to be spending that kind of money right now!" That and, well, let's just say I'm not the most moral example that the USA could send overseas to spend time with hundreds of Ugandan orphans. I'm a damn fool.

But get ready, good reader, because this might hurt. Just what have you done, my friend? I'm not here to accuse you because I don't know what you do with your personal time, your income, or your treasure. Those are your business. But of what gain are they? I mean, really? What good is it? At this reflective time of the year, what have you done? If your life is replete with comforts but you've not taken some kind of action to lift up our brothers and sisters, what have you done? If the proverb is true, aren't you a bit foolish yourself? What are you prepared to do?

That was the subject of last night's meeting: what are we prepared to do? We were discussing the mission trip to Uganda next month: the logistics of it, schedule, villages we'll visit, what to expect, what to bring, etc. And we were discussing the sheer humanity of it. How, for example, there is one village where there are 1200 orphans and only a smattering of adults (because most of the adults are dead from AIDS). The team leader talked about how you will get off the bus and be surrounded by children who may not eat that day and who may own only the clothes they wear, but they will be starving for love: God's love given as our love. Human touch, someone to care, someone to spend a few minutes with them letting them know they matter: it will all be real because it is a real need today.

I can't wait. I really, truly can't wait, and yet I am both terrified and saddened by the prospect of it. I'm saddened that there is such a glaring need in our world, in our twenty-first century world, not for a bunch of government BS or handouts but, instead, for a hand-up from one man to another. People don't need long-term aid: they need long term love. That includes showing them how to raise food, how to earn and be self-producing, and how to live lives with basic medicine and sanitation. Most of all, it means starting by simply sharing God's love with them and infusing those other things with it. It means telling them, showing them, the love of the Savior as a practical thing, not some stale Sunday morning commentary, spoken by hypocrites like me, between the coffee and donuts.

And I'm saddened that I, the worst of fools, squandered so many good things and great chances to be someone better, to help do something about this, and I didn't. After my last mission trip, I let my world spiral out of control and wasted so many blessings. I devastated people and I hurt myself getting hurt badly by someone else. I was a fool. I'm still a damn fool.

And I'm terrified because I'm the chief of sinners and I know nothing about Africa except that it seems like a backward place teeming with internecine wars and preventable disease. Going there is way out of my comfort zone physically, spiritually, economically and culturally. And yet I feel called to go; something moved me to volunteer and to get on a plane and just go, to go and listen and see, taste, feel and touch. But I feel like a fool. I have riches beyond what most of the people in Jinja could dream of, or will ever have, and yet I squander them on useless things like Dish Network, turning up the furnace two degrees, and the cost of food that goes in the trash because I don't bother to eat it all. Worst of all, I've lived forty-four years of blessed life and what good have I done with it? What good can I do now?

If I haven't let God transform my heart from a heart of selfishness to a heart of love, then what good have I done? What wisdom have I attained? What desire have I shown to actually do something more meaningful with my life than Facebook, health insurance or fixing the washer and dryer?

Of what use is money in the hand of a fool, since he has no desire to get wisdom? That's a really good question, and I don't have a really good answer. Instead, all I can say is, "Thank you, Lord, for including me in your plan." Whatever is in that plan I don't know. Whatever is in it will come and I'll be there to listen, learn, play, and come back to tell you about it. It isn't much, but I'm prepared to do it. In fact, I'm doing it in 37 days.

You don't have to get on a plane and fly to Uganda with me to make a difference. Your mission may very well be here, in your town, in your family, in your workplace. It may be to help, to support, to pray, to encourage, to do SOMETHING. My purpose isn't to guilt you into doing that something. But for God's sake, can't we each, you and I, stand back and look in the mirror, then ask ourselves what more we can do? We don't need works to prove our faith, but faith without doing something about it is dead. Works are proof of faith, not the cause of it. What work are you prepared to do? What are WE prepared to do?

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 9 December 2010

A man lacking in judgment strikes hands in pledge and puts up security for his neighbor. Proverbs 17, verse 18.

These days, with Federal budget deficits in the trillions and with millions of our fellow citizens struggling to pay bills, doesn't this verse ring true? If your neighbor came up to you and said, "I can't pay my bills and I need your help," would you help him? Most of us are altruistic and, I think, like to believe that we would help if we could. Those "if we could" words, however, are a really good out. They mean that we'd like to help but we just can't. And they mean, "I have my own house to take care of first." Faith in God isn't direction to be irresponsible. We can and should, in accordance with divine guidance, tend to our own responsibilities. We are also directed to be kind, loving, giving and trusting that God will provide for all our needs.

But we aren't necessarily directed to leave it to others to provide for our needs. So, like you, if my neighbor shows up at my door, I'd publicly tell them "Sure, how can I help" while privately hoping they don't need it. I may not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but even I see the truth of this proverb.

Yet I think there's more to this than just the pocketbook.

There's a difference between helping a neighbor, family member, friend or even a stranger in need and foolishly tying yourself to someone else's misfortunes. Face it: don't we all know people who are irresponsible? The guy who's always borrowing tools because he never buys them for himself? The woman who doesn't plan ahead and is always scrambling to get things done at the deadline? The guy who never seems to have enough to pay his bills but has enough to pay for fast food five days a week? Aren't they all a bit irresponsible? Perhaps that's too superficial of a statement to make. It paints with a broad brush, and chances are neither you nor I know the whole story.

Here's the kicker: of course you know someone like that. They might not even be your neighbor, or your family member or your friend. They might be you. Nobody this side of heaven is perfect and nobody here has it all together. Each of us has junk in the trunk and I'm betting that (like mine) yours got in the trunk because of a lot of different reasons. Valid reasons. And because we're all a little bit flawed, every now and then we need help. It's a good and faithful thing to ask for help when we need it, and it's a good and faithful thing to give help where it is needed.

But it's a foolish thing to make promises you can't – or shouldn't – keep, and it's a foolish thing to guarantee the security of someone without thinking it through. It's a foolish thing to squander your resources for someone who may not safeguard them or their own. God provides for all of us and it's up to us to channel that and be part of the plan instead of trying to spin too many balls in the air. We should lend a hand in emergencies, and we should help others get up when they're down. Sometimes that may take quite awhile, especially in times like these. Should that help include guaranteeing the physical or emotional security of others? Maybe. Like so many other things – actually, like everything – the key is involving God right from the start. If the motivation is to give caring help (something Godly) then you can't go wrong, even if the outcome isn't what we intend. If it's any other motivation then watch out. Verse 18 seems like a good reminder of that.

Since spring, I've been seeing a good counselor. At first, I was reluctant to see him because I wasn't sure of his background, but I needed someone to help me sort out my stuff and he's turned out to be a big help in that. One of the things he told me was, "Dave, you're in the process of learning who you should help and who you should just pray for." That's good advice, and it's wise, Godly advice. There are some people to whom we should jump in and give Godly help because we love them, because we're responsible for them, or because it's an emergency. There are others we should help differently, through empathy, listening and prayer. That's still a help, but it's doing so by surrendering control of the situation back to God, then using the tools He puts at our disposal for the best and common good. Who can we help and who should we just pray for? In this season of Christmas giving, those are good words of sound judgment that build up security for all of us.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 13 December 2010

To have a fool for a son brings grief; there is no joy for the father of a fool. Proverbs 17, verse 21.

Fathers and sons and sons and fathers: it's something you have to be a dad to understand. I'm 100% certain that there is a unique relationship between mothers and daughters, a special dynamic that we men just don't understand because we aren't women and we aren't wired the same. So it is with fathers and sons too. There's something about men that only we understand, and it's a unique, frustrating but wonderful thing. We grunt, storm around, and obsess over stupid things. We have feelings too.

I miss my dad. A few days ago I remarked on the 13th anniversary of his death, and it's been on my heart a lot. I'm not the same man I was back then and in light of this verse, I wonder what my dad would think of me.

When Dad died, I was just a year out of the Air Force: a move of which he never approved. He thought it was unwise of me to get out when I did, even though he didn't say he disagreed with my reasons. Since then, I've worked for seven different companies. I think that, in the 35 years after he separated from the Army he worked for three. I'm not sure he would approve of the way I've moved from place to place, seemingly chasing bigger rewards and trying to keep ahead of my obligations and debts. I hope he would have understood my reasons, maybe even agreeing with some of them. But I don't think he would have approved. I've become a gypsy in pursuit of the brass ring and I can't say that it's bought me much peace, even in the obvious light of so many blessings. I think it would have brought him worry and grief.

And what about other ways I know I've been a disappointment. This year I've again struggled with my infidelity, lies, deceit, cheating, arrogance, selfishness and impatience. I've struggled with the crushing guilt of it all and all the disastrous consequences my wrongs brought into the lives of people I love. There's no easy way to put it behind you, even when you say your sins are forgiven. Since last spring I seem to be angry all the time. It is a consequence of what I did, and I don't know how to let go of it. I know my father wasn't perfect either, but I wonder what Dad would think of me for all this.

My kids are mostly grown and have struggled with many of the things that challenge kids today. Dad grew up during the Depression and World War II. I don't think he would have approved of rap music, Jersey Shore (or any reality TV), the systematic dysfunction in American education, and the 'whatever' attitude that speaks for Generation 21. I wonder what he would think of people close to him being inculcated with both the good and the bad of this so-called modern century – though in reality aren't we just cavemen dressed up in American Eagle? My kids are good kids but there seems to be a harder edge to kids today than there was in the past. Would there be no joy for my father of fools? I don't know.

Then there is my own son. Boy Terry struggles in so many different ways. He's not a boy but not yet a man. He despises school because he has trouble learning and yet he tries so hard to fit into a mold that seems to always change on him. His learning disability means he tries doubly harder than most of his peers and his teachers don't seem to understand or care. Being fifteen, he's also thick with that 'whatever' attitude I described, and is constantly fighting against human nature to rage against the world that he only wants to embrace. He's pretty stoic but I know him better than other people do. Deep inside, he feels like he's disappointed others, including me. Deep inside, he sometimes feels like a fool. He feels frustration and anger and disappointment and grief. I wonder if he knows my inmost thoughts about him. I wonder if he really, truly understands how immensely proud I am of him every day, how proud I am that he always tries so hard, and how much joy it brings me to say, "I'm his father?" I wonder if he understands that I get what he's going through, that he really doesn't bring me any grief. I've been there. I wonder if he understands that, and I wonder if that's how my dad felt about me.

And what about God? Isn't He a father too? Certainly there can be no joy for our creator when He looks at people like me and you and sees all the ways we muck up our lives. He sent His only true son to this screwed up place to save a bunch of screwed up people from the consequences of what their screwed up actions deserve. I can't imagine the kind of love that would do such a thing.

So I find myself at the airport on Monday morning, flying off yet again to perform my role as a man, breadwinner, and citizen of the world. I sit here in the terminal and I wonder if I brought grief to my father and if he thought I was a fool. I wonder what he would think of me now...

...But then I remember a few things that seem too easy to overlook when I let the trap of self-pity overcome me. I remember that God didn't think I was a fool. He isn't happy with all the stupid things I do and He doesn't condone them.

But He loved me enough to arrange for His own son to pay a price I couldn't, and that's the whole reason for this Christmas season we celebrate. I remember that I'm only human and that I shouldn't take on more than I can handle, or more than those things for which I truly am responsible. I remember that I'm doing the best I can with the tools and decisions at my disposal. I remember that I'm not alone. And I remember that I'm just a man.

It's easy to take on more than you can handle, especially on a Monday morning and especially since I'm a man. It's my tendency, and it's foolish. And I've done foolish things. So has my son. And so did my father and his fathers before him. I'm not a woman and I'm not a child. I'm a man; that was part of our closing prayer at a men's Bible study I attended last week. I've done those foolish things and I'm repentant for them and the grief I caused. Even when I can do better, the best I can do is let God sharpen me and follow where He leads. I'm a man and I hope my son can understand it. And some day his son too. Our Father does.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 14 December 2010

A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones. Proverbs 17, verse 22.

Have you ever had your spirit crushed? Have you ever felt so down that you didn't want to go on, and you knew you were the one to blame? And when you tried to throw a lifeline to people who you thought would help, did you find they threw it back at you? Have you ever done things that cost you friends, or family, or both? How did it you feel about it?

A crushed spirit dries up the bones. That imagery brings to mind dried skeletons, or the searing, aching pain of arthritis. It makes me think of being lifeless, hopeless, without form and without love. The longer I live the more I think that hell is the final crushing of the spirit. In my opinion, it's not fire or burning or physical torture: it is the full knowledge that there will never be hope of medicine, love or God's forgiveness. Hell is full separation from God's loving wisdom. It is the ultimate crushing of the spirit.

That's how I felt not very long ago. I seriously thought I was living through hell. Just a few months ago, in my darkest depression, good people refused to let me founder. They saw what had happened and what I had done, and they refused to let me just curl up and die, even though I wanted to. I had committed grave wrongs, destroyed my family, devastated the people I loved most, and threw them away. I was then chewed up, spit out, and cast aside; I was the player who got played by a better player. When I saw all I had done, I tried to have things both ways and it just didn't work; it just wasn't right. I just wasn't right. I was somebody who nobody would trust.

I didn't want to go on. Really, truly didn't. There were times when all I could do was summon the courage to get out of bed and put on my shoes. There were whole days when all I did was stare at the wall. I did not want to go on living a life where my spirit was crushed knowing I had done things to deserve it. No matter what I did to try to bounce back, it didn't work and all I did was spiral downward. I didn't want to live, and I didn't care what happened to me. As far as I was concerned, I deserved it, even the chewed-up-spit-out part. My bones truly did feel dried up, petrified. It was the time I let the Devil exploit my weakest points: something he clearly relished doing.

That's why those cheerful hearts meant so much. They always do. They have an attitude that is realistic. They listen, love, don't wrongly judge, and they are positive. They breathe out love. Not saccharine sweet, false love but selfless, graceful love. They are like good medicine that cleans a wound, softens a pain, or promotes healing. The kindness we show each other as a matter of common courtesy really does matter, and really does make a difference in ways we don't always quickly understand. That kindness is God working through us to heal with cheerful medicine.

In my own hours of need, my family listened, encouraged and supported me. Where good Christian hypocrites cast me aside, other good Christian people listened; I hadn't even known they cared. They were honest and cheerful, not tolerating my wrongs but not crushing me with them further. My best friend called me night after night and talked me back from the abyss; she gave me reason to go on. And at the time I was ready to hear it, the woman closest to me let me know that God wasn't done with me yet. That was the cheerful medicine I valued most and it gave me the strength to start again.

I know divorced mothers who refuse to let the world defeat them but pay such a dear price to do so. I know men who are struggling with addiction who need all the reinforcement they can get. I know people who are down all the time and just want to know that somebody cares. I know lonely widows, scared children, struggling strangers. I know these people because I've been where they are. I'm betting you can say the same thing.

It doesn't take much to let someone know you care, and letting someone know you care doesn't mean you condone all they've done or that you assume responsibility for it. In fact, I think it's better if we don't. And best of all, it's free. It doesn't cost anything to tell someone, "I believe in you" when they are hurting. All of God's gifts are free, and giving or receiving them releases us from our debts. "Love can build a bridge....don't you think it's time?" That's a good song; thank you Mama Judd. At Christmas time, it's also my challenge to you, one I'll take up myself: find someone in your life who needs encouragement and give it. Be the cheerful medicine to a crushed spirit. Love really can build that bridge, so don't you think it's time?

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 15 December 2010

A discerning person keeps wisdom in view, but a fool's eyes wander to the ends of the earth. Proverbs 17, verse 24.

I'll make a confession here: I get annoyed with those end-of-year TV specials and lists that talk about all that happened this year. While it's sometimes fun to look back and remember, "wow! Did all that really happen?" more than not, I find them to be tedious. They're like awards shows: spectacles of self-congratulatory adulation celebrating the trivial while glossing over the meaningful. I don't like to look back. I prefer to look forward, even though I'm a big believer in history, mainly so we can learn from it.

This year has just over two weeks left to 'live.' You've heard me say over and over that it's been a heck of a year. New Years Eve itself is one more milestone to overcome and, to be honest, I'll be glad to get past it. This year I've seen and brought great change in my life, and I wish I could say all the change was based in wisdom. It wasn't. All too often this year, heck all too often in my life, I've let my eyes, my thoughts, and my dreams wander to the ends of the earth. Doing that is the path to defeat.

Especially this year, part of the reason why I don't like to look back is that I don't want to face, yet again, the mistakes I've made, the people I hurt, the love I've lost, the hope I squandered, and the choices I made. Some of them were good, founded in wisdom I tried to keep in view. Some were way-stations on the path I took while wandering to the ends of the earth. I don't like to face them because emotions are still raw, feelings still hurt, and I still carry around way too much anger over bad memories I should just let go. This year has been full of those for me, and if the networks ever wanted to do a "look back at 2010 in Dave's life" special, I'm afraid it would be too hard to watch.

As I said, I prefer to look forward, so rather than dwelling on water flowed under the bridge, how about we say a collective prayer for the year about to start? How about we pray to infuse each day with the desire to keep God's wisdom in view? To temper every decision, every action, with "what do you think, Lord?" instead of "oh my God, what am I going to do?" To paraphrase my friend Patrick, how about we start each day being in the posture of listening, of opening our ears, minds, and hearts to what God has in store for us this day? How about we wake up in the morning and ask, "what do you have in store for me today, Lord?"

How about we take action on our dreams, submitting them and ourselves to the higher, divine plan and then walking on the road where that plan leads? How about we do what we have to do to make the most of our talents and our gifts, all while surrounding and bathing them in the loving wisdom that is a gift from above? Instead of being corralled by all we've done and undone, how about we open up the gate and go free, knowing that freedom in God is different from that small thing which we think freedom is here?

Most of all, how about we each give something more? In this time when we're all hurting in various ways, how about we give of ourselves, our time, our talents, our hearts, thoughts, dreams, fears, hopes, and our love? How about we give something meaningful of our real selves to better the lot of someone else? How about we give of ourselves in the discernment of knowing that, when we give from God's own heart, we do so in wise and loving ways that can never go wrong?

"I've had choices," sang George Jones, and how right he was. He had them and so did I. Some of my choices this year brought great love and sweet peace; some were agonizing and cut deep. Some I can't ever defend but some I'll cry from the rooftops. There isn't much time left to make something more of 2010, but I'm thinking today is a good place to start. Like brother George, I'm living and dying with the choices I've made, but I'm too young to die just yet. At least if I have my way! I'm ready to build, found, and advance because I've torn down, rent asunder, and retreated far too often. I'm ready to move forward, to advance, and I'm ready to do so with you. I'm ready that we should walk, hand in hand, unafraid of what could come knowing we've made it through –and are better for – all that we've moved beyond. And I'm ready to do it singing sweet songs of praise instead of the sad music of the dirge. Looking forward, to take action, to love, and to give, I'm ready to start here and now. That's a choice I can live and die with, and I don't care if they ever talk about it on TV.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 16 December 2010

A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even tempered. Proverbs 17, verse 27.

I don't know jack. I really don't. I'm sitting in my hotel room out here in sunny southern California (where it's actually 8:40 PM) with an open bottle of wine, my open Bible beside me, and I realize I just don't know jack. Squat. Zip, zero, zilch, nada. I have three college degrees with many years of hard work and learning invested, and I'm nothing but an educated idiot.

In the past seven months, I have written over a thousand pages of blogs, novels, stories, poems and what passes for contemporary literature but I still don't know how to use those words with restraint. More often than not, what I say (or write) doesn't have the helpful effect I intend. In some ways, it's heartbreaking.

And even tempered? Not hardly.

After all is said and done (and my bottle of pinot noir is half emptied), I sit here with tears in my eyes and realize I just don't know squat. I've let others steal my joy, I let a predator leave me angry, and I've wallowed too long in the land of the unforgiven. Don't misunderstand me: I know all my sins are forgiven, even the quiet ones and the ones I've forgotten. The people who matter most and He who is over us all have set my accounts straight.

So why do I feel like the man of knowledge who didn't use his words of restraint and the man of understanding with a foul temper? Why can't I forgive myself? Worse, tonight, why am I the morose man who can't seem to pull himself out of the boring tar pit of mediocrity?

Because I am. Are you at the end of your rope in reading this? Dark enough or boring enough or had enough yet?

Then let me shed some welcome light on the subject. I really don't know jack. I really am an educated idiot. I don't know how to speak with restraint. I'm not very understanding or even tempered. And let me tell you this, brother, it stinks.

I also think that there's hope, lots and lots of real, true, forgiving and honest hope. I'm just a man, one man, and I need the promise of hope. Not the wishing well, "I hope it's ok" saccharin kind of hope. I mean the certain promise kind that God deals in.

I may not have been a man of knowledge who uses restraint for all my life (or even for all this year)...but that doesn't mean I can't become one. I may not have been an even tempered man of understanding when my kids were growing up. I obsessed over stupid things and didn't serve them well. And today I may look back on that with regret, wishing I'd done better...

...so here's the chance to do better.

You see, God sees us as perfect. Through the prism of his justified forgiveness, he sees us as perfect; check out your New Testament if you want to know more. It's the instruction manual on the subject. God sees us as redeemed, cleaned up, wiped clean, and forgiven. He sees the dirty, filthy, real things we've done that made us stupid and uneven tempered, and He really doesn't tolerate those things. Then, he really doesn't hold them against us as long as we have faith in his Son. His Son, you know, that whole 'reason for the season' part of why people say "Merry Christmas" at this time of year. Jesus Christ. Check Him out for some one on one. I think you'll be pleasantly amazed.

And even though I'm pleasantly amazed, I have to confess that I still don't know jack. Faith in God through Christ doesn't make me any smarter, but I have gained wisdom from it. Faith in Christ doesn't bulletproof me from the consequences of things I've done wrong in this world, but it does allow me to honestly try to do better and improve my temperament in doing so. And faith doesn't make me the wisest man in the world, or better than anyone else in any way. If you don't believe me, show up here at my door and we'll finish this bottle of wine together. In doing so, I'll regale you with stories about the myriad ways I've fallen short. No, faith in God isn't some magic 8 ball or Tinkerbell magic wand that makes everything ok. You can't rub it for three wishes, and it isn't a get-out-of-jail-free card if you don't sign up for it.

But faith does allow us to get through the tough times that this tough old world will dish out at us. And it does allow us to move forward and try again when we only feel like giving in. I may not know everything and I may not even know jack. But even I know that.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 17 December 2010

Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue. Proverbs 17, verse 28.

It's nice to know that Proverbs chapter 17 ends on a hopeful and positive note. I was getting depressed at all the negatives that seemed to stem from the last few verses. There were many harsh truths that are contained in them. It's hard to remember, I guess, that tough love can be tough but still be loving. It's nice to read something that doesn't remind me of what a dirty so-and-so I am. I get that enough. For this verse, I envision Solomon standing around in his court, his scribe diligently scribbling down whatever the King says. Solomon utters this one and the scribe records it thinking, "huh?" It's a scratch your head kind of verse: true but maybe a little vexing.

First off there's the common sense aspect. Even a fool looks smart if he knows when to keep his mouth shut. Even an idiot can look good if he shows he knows when to watch and listen versus when to speak and act. Think Forrest Gump (which, I might say, sometimes seems like the story of my life). Or Thumper: if you don't got nothin nice to say, don't say nothin at all. Or Congress; is it just me or does the Congress look much better if they clam up? Maybe spend less? But I digress.

Of course, looks can be deceiving. A quiet idiot may still be an idiot just like a quiet college professor usually is an idiot (and an educated one at that). A dormant sinner is still a sinner, still disposed to whatever things trip their trigger. And those things do lie dormant. I have quite a few vices and I'm sure you do too. For instance, today marks four weeks since I quit smoking. I've regressed one time (and it made me nauseous). During that time I've been cranky, irritable, emotional, weepy and hard to get along with. I've used the time to make big changes in my life, to get busy living or get busy dying. Let me tell you this: every waking minute of the last four weeks has been a temptation, especially when my daughter brought home a pack of the menthols I used to smoke (she's obviously struggling too).

I've stuck with it though. I'm not patting myself on the back, mind you, though I don't mind bragging that a pat is well earned. I'm simply stating that I've resisted the temptation to imbibe of something that I really liked but that is really bad for me and hard to live with. My addiction is dormant, not cured; like any addict, I will always be a nicotine addict. If I don't smoke, it will remain a conscious choice versus the absence of the addiction. If I started again, like I did in June, I believe I'd quickly be back to a pack a day. Even now, I'm mulling what to do next month. Earlier, I fully intended to break my tobacco fast in Uganda next month (as a way to reach out to people; have done it and it works). Now I'm not so sure; will probably keep struggling with the choice.

Isn't that the way it is with any of our sins? Things tempt us but we choose how we react to the temptation. Love is an addiction. Sex can seem like an addiction. Power is an addiction. Food, the need for speed, conversation, even friendships: all are blessed gifts that, if taken to extremes, can be addicting and, thus, lead us into wrongdoing. The key, I believe, is to trust in faith to get us through, and to fight the addiction with that faith. There isn't a point where we really get to spike the ball in the end zone, at least not on this side of Heaven. We always struggle, especially with the things that mean most to us. But if we cling to something that is good for us, then we're much better off in the long run.

Especially when it comes to keeping my mouth shut. After all, we look better, have more stature in the eyes of our peers, when we are quiet, when we try to learn from our sins.

So, yes, it's nice to end on a positive, if droll, note. I think this verse is more of an observation than anything. Sure, that practical advice is great and it's always needed. But I like the careful observations too. They're needed just as much.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 20 December 2010

An unfriendly man pursues selfish ends; he defies all sound judgment. Proverbs 18, verse 1.

Today is the Monday of Christmas week and, believe it or not, I think this verse is the reason for Christmas. Think about it: the first sin was selfishness. It wasn't murder or adultery or cheating on your taxes or telling white lies about sneaking into the cookie dough. It was the idolatry of selfishness, of saying "no, me first." That's an inherently unfriendly, selfish, unsound thing of which we're all guilty, and it caused the fall of mankind. We all defy sound judgment. We all do things that, when you boil away the reasons, are based in selfishness.

In fact, if you think about it, the entire Christmas story is a testament to that. Of course it's about God's love for us being so unconditional that He came to us on our level. He came to us as the poorest of the poor, in humility, and in subtle grandeur that still enchants, warms and amazes us millenia later.

But why? Unfriendly, selfish, unsound people, that's why.

And if you think about it a little more, the whole Christmas story is rife with it. Behind the trees, nativity scenes, cookies and card, the Christmas story is about treachery, intrigue, murder, jealousy, selfishness, deceit, danger, and vanity. A pregnant woman desperately needs help and the only place for her to sleep is in a barn? Then there's the toddler Jesus, alive for several years at the time the Magi come to visit him. They had journeyed from Asia and Africa (most likely) and on the way stopped to see the king of Judea, the puppet installed by the Romans as their local figurehead. Herod, jealous to keep his power, conspired to find out where the Christ child was. When his machinations were thwarted what did he do? Wholesale murder. Not just a royal power struggle either, but he had baby boys brutally murdered, every single one of them in the area around Bethlehem in whole parts of Judea where hundreds, maybe thousands, of baby boys were murdered for the vanity of the king.

But there's more. If you read between the fire and brimstone in the Old Testament, you see it is a love story between God and His people. It's the account between love and failure. For hundreds, almost thousands, of years, God had sent prophets, miracles, and messengers to remind us that He was holy and loved us that way, and that His holy love meant our sins were unacceptable. Many of those prophets were tortured and murdered; more murder, go figure. They were tortured and murdered by those same people God was trying to woo through history. Those people needed redemption because, on their own, the toll for their personal wrongs was too great to pay. We, my friend, are no different.

At this time of year, we think of Christmas as the time for sharing, family love, warmth, happy memories, giving and fellowship. Me, I bake dozens of cookies to share and give away just for the purpose of doing so. Yet behind that giving, and behind all the wonderful reasons for the season culminating in the Savior, there's the reason why we need a Savior. The people from Adam through Joseph needed Him, and everyone from Joseph to you and I do as well. We need a savior because we are unfriendly, selfish and unsound people disposed to a nature that would rather murder than save. We each defy sound judgment, opting instead for personal gain, personal choice, and personal matters. Person: we opt for the person in the mirror, not the person on the Cross living as the person next to us. Deep inside us, in varying degrees and varying intensities, lives a Herod of our own, waiting to kill to preserve what we have.

Don't get me wrong: I love Christmas. I really do, and I love people being in a better mood, and the lights, foods, friendships, and I love the thought of beautiful Christmas memories. I love having family and friends around, and I love Christmas Eve services, Midnight Mass, Christmas carols, and Christmas snow (especially since we don't get much in Texas). I even love the crowds at the mall. I love all those things and this year more than most, I'll remind myself to be thankful for them because...

...Because for the other 364 days a year I am unfriendly, selfish, unsound, unkind and a whole slew of other adjectives that wouldn't look pleasant on a tombstone. I love you too, my friend and reader, but I'm afraid you are not so different from me. I love Christmas and am thankful for it knowing that it was at Christmas the Savior came because of unfriendly, selfish, unsound people like us, so that he could grow into a man and walk towards Jerusalem to be murdered at Easter. He came to leave, so He could come back and we could live. THAT is the reason for the season.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 21 December 2010

Fools find no pleasure in understanding, but delight in airing their own opinions. Proverbs 18, verse 2.

To tell you the truth, I almost skipped this verse. Not only because it's mostly self-explanatory (and needs no illumination from me), but also because it hits pretty close to home. I'm guilty of vanity and you read my guilty pleasure every time you read one of these 'columns.' This year especially, I've been prolific, writing nearly nine months of these; in single spaced Word, that amounts to over 200 pages already. I've also finished a novel, which is actually my fourth book; I'm searching for a publisher and am already at work on another. I write poetry which may also be published in the coming year, I keep this blog, and I spend a lot of time writing documents for work. Like I said, prolific.

Vain too. I spend a lot of time on Facebook, itself a haven for the vain and prolific fools. I like the idea of having people I've known all my life in one place where we can exchange quick or long notes, keep up on each others' lives, and keep it light or deep while still keeping it real. It can be a quick, helpful way to let someone know they matter and that you care. Still, the best description anyone's ever told me about Facebook is that it's a mile wide and one inch deep; thanks John. I think the quote is dead on. I post these Proverbials on Facebook, (and through that it becomes a blessing to make it available to over 1300 people a day), and I sometimes post poetry and insights how I'm really feeling. Juxtaposed with those are a whole bunch of one-liners, snarky quotes, links to other websites for op-ed's that I think are worthwhile, Youtube links for music, and a whole bunch of blather. Like my friend's quote, it's a mile wide and an inch deep.

That's one reason why I've been trying to back off it for several weeks by posting less, by getting on fewer times, and by lurking in the background. It's pretty difficult, though, and I've been having only see-saw success. Some days I'm on a lot (mainly when I travel because I get lonely); some days I'm not because I'm busy. On either of those days, I find it hard to back away from getting updates. I find it difficult to not be engaged in the lives of people who matter to me even when they're many states away. And I find it VERY hard to lay down the mantle of vanity and not share what's on my mind.

In this way, I think I'm the fool who finds no pleasure in real understanding but delights in posting the shallowness of my opinions. In the grand scheme of things, it probably doesn't mean much because, if you strip away all the vanity of it, I really must look like a fool with or without Facebook. People can see that, even if they're just looking at a computer screen. It's easy to read into things online, to read between the lines and find meaning that isn't there or isn't intended. Understanding is a precious commodity on a medium designed for self-focused sharing of carefully chosen content. Striving for it, in light of my own sins, is not an easy task.

How about you? Do you wrestle with vanity, or shallowness? Do you struggle like I do with learning from your past, with keeping it in the past, and with doing what you can in working to make tomorrow better than your past? Do you delight in airing your own opinions while slacking up on striving for understanding of real wisdom, real love for others? How do you cope with it?

Still, I do the best I can, and I try to do what's right. Sometimes, yes, I skate on thin ice and, yes, sometimes I crack it and fall through. That water is darn cold; I've fallen through a few times. Some people judge me for being arrogant, vain, cocky, shallow, uncaring, and selfish. To be honest, in some ways, their judgment is right. I try to not judge them back, or to react in anger, but to be honest again, I'm not very good at it, especially when feelings get hurt. Yet try again I do because I need to. We each need to. When we fail, we need to try again. When we hurt others, we need to genuinely apologize and try to do better for them. When we err and sin, we need to genuinely repent and turn from those things, then try again. And when we fall short even when we've tried so hard, we need to cling to faith in the Christmas Savior, let him pull us out of the cold water, and help us warm up to try again. Sometimes it helps to keep those things to ourselves, but sometimes it might even help to post them on Facebook. I'm betting the best course is someplace in-between. With Christmas coming, that's a good thing to remember.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 22 December 2010

When wickedness comes, so does contempt, and with shame comes disgrace. Proverbs 18, verse 3.

Wicked is an underrated word. So is contempt. And those without shame are, by and large, without disgrace. This week, all three of those came home to roost. A friend of mine lost his son; suicide. My friend is one of the kindest, gentlest people you'd ever meet. He's known a lot of heartache and hardship through his life but I don't remember ever hearing him complain about it. Instead, he publicly clings to faith in God and is a wonderful example to his children.

When I got the message, I was shocked. Then I was sad beyond words. I mean, I had taught this boy in Sunday school and never would have thought he was capable of such a thing, that such an evil could even live inside a bright, sweet, kind person. I suppose none of us thinks that, though afterwards we ask ourselves if indeed the signs weren't apparent. That doesn't matter much. I can't imagine what my friend must be going through, and my heart is heavy at knowing how heavy must be his.

A few months ago, I wrote a similar observation on a different proverb using another example of suicide. I didn't know that man, though I knew his ex-wife well and his children in passing. Even though I haven't seen them in years, my heart ached for what they must have gone through. But I know this other man well, and I knew his son well, and I find myself moved in ways I didn't expect by this loss. I write these words in tears. I remember him sitting in class, even in my home, and acting as boys do. He was a good kid, and a good son to his family. Now he's gone and I keep asking myself, and God, 'why?' And I haven't gotten the answer I want to hear; it probably won't happen, but I'm betting I will, in God's good time, get the right one.

In his last days, my friend's son was beset with anguish; shifting paranoia and delusions, and an urge to flee. These days, in our so-called modern world, we label it mental illness and diagnose to excuse. Treatment was attempted but it failed. I'm old fashioned enough, though, to think that perhaps something else was at play, that wickedness overcame the boy's heart, that something not of God overtook and possessed him, driving him to do something he wouldn't normally do. Demons? Sure, why not. It's impossible to believe in a God of pure love and not accept that there is another being of pure evil opposing Him.

I have contempt for such evil, and the only shame I see in my contempt is the disgraceful fact that it is evil to mistrust God. It makes me angry, so angry, to know that someone I cared for was taken over, then taken away. I want to go toe to toe with the Prince of this world and spit in his face for it, not caring what wiles he would have in store for me, or what evil yarns he could weave throughout my life. I've had enough of them already anyway, leaving me only this contempt for evil, especially the petty demons who would torture a boy born only for kindness and Christian love. They use young men like my friend as pawns in their jealous, ageless battle for supremacy that won't ever come.

Perhaps that's not what the proverb is saying, I know. I know there's the message saying 'with evil acts comes contempt from others, from above and even from within ourselves.' And shame truly does come only with realizing the disgrace of our sins, any sins. For my friend, the other kinds of contempt are probably starting already. Good people looking with shame at the disgrace of how my friend's son died. Suicide is the one sin from which we don't get to repent; it's the ultimate finger in God's eye, saying "I reject you" for His ultimate gift of life. At times like these, we all are left wondering 'how' and 'why' do they happen to people we love. At times like these, too, I think of what another mutual friend, their minister, said in announcing the tragedy: perhaps the only thing you can pray for in such a time of loss is to pray for the family that they would "trust in God's hidden wisdom, his faithful love, and his eternal promises."

I cling to the hope that the young man's final thoughts sought forgiveness, sought God. That happened for the criminal crucified with Christ. There's no way to know this, of course, but I trust and believe in God's promise that He always forgives and always loves, even in our weakest moments. The young man I taught would have sought such things, so I hold out good hope, more than just a desperate wish, that my friend did seek out the God who would forgive him everything. It is my hope and desire to one day see him in the beyond, knowing that the love and works of God are always true and just even when ours aren't.

God's wisdom is indeed hidden here, but His faithful love is on display in all ways. He touches hearts to give comfort when evil enters our lives, and he wipes away the disgraceful stain of being wrapped up with that evil. He overcomes our contempt to replace it with compassion, and replaces our foolishness with his wise love. The purposes of actions we don't

understand. Perhaps the only understanding to glean from is what Job said: the Lord gives, the Lord takes away, blessed by the name of the Lord. Blessed by the name of the Lord, and also blessed be my friend's family at this terrible time.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 23 December 2010

It is not good to be partial to the wicked or to deprive the innocent of justice. Proverbs 18, verse 5.

When you're a parent, it's hard to be impartial and it's easy to deprive the innocent of justice. We had a big argument in my house last night, trying to enforce some rules that are needed to keep the kids safe and in line. What started out as a calmly stated "you need to start checking in again when you go someplace" degenerated into the usual parry and thrust of kids bringing up things from the past so as to cause hurt and score cheap points. It was wicked, and I don't know that anything good was gained from it. I don't want to rehash it more than that because I think some arguments just go on and on, especially when one side can't seem to communicate understanding to the other.

Isn't that how it always goes?

As a parent, when you're done, even when your child is completely in the wrong, you feel like a heel for arguing. Mind you, I don't feel bad in any way for insisting on a tougher standard or that bad behavior be corrected; as parents, we have to. I do feel bad, though, for falling into the trap of letting them get my goat, of taking it and taking it and taking it again before finally losing my cool and yelling back. We don't let it become personal; no response to the kids is ever said to tear them down. But let's be honest about something too: when you yell to intimidate your kids, even when it's to correct them, there's some tearing down that happens. When all the dealing was done, I did some mundane chores and some baking to take my mind off it. It didn't work too well.

Afterwards, I tried to reach out to make the peace. I have to try to be a grown-up and make peace even when I'm not completely in the wrong. The temptation there is to be partial to wicked behavior, to excuse something that's inexcusable. Personal insults, vicious attacks, vehement disobedience, flagrant verbal abuse, openly destructive behavior: in other words, what was on display here last night was, taken to the usual extreme, typical teenage behavior. Afterwards, the temptation is to build back bridges by excusing some of that. This is where I'm struggling today.

After all, isn't that what God does for us? We each insult Him every day, attack His commands, disobey with gusto, abuse each other with our actions and our apathy, and do things that are openly destructive. And yet He forgives us time and again when we come to Him genuinely asking for it. Is it hypocritical of me to insist that my teenagers adhere to a high standard and not feel I should compromise on that standard, knowing all the while that in so many ways it is I who have fallen short and not adhered to the high standards? Is it hypocritical or is it just part of being human?

I'm thinking the latter. The other half of the equation is that it's still pretty early and there's a lot of time in the day ahead for forgiveness, calm discussion, and building bridges the right way. I can't say there's a lot of innocence involved in our argument last night, but to be unwilling to forgive, to be hard-hearted for the sake of being stubborn, would be to deprive the innocent. They too have gotten a night's rest, and they too have a day ahead in which to build a better life. To talk through things today so as to more softly re-engage on the standards isn't excusing the things that were hurtfully said. It's a way to learn from them, to be better.

I've said before how much I hate arguing. It's even stronger during Christmas week, when we're supposed to be concentrating on the gift of the coming Savior. We're supposed to be of good cheer, act kindly, and spread love. That didn't happen here last night, but today is a new day. Today is yet another opportunity for all of us to do better and to be stronger through living faith in small ways, through letting that seal the breach and bridge past it.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 24 December 2010

The words of a man's mouth are deep waters, but the fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook. Proverbs 18, verse 4.

Just a few random thoughts strung together using the thread of wisdom from this proverb.

- I long to say things that are meaningful and helpful to others, and I long to write deep things that are important and memorable. All too often, I'm afraid I fall short. Still, I keep trying and will keep trying as long as I have breath and the ability to type.

- Words mean things. The Bible, the Constitution, the Gettysburg Address, your high school commencement address: they are written as they are for a reason, and those reasons are good ones. Words mean things and they sustain us. We will live, love, and die for what we say and vow. Words mean things and are a precious resource, especially when they say "I love you." They are deep waters.

- At any time but especially today, words of love and wisdom are the most encouraging of all. Like Patrick Swayze said, "It's amazing....the love...you get to take it with you." Profound, don't you think, especially in light of the miracle of Christmas? As Patrick might have said, when someone loves you back, it's okay to simply say, "ditto." So, ditto. That's a very wise thing.

- But, perhaps, the greatest wisdom of all is this:

"And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them."

Merry Christmas, my friends. May God enrich your life with His Christmas grace and love, and may this sustain you. Ditto.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 27 December 2010

The lips of fools bring them strife, and their mouths invite a beating. The mouths of fools are their undoing, and their lips are a snare to their very lives. Proverbs 18, verses 6 and 7.

I'm famous for biting off more than I can chew so in stacking a few verses together, I will try my best to not struggle. I do this only to think outside the box and propose some analysis. For the purposes of that analysis, how would it be if I reworded verses 6 and 7 to read like this: The lips of fools bring them strife, and their lips are a snare to their very lives. The mouths of fools are their undoing, and their mouths invite a beating.

Sort of changes the meaning, don't you think? The phrases are similar enough that the rearranging works, doesn't it? In one way, it brings clauses together to group similar thoughts. Lips and lips, mouths and mouths: it sort of makes sense. The thoughts seem more complete, fuller. But then I remember that it isn't a wise thing to fool around with the Divine. If you think about it, it's a form of subtle idolatry, thinking that I know better than He who wrote it in the first place.

Here ends the analysis because that's my point: it would be a foolish thing to try to change something that is good the first time around. It would be completely self-serving. It would be like, say, remaking a great movie: the remake usually turns out different, loses something. Think "The Longest Yard." The proverb is good as it is, and complete as it is.

Words don't leave the mouth until they pass over the lips, and words don't start on the lips but they do further back with thought and intention. I suppose these verses are another way of saying "think before you speak." Words mean things, and we will say and do almost anything because of words. Here's the kicker: you don't have to be a fool for what you say to invite a beating, or for words to be your undoing, or for what you say to be a snare trap. Whether it's done in love or from some other motivation, what we say can get us in trouble. There may be promises we can't keep, things we can't or shouldn't do, things that are hard to live up to. Even the most educated person can still feel like a fool – or be a fool – because of things they say.

Hence, it's probably a good idea to cling tightly to that "think before you speak" concept because God does. He is a chess player where we are playing checkers. He thinks thousands of moves ahead before ever speaking in any way. From the beginning of time He foretold we would need a Savior, and all that time in-between then and the time of Christ He pointed people to that need and to His promise to meet it. Funny thing is that they reversed all of it. They didn't just take God at his word: they did what I did and reversed his verses so that the words said what they wanted to hear. From that, rules, conditions, regulations, and a bunch of mostly well-intentioned misconstruing happened. Through it all, God kept on speaking, kept on speaking his thought-out, well-planned words that revealed Himself and his loving wisdom to us bit by bit.

And that's how it's always been. Sometimes He speaks loud, and sometimes it's so hard to understand that it takes lots of gray matter to process it all. He's speaking all the same and His words are just right the way they are. They need no embellishment, not even any commentary from someone like me. That's a struggle for me because I'm still learning to think before I speak, and I'm still learning to not be self-focused. Above all, I'm still learning to not bite off more than I can chew. It means I constantly struggle to not overload my days, or to over-speak my place. In the year soon to come, I'll keep working at it. One thing I know: the Word doesn't need changing, but maybe I do.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 28 December 2010

The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts. Proverbs 18, verse 8.

Continuing on a theme that words mean things, let me reiterate it here: words mean things. Words cut deep and words hurt. When I was a kid I was a scrawny thing; skinny, awkward, socially outcast. I compensated, at times being timid and at other times cocky. I got bullied a lot from the time I was in elementary school until I finally grew up to put a stop to it in high school. It wasn't always physical bullying; most of the time it was the put-down's and cut-down's from other kids. All young kids are impressionable but I'll speak only for myself: I remembered the insults and the lies. After awhile, I started to believe them.

Later, I struggled with criticism. I've developed a thicker skin, and most times I find that I don't care what people say about me. Talk really is cheap, and if someone isn't talking about me, they're talking about someone else. Usually it doesn't bother me. But you've read about my struggles this year, and a few months back I brought grave sin and trouble into my house. You don't realize it when you're caught up in the thick of such things how they affect the people around you, but they affected much more than just the primary people involved.

Of course the talk started. Good Christians with whom I'd been friends, close friends even, wouldn't have anything to do with me anymore. They talked, they networked. I'd become somebody nobody would trust, and I had betrayed the closest relationships and confidences. Some didn't know what to think, some didn't approve and some just didn't know; they all pushed away. And some, well, some kept the talk going. "The Hens" chatter in the barnyard. That cheap chatter hurts, especially when it hurts the people around you.

The sad part about it was that some of it was true.

After I was alone, I thought a lot about it. It hurt; ALOT. It hurt so much that I was despondent, not wanting to go on. I spent weeks alone at night, wading deep into the regret of what I'd done and how I'd laid waste love, trust, and the lives of the people I loved most. I had ruined my marriage, my family, and become a hypocrite to my faith. I'd insulted God for the love He gave to me. When I turned to some for emotional support, they helped and they got me through. When I turned to others, they recoiled; can you blame them? And in the background I heard the chatter...pick a little, talk a little, pick a little, talk a little, cheep, cheep, cheep, talk a lot pick a little more. Goodnight ladies.

And so it goes. It's not just ladies who gossip. We men do our fair share. We do it differently but it happens all the same. Some of you will even read these words from a link on Facebook and if there's ever a perfect forum for promulgating gossip it is our modern social network. Remember what my friend, John, said: it's a mile wide and an inch deep.

So how about we turn it around (or as they say in my church, "Whoop" it)? How about we make a new years' resolution here and now, before the new year actually starts? How about we take that 'gossip' word and make it our own? I'll embrace it and accept it and admit that I gossip too. In my life I've passed on unfounded news as reliable, and in my life I've talked cheaply, judged loosely, and formed grudges based on hearsay. I'm a damn sinner and I hate it. Words mean things and I've said things using mean words. They hurt me when I was a kid; they hurt badly this year when they're said about me; they hurt even worse when I say them about others. It's an affront to God who is perfect love and who transmits that perfect love into the very inmost parts of our lives.

And He does it using words: words His Spirit uses to touch our hearts and turn us from who we were and what we've done. So how about we do that 'whoop' on gossip and resolve to say things only to build up? How about we make 'gossip' into something constructive, talking up the positives to make them into something that helps? If Paul can turn obligatory slavery from sin to righteousness, we can do the same with gossip. I don't have the apostle's gifts, but I do have the same God in Christ who gave those gifts to Paul.

How about it starts with me, Dave Terry, and that I say things to lay a good foundation in people's lives? When I'm online, how about I start there, building others up and offering encouraging praise and support? How about we refrain from opinions that tear down? Sure, there will be challenges. There will be negative opinions and things that affront us too. Others will still do things that hurt us; our government will still be inept; those in the media and entertainment will still be, well, less than supportive. Our tendency and our nature will still confront us every minute to resort to old ways and old habits. I'm the worst of the worst at this, but I resolve to keep working to change, to do better. I challenge and dare you to do the same.

Because George Jones and Mama Judd were right: I've had choices, and don't you think it's time? I've had choices and I've hurt others by them. Don't you think it's time to do better? Don't you think it's time to take that Christmas love of the Savior who came to teach us different choices, then do something with it? Don't you think it's time to choose to hold onto that Christmas redemption and carry it forward into every day? In my heart, I long ago forgave those who hurt me over the years, and I forgave the people who hurt me just recently. I hope they can forgive me too. One day I hope we'll share the same Heaven where our forgiveness will be amplified so much more by the real forgiveness that got us there. I'm very hopeful that 2011 will be made into a great year by the words we say and do. Words do mean things, so let's resolve to build meaning into them that reflects and shines the blessings & love God puts in our way instead of beaconing out all the garbage.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 29 December 2010

One who is slack in his work is brother to one who destroys. Proverbs 18, verse 9.

'Make hay while the sun shines' goes the old saying. Good advice, I'd say, especially since farming is hard work at any hour. Do work while you can and when you should to build rather than destroy. Whether we like it or not, we have to work. It's what we were put here for. Awhile back, my friend, Patrick, preached on vocation, saying how even back in Eden, God made people to work, that work and vocation would be a joy and form of praise for us. God worked to build this place, and He works to maintain it and us, and God doesn't ever do anything wrong. Therefore, work should be a blessing, right?

If you think about it, work IS a blessing. We are blessed with remuneration, status, achievement, friendships, interactions, skills, challenges, and something to pass the time. Sure, there are conflicts (which are opportunities for constructive resolution), arguments (see the previous point), challenges (to which we can rise), headaches (which can be soothed and relieved), and negatives (which can also point to positives). See where I'm going with this? I reject the notion that work is a drudgery, or something we HAVE to do. Indeed, even on the bad days, it is a blessing, maybe even something we could want to do.

Of course, you might think I'm a bit strange but I like to work. I thrive on work, though I believe in the positive aspects around the maxim of 'working to live instead of living to work.' I like having something to do to earn my way and be productive. On the job, I believe in giving at least 100% in effort and commitment to the tasks that are mine. I recently left a good company because I didn't have enough to do. When I was working, it was good work and I enjoyed it, but with the workplace (and the health insurance sector) being what it is, there just wasn't enough to do and I began to emotionally drift. I don't like that.

So this is a proverb I easily understand and to which I can relate. Idle hands are the devil's playground, right? I agree with that. These days I work from home. Being a software configuration consultant, I find that my most productive days are those I spend onsite, working with the client. It's easier to keep focused. When I work at home, I need to be judicious about how I spend my time because it's too easy to get sidetracked. In a house full of clutter and kids, it doesn't take much for my interest and my efforts to wander. There is always something that needs to be done, or words to be written. And if that isn't enough, between IMs, writing, Facebook and the phone, my attention is easily diverted, distracted.

When that happens, I become a slacker. I hate that, because when I slack off on something, then someone else is affected. "Synergism" is a word used in the workplace. I define it as 'work harmony,' like the instruments in an orchestra playing different parts together as part of a larger composition. It is efforts moving as one, together and complementary. Thus, if one person slacks off, it affects others. Someone has to pick up that slack; someone has to make up for it. It can be destructive on small or large scale. There are consequences.

And it really affects me because consequences are something I'm trying to instill in my kids. If they do something, there are consequences for others. If your son needs a ride and you have a meeting, there are consequences. If your daughter blows out a tire (because she overfilled a bad tire with too much air) driving someplace she shouldn't have been in anyway, there are consequences. If you have an affair, there are consequences. When one person slacks in his or her work of life, we are like destroyers. If only potentially, we negatively affect others. When we rise to that potential, in small ways or large, we destroy.

I've had enough of destruction, and it really grates me when someone has to pick up my slack. I'm not a New Year's Resolution believer; I believe we should resolve to do what's right and helpful regardless of the date on some calendar. Here and now, I resolve to continue to do my best at work and to keep putting good efforts into it. Here and now, I resolve to make hay while the good sun is shining.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 30 December 2010

The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it an unscalable wall. Proverbs 18, verse 11.

The first half of this verse is identical to Proverbs 10, verse 15; dare you to go look that up. I wrote about that one a few months back, saying that I thought one way to think of 'the wealth of the rich' is friendship and love, that according to a movie character "no man is a failure who has friends" (attaboy Clarence). I still think that, and I also think that we can incorporate thinking about the verse at face value: the clause talks about financial wealth and how secure it can make you (unless you invest with Bernie Madoff).

Today let's talk about the second half, though. Let's talk about attitude. A few days ago I watched "Titanic" with my daughter. Put aside Kate and Leo: the ship was unsinkable and pride caused the collision, which caused the sinking, which caused the unnecessary deaths of hundreds of innocent people. Let's talk about teenagers who get away with wrongdoing. All too often dodging one bullet makes them think they are bulletproof. Let's talk about the stock market that will never crash...until the laws of economics take hold and it happens. And let's talk about Bernie Madoff too, that brilliant investor who also happens to be a financial kleptomaniac writ large.

Finally, let's talk about the man in the mirror. Let's talk about someone more down to earth, closer to home. Let's talk about you and I. One of my unscalable walls is pride. I hold myself to be far too proud, proud beyond that healthy pride that comes of accomplishment and achievement. I hold my pride up as a protective barrier, keeping some out and others within. I look for offenses where there are none, and I find some where none are intended. My pride is a hollow shell covering my insecurities, and it is a cheap façade covering an even cheaper core. My hollow pride comes off as arrogance and shallowness; to be honest, it IS arrogant and shallow. Most of all, it gives me a BAD attitude.

The funny thing about it is that it's such a sham. I may keep people out by turning them off, pushing them away, but God can see past it. He sees how much it hurts me to have that wall, even as I deceive myself into thinking I need it, so He sees through it and pushes past. He punches down the wall, breaks it into pieces. He talks to me at a more fundamental level, demands I get down to the rub of issues, and holds me accountable to the highest standards. He also sees when I fall so desperately short of those standards, so He gives me an out and sets things right in ways I can't. God doesn't ignore my unscalable walls: He overcomes them. Then He corrects my attitude, stripping away the sham and giving me another opportunity to put my best foot forward and my best face in public. He does it because of love.

So it comes back to the attitude. My attitude, specifically. It's one of the things I need to work on and, to be honest, I am. It's a work in progress, but I'm on it. With God's help and yours, I can improve it, turn it around. With that help, I can tear down a wall or two.

What is your unscalable wall? My hunch is that you have one, or you're like me and have a few. I have another hunch that maintaining that wall is a costly thing for you because I know mine cost me dearly. At the start of a new year, don't you think it's time to do something about it?

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 31 December 2010

The name of the LORD is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe. Proverbs 18, verse 10.

It is New Year's Eve, 2010. In less than a day, 2011 will be here; if you're in Australia it already is. I'm not much for NYE because some bad things have happened to me on New Year's' past. It pains me to look back on the past because I don't want to gloat over some good things and don't like facing some of the bad. This year there has been heartbreak, betrayal, separation, fighting, struggling, sins and challenges. Adultery, financial woes, anger, fighting, theft, deceit, addictions, profanity, spiraling downward and hurt: years from now, I'm afraid those are the words I'll use to describe 2010. I brought many of them on myself; I brought many of them into my life and the lives of people I love. I destroyed and devastated them. I live – we live – with the legacy of that.

Yet there is a counterbalance to things, and I believe that for every bad there is at least one good. In the middle of all those negative things, there have been many more positives. There is blessing, reconciliation, achievement, enjoyment, prosperity, and motivation. Love came back in my life, my family is healing, issues are being addressed, my kids are all healthy, and in many ways we're better off than we were even a year ago when all the hurt started. We haven't failed completely in our finances, the kids are working harder in school, and I got a new job that promises to pay rewards bigger than my family has ever known. I've permanently lost 30 pounds (and have kept it off), and in many non-physical ways, we're healthier as well.

I believe that's because the name of the LORD is a fortified tower. On my own, I am not righteous, but He made me so. When unexpected misfortunes happened, I saw He was first on the scene to gird my resolve, calm my fears, and help me to take constructive action. His strength never abandoned me. When I reaped the consequences of my sins, when I was so down, I turned to God repeatedly for comfort and restoration. Sometimes it seemed like He wasn't listening because I didn't perceive that I'd gotten any kind of response, even a negative one. That too is deceitful because I found that, when I felt most disconnected from God was when I was running away from him. It took prayer, devotion and help to break through. All the while, even in the middle of the worst of my sins, I was running to Him, I was running to that tower of fortified safety where no harm – no guilt, shame or regret – could befall me. He sent others and their loving words to let me know I was loved. He restored me within the fortified walls of His love.

He kept me safe. He was tearing down and tearing away at the negatives, then turning them around to teach me and build me up. He was showing me that He doesn't give second chances: He gives the grace of unlimited opportunities for the repentant heart. Mine has been broken a number of times this year in different ways, and I'm still plagued with the heartache from that. I'm learning, though, that God allows pain for us to see a need. When we see that, with real and honest hope, we can begin to heal.

For days now, I've been saying to friends that I believe 2011 will be a better year. I truly do. It's not the concept of 'it can't get any worse' because, to be frank, it always can. Things can always get worse in ways we don't expect. The thing to remember is that, more often than worse, things get much better in ways we don't expect, so we should plan for the unexpected. We should work to minimize our exposure to the bad while opening ourselves to the good. That's not just psychological pap: it's solid Christian theology. Learn from our mistakes to do better, then open our hearts to let God through His Son and Spirit have His way with us. Grace flows down, then it flows all around. It flows all around through you and me. In this year of disasters and blessings, I've learned that it's ok to get hurt because you can be healed. It's ok to let love go because it can come back to you when you least deserve or expect it and it always comes back multiple. It's ok to tell people you love them because as people and believers that's our privilege. And it's ok to make mistakes because the LORD is a fortified tower and in Him is rest and safety.

I'm not sure if we'll all stay in or go out tonight. Doesn't matter though: wherever we are, the year will be a fresh opportunity instead of a millstone curse. Whatever we do, He will be right there with us to celebrate, laugh, cry, and move forward. He will be for you too. God's blessings on your new year. Use your talents, faith, and drive to make the best of it for others, for the Kingdom, and for yourself. Enjoy the celebration and we'll see you on the other side of it all. A happy, safe and blessed New Year's to you.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 3 January 2011

Before his downfall a man's heart is proud, but humility comes before honor. Proverbs 18, verse 2.

Happy New Year and I hope that your celebrations were fun, full of meaning and celebration, and proudly humble and honorable. Kind of strange, that last thought. Proudly humble and honorable. Aren't pride and humility mutually exclusive? How can someone be proud and humble, and then how can that be honorable, especially since humility is a pre-requisite for honor?

I suppose the key is in what we're proud of. I'm proud of many things. I'm proud to be a man. I'm proud to be a Christian, father, writer, brown-eyed, nail-biting Texan. I haven't always been those things, but I'm proud of them and glad to be them today. Except for the Christian man role, I may not always be all those things, but I'm proud of them now.

As a believer, I don't see pride in these things as being dishonorable or wrong. I'm proud to boast of what I believe about God. I'm proud of that because in order to believe it, to really live it, one can't be prideful in an arrogant manner. Other people may not be very comfortable with how I would practice my faith, but that's ok; I'm not comfortable with some ways others would do the same thing. As my friend Patrick quotes, 'got skin? Got sin.' I struggle with it every day, and it tempts me – and pulls me under – most of the time. I constantly fail at upholding the standard Christ implored of loving perfectly, obeying His commands perfectly, and serving & giving perfectly. I'm an abject failure at these, which is why He took that burden from me and said "don't sweat it anymore." Consequently, because of what He did there is pride in going into situations that you know are hostile to faith (such as in Red China or Red San Francisco) where clinging to it and saying "this I believe" is a strengthening, powerful action.

For Him, humility came before honor in this ultimate act of service. Yet all through his life, Christ proudly boasted of serving God, of being God, and never shied from that. All my life I've been a believer, though a lapsed one for some years, and a hypocritical one for many. During those times, I have been prouder of who I am instead who the I AM is in my life; during those times, He stood in front of me, silently convicting me of things I knew I'd done. And during those times, He urged me to take His hand and walk with him awhile, to let him fix what was errant inside of me and walk with me hand in hand as I endured the consequences.

That's not to say that I should live my life as a slave in abject humiliation. God doesn't want that for us because that wouldn't be love. And He doesn't want us to live as dutiful servants, living our lives in an upright manner because we HAVE TO. Instead, He builds us up to do so because we want to, because we care and love; because that's how He does and what He is. He is complete love and He is and does so in a humble yet proud way. You always know where the Almighty stands, whether it is confronting you in conviction or standing beside you holding your hand: the great I AM is both proudly almighty and powerful, and humbly encouraging as my friend, brother and Savior.

Last year I lived out the consequences of lot of pride. Today is the first Proverbial day of a new year, so I think it's a good time to set a foundation for the year to come. Yesterday's sermon in church talked about doing LESS for the year to come. It meant relying more on God to have His way in our lives and worry & stress less. It will mean being confident – and maybe proud – in being humble, in letting God move amid the details of every day. Before his downfall a man's heart is proud, but humility comes before honor. I believe now is a great time to resolve to make a humble and honorable year, channeling my pride into was that build up rather than tear down, glorify rather than magnify, and love rather than envy. Happy New Year, my friends, and let's get busy.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 4 January 2011

He who answers before listening – that is his folly and shame. Proverbs 18, verse 13.

Had another discussion with a teenager yesterday and I wish I had read this verse before. I'll proudly say that it wasn't adult voices that were raised, but there were loud voices in the room. This particular teenager didn't like being confronted with some rules being re-enforced, and didn't like having to face a few realities. The adults in the room didn't like enforcing them either. After the cool-down period (where said teen was left alone to collect thoughts), things were better and calmer. It was like letting steam out of a valve: you have to do it even though it might burn you because the building pressure is too much for the system to bear.

Then I read this verse and it got me thinking that this is a great verse to remember when talking with your kids, especially teenagers. True, it's perfect to remember with any interaction, but let's keep on track here. We're talking about talking with teens. 2011 is the ninth year I've had teenagers in my home, and I will have a teen in my family for at least another six years as well. Over my time of testing here, I've learned that, above all, teenagers crave understanding. They want to understand because they are trying so hard to carve out a place for themselves while developing an adult identity in a body not yet adult but no longer child. Spiritual, physical, emotional, vocational, educational, familial: teenagers want to be understood in each of these arenas and want to be taken at face value in them as well.

To that end, I've learned the hard way that, when talking with your teens, if you answer before you've really listened, then you just make a bad situation worse. I'm especially bad at this, with caffeine issues and being impatient by nature. It takes a lot for me to remind myself to shut up and listen, to not immediately respond, when they are talking. When I do, I am better positioned to try to understand what it is they are saying (which is usually projected at a high volume). Not only that, but I find it helps me build respect with them because it means I am opening myself to them, considering what they have to say before taking any action on it. Listening builds trust, and builds bridges.

Invariably, when I give a knee-jerk answer, unless there is immediate danger involved, I appear weak and not credible. It is my folly and shame to all too often give those knee-jerk, immediate answers. When I react, or when I answer before considering what's been said, I increase the volume and the stress. The argument becomes shrill, the walls go up, the chip on the shoulder gets bigger, the profanities fly, and understanding is breached. Mission very much not accomplished.

Sound familiar? Ever been there and done that? I bet quite a few of us have, with or without teenagers in our lives. We're all former teenagers anyway.

So I'm adding this to my short list of things to do for 2011. Part of my doing less this year (in keeping with letting God have more of His way in my life) will be to react less and listen more. This one will be dear to me and, I expect, very hard to do. It's worthwhile though. The teenage years are very frustrating; I laugh when my friends with little children say how tough it is to raise them. I don't discount that it's tough because it is. But they ain't seen nothing yet. When those days finally come, I hope they listen better than I did, or at least as well as I hope to in this year just begun.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 5 January 2011

A man's spirit sustains him in sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear? Proverbs 18, verse 14.

Yesterday I learned that a friend of mine has cancer. Breast cancer and it could be advanced; doctors are still running tests. She's a friend from high school and was in my wife's graduating class. We were friends in the hall, and are friends online via Facebook too. As much as I struggle with Facebook and the shallow nature of it, for times such as these I'm thankful for it because it informs me that I can, via prayers, play a role in this woman's battle against the disease.

My friend is a woman of faith and while she doesn't know her prognosis yet, she is publicly clinging to her faith. I suppose that a psychiatrist could make the argument that, at times of crisis, feigning faith is a coping mechanism. When we are distressed, we say and do anything necessary to cope with the distress, to make ourselves feel better.

Whatever.

I remember this woman and she isn't some drama queen, and she isn't shallow or pathetic. As soon as she was emotionally able, she broke the news in a rational manner and asked for prayers. She also repeatedly posted statements saying how she understood God was in control of even this bad situation, that He would use it for her good somehow. At such a time, I'm amazed and humbled by such faith. This is one of those moments in which I take healthy pride in sharing that common belief. For my friend, faith in God through Christ is a real and integral part of living, not just some outfit you wear on Sunday morning. It is a gift, and a pleasure.

I pity those without faith, and pray that they too would be encouraged and make the common sense turn to real wisdom. A few days ago, I got into an online tiff with someone I'd befriended. I think that I've become a Facebook friend collector in that, if a sufficient number of my friends & acquaintances know someone, I'd send them a friend request. Since doing these 'columns,' I find I want to do what I can to spread the good news. I'm no minister, but this is a way I can use what talent I have to spread that news. That's how this person came into my list of friends. He was openly hostile towards my Christianity, and got even more so when I wished him well and told him I would pray for him. Either it was an act – drama queen – or he's a person without faith. Either way, I think about it now and it bothers me. I pity him because what would he do if the doctor told him that he had cancer? To where would he turn for solace and encouragement when the treatments run their course? What future is there for someone who rejects God's free gift of life? What would sustain him in his time of sickness because each of us will face death one day whether we believe in Christ or not? Would his crushed spirit be more than he could bear? I hope not.

So if you're of the praying bent, then please pray for my friend T, and pray for the friend with the profile picture of Joe Cool. The days ahead may be tough and the outcome of them on this earth isn't known. Like you and I, my friend T has friends and family to support her, but also family and friends who would like to grow old with her. The old Gospel song says "it is no secret what God can do...what He's done for others, He'll do for you." Whether it's healing, comfort, encouragement or more, I believe it's no secret what God can do for my friend and anyone facing the tough days of sickness, of trouble and hardship or heartbreak, or just of living from heartbeat to heartbeat. Life can be tough. The antidote and medicine to it is a lifeline to the Almighty.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 6 January 2011

A gift opens the way for the giver and ushers him into the presence of the great. Proverbs 18, verse 16.

Have you ever paid it forward? Have you ever bought something for the person standing behind you in line? Or changed a stranger's tire without being paid? Have you ever considered what giving a gift does for YOU? This isn't meant to be selfish or entirely self-focused, yet just for a second, think about the part you play as the gift-giver.

Isn't giving at the center of serving? Isn't giving the thing that God implores us most to do? Give our love, give our earnings, give our possessions, give our humility and pride, give over our sins to Him, give our lives for each other: God implores us to be willing to give 24/7 and sometimes to back up that willingness with action. He tells us to do whatever we do with a cheerful and giving heart and accept what comes, whether it be praise or death, knowing that good giving of the heart stores up treasure in Heaven. I think we can't serve without giving, and we can't give without serving. A servant gives of himself in even menial tasks; whether it is by compulsion or compensation, a servant gives his talents and time to perform a task of service. Likewise, I believe it is impossible to give something to someone without subordinating yourself to the other person. We give because we want to feel good by instilling happiness in someone else. That can't be done without taking the risk that they may reject our gift, and some gifts are very dear to reject.

The Bible translation that I use for these verses (NIV) includes a concordance note about this verse. It references it to Proverbs 17:8, which talks about bribes. True, there are other proverbs (and other verses in the Bible) that talk about bribes, and about how the people of the Bible used bribes to get what they want. Focus on Congress (or your church council, family reunion, mornings with your children, and the work place) and you'll see we aren't much different; the carrot and stick approach works no matter what time period you call your own. This is a new year and I'm not ready to focus on being so negative. Christmas was just over ten days ago and I would rather focus on gifts being gifts instead of them being bribes. Mind you, I'm not sugar coating here: I'm very conscious that many of us (including the man in the mirror) sometimes give with expectation of something in return. Let's just table that for a moment, shall we?

Instead, let's move into today and be glad for gifts given to us. Work challenges can be a gift because they are an opportunity to hone our talents. Friendships are a gift because they let us share of ourselves in ways we otherwise wouldn't. New clothes, iPods, DVDs, new tires for the car, books, ornaments and cards are gifts; we all like and sometimes need those things. And love is a gift, the best of all. God, who is love, gives that to us to share and spread around. He gave of himself, then gave His own life, that we may have the gift of being with Him forever. He did it so we could fully share in His perfect love, letting it fulfill, enrich, and nurture us for all time. And He did it to start here and now.

How about we spread a little of that around today? It just takes a handshake, or a compliment, or a kind word. How about we say a prayer for someone who confronts us, or smile when we feel like frowning? How about we give some time instead of taking time to do whatever it is that we do? Finally, how about we give thanks: how about we each give thanks, in our own ways, to God and those He puts in our lives for all the ways they support, build, encourage, sharpen, and care in our lives? It builds treasure in heaven, you know, and ushers us into the presence of the great.

Life is pretty darn hard, I know. For every gift-giver, there are bribe-takers out there as well. For everyone who would give of a willing heart, there is someone willing to manipulate that heart for whatever it is they think they need. There's enough pain in living day to day that it would be all too easy to focus on gifts as being subtle bribes, but doing that wouldn't ease the pain. Turning it around, making gifts about the giving of them does so. Let that be one of my gifts to you today.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 7 January 2011

The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him. Proverbs 18, verse 17.

I suppose there are any number of angles with which you could analyze the verse, from honesty to contending that Solomon was in favor of lawyers. But, on this one, I'm going to side with my NIV concordance that says the verse is a caution to judges to listen to all sides of an argument before passing judgment.

That's good New Years advice, don't you think? As this first workweek of the new year comes to a close, I think that's the advice I'll try hardest to remember. You've heard me complain before that I'm rash, that I rush to judgment on things. I'm guilty of forever trying to read between the lines for meaning that isn't there, and I'm guilty of passing silent judgment on things before I really know the whole story. It shouldn't be that way: I spent many years working in military intelligence. One of the things you learn in intelligence analysis is that one fact doesn't make a trend, and the complete story is usually told only when you know much more. So it is with everything.

You've also read about talks with my teenagers. THAT is an area where rushing to judgment is especially dangerous. A good example is last night. My son is on the school wrestling team yet has been struggling with his grades for much of this first semester. He is learning disabled yet, through many years of hard work, is taking all mainstream classes and is passing all of them...except two. One is a foreign language and the other is, surprisingly, algebra which he was passing just before Christmas. His grades mean that he's suspended from competition. He still trains daily with the team, but he can't compete. That's very hard for him to bear.

When I picked him up from school yesterday, he was in a foul mood. Anger, profanity, complaining, disrespect: all typical teenage behaviors but it wasn't hard to see that something was going on. We tried talking with him, and it turns out that it was a confluence of factors. He's something of a social outcast and is feeling more outcast these days because the group he wants to be in (the wrestlers) is a group which he can't fully join. He hadn't eaten all day, trying to cut weight to make the weekly weigh in. He made weight but wasn't allowed to compete in the district meet that starts today, yet (along with the rest of the team) he had to set up mats in the school gym to prepare for the meet. He hadn't slept well the night before. He was sore from practice, and to top it all off, he had seen his grades for the week and was failing those two classes.

"What good is it to work hard if all I do is fail?" he said. He was practically imploring it. How do you answer someone like that? While it's true that he needs to improve more on his home study skills, he has worked harder in the last two months than I've ever seen him work, and it only seems to get him nowhere. He wants so badly to compete, and he's conditioned himself perfectly for it but his grades hold him back. I had to turn my head away from him because he was so upset and I didn't want him to see the tears in my own eyes.

There was more than one thing bothering him, and a rush to judgment would have meant reaching a conclusion without seeing all sides of the story. It would have meant addressing only one facet of what was going on, and probably not addressing the fundamental issue at all. After the discussion, we let him think about it for awhile. He had been angry and profane, and I didn't let that slide; neither did we let it sidetrack the discussion. He is very hard on himself, and he's frustrated. Later in the night, as I was putting away decorations in the family room, he wanted to cook something and got part of the way into the recipe before he discovered that we didn't have all the ingredients. At that, he grouched and went to bed. I felt bad for him again because he likes to cook and was trying to do something to calm himself, but found only frustration again. Had to turn away again with those same tears in my eyes.

I wish there was a happier ending for the story. He's going to school today and will have to sit in the bleachers during the meet, watching his teammates wrestle and compete, knowing that he could – and should – be out there. It will be hard on him. He wanted to stay home from school, to avoid the problem, but I'm making him go instead. It's hard to work around here with the kids around, and it's more important that he be there to both support his team and build some resolve to not let this defeat negatively define him. My heart aches for him, and I want so badly to shake his Spanish teacher until she gets it through her wooden head that he has worked so hard in her class but she refuses to meet him halfway; he's dyslexic and learning English is hard enough let alone Spanish from a teacher who (in my opinion) isn't fit to train a dog. But he needs to work harder as well. A few weeks ago he was failing other classes but has since brought those grades up to passing as well. He can do the work; he just needs to do some more. My son needs to develop some more study skills and improve his self-discipline, but those things come with time, with being a teenager, and with growing up. A larger lesson is in play here, and it's worth letting it play out to a happier conclusion.

It would have been all too easy to pass judgment on the situation, to mete out punishment for the flagrant disrespect and venom that he injected into our conversation. It would also have been wrong and unfair. My son was presenting his case and, if the case had been closed at "I don't want to go to that *&%\$ school tomorrow" then the case would have been incomplete. Judgment and consequences would have been misplaced. So it is with much more than teenage years and high school wrestling. As this first week of 2011 draws to a close, let this be a lesson to me, to my son, my family, and maybe even to each of us to learn the whole story before we speak or act. Our words and actions mean things; let this be another reminder from Scripture that we should want them to mean the right things.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 10 January 2011

Casting the lot settles disputes and keeps strong opponents apart. Proverbs 18, verse 18.

Let's not spread the rumor that, from this verse, God is sanctioning gambling. I did some online research and found the statement that might enrage some: the Bible neither prohibits nor condones gambling. It does warn against trusting in chance (trust in God instead), and it does label the love of money or consulting a medium as sins. If you want to read more, here's the most succinct reference I found: <http://www.gotquestions.org/gambling-sin.html>

But there is NOTHING in the Bible – in God's inerrant word – that prohibits gambling. In fact, the Old Testament has numerous examples of the Hebrews and Jews of old casting lots (dice) to settle matters. The Urim and Thumim may have been forms of dice that the ancient Hebrews used to decide on matters they couldn't otherwise decide. There are other examples too. In the New Testament, when the Apostles couldn't decide on just who would replace Judas Iscariot, they cast lots and left the decision up to God on how He would let the dice fall. As you can see, precedent.

Now, a skeptical someone might say, "This is nothing but a cop out!" Think about it and there's a grain of wholesome truth in that. After all, we don't know the outcome when we roll the dice and we trust they will fall with a positive outcome for us. If we're wagering money, it's a game of luck or chance for either gain or loss. Isn't wagering the outcome of a decision a gamble as well? For that matter, let's debate how many angels dance on the head of a pin.

Here's where I land on it: the examples of 'constructive gambling' in the Bible are where casting lots, dice, or rock/paper/scissors were used to make a decision. How many times in our lives do we get to a decision where there are multiple, good choices and we just find it too hard to decide? We think through the options, try to anticipate outcomes, make up our pro's and con's and we still can't make the decision. In cases like that, I don't see anything wrong with leaving the choice up to God via the roll of the dice. It's trusting that He will put His desired outcome in a medium we can understand.

Again, here comes the skeptic yelling "cop out" again. Isn't that the same as saying "you're trusting your decision to blind luck?" What, I would respond to them, is either blind or lucky about it? We choose to cast the dice, we choose the medium of those dice, we put trust in the outcome of the medium, and we turn those things over to a higher power who we believe always acts for our good. I would even counter that your average atheist who would trust in blind luck is doing that same thing as your average Dave who would blindly trust in God. If my perspective is that this is an act of faith, perhaps the atheist is putting his or her faith in God after all. You be the judge. There's hope for the hopeless at all times.

Whatever the motivation or outcome, I think the Proverb stands up because if two parties trust in a roll of the lot to make a decision – and both agree to abide by the outcome – then it's undeniably true that the casting of lots can settle disputes. Both sides may have strong, justifiable cases; both may have strong claim. I see nothing wrong in trusting the outcome of a decision to the casting of lots, rolling of the dice, or whatever means you decide to use. If you think about it, it's seeking God's assistance to intervene in something important to us. That's always a good thing.

I'm not wild about the 'sin city' nature of Las Vegas, and there are times when (for various reasons) the burgeoning number of Indian casinos bothers me. But it may surprise you to learn that I like casinos. While I can take or leave gambling itself, I like the flashy, fast-paced, shiny nature of casinos themselves. Maybe one of these days I'll have the money to spare and I'll get up the gumption to spend a few days in West Baden, Shreveport or Durant, take in a show, have a few drinks, and play the tables. I doubt that it'll be for the reason of making a decision, but I also doubt that doing so will have a deleterious, long-term effect on my soul. I trust that God will make whatever happens to happen, and I won't have to shoot the dice too often to find out.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 11 January 2011

An offended brother is more unyielding than a fortified city, and disputes are like the barred gate of a citadel. Proverbs 18, verse 19.

Cain and Abel; Jacob and Esau; Hatfields and McCoys; us and our neighbors: have you ever offended, or been offended by, your neighbor or your brother or sister? When you're offended, it's hard to be impartial, and it's hard to be forgiving, isn't it? What's more, once you get offended, don't you sometimes find it hard to lay down the burden of being offended? Have you ever been hurt by someone else?

I'll give you two examples from my own story; you decide. When I was growing up, I was bullied, and it took me 30 years of maturing, moving around, and living as an adult before I finally came to the sensible conclusion that the only person still being hurt by what happened was me. It was hard to put down that weight, to let it off my shoulders. After all, the success of a dozen bullies in four schools was played out in the misery with which I clothed myself. Wear those clothes long enough and they become very comfortable, too comfortable in fact. And yet, it's awful tough to convince yourself that you're better off naked, without the clothes. Pride, too, can be like the barred gate of the citadel.

In another example, a few years ago, I lost a job in Montana. I didn't give the company cause to fire me; they simply let me go within 180 days of my hire saying, "this just isn't a good fit." It devastated me and my family financially, physically, emotionally, vocationally, and personally. To this day, I still don't know all the reasons why, though I know bits and pieces of it from things I have been told. Even though I now work for a much better company, I still bear grudges against the people who I felt did me wrong; I need to let it go because the person hurt most is still me.

Do you see the common vein running through these? I was offended, and in my own defense, offenses were done to me. I don't know what I did to deserve the taunting or the abuse, but it happened anyway. I don't know what I did to deserve being let go from the job I looked at as a fresh beginning, but it happened anyway. I was wronged, but it happened anyway. There may have been nothing I could have done to stop either of these things; they might have happened to me or someone else anyway. Still, I was the one to whom they did happen and they left me angry: angry and unyielding in the grudges I bore in their wake.

There are many other examples of things that left me angry. Personal struggles at home, struggles within my family, struggles in the workplace, financial struggles, friendship struggles, struggles in and outside the boundaries of my marriage: there are many things that cause hurt, many things that cause dispute. I am responsible for some of them, but for some I am not. Some things are done by others, and some things just happen. Not a pretty story is it. I wish it weren't true because there are some hurts that are very difficult to live with, especially when other hearts are involved. Real hearts really can be broken. Who can change all this? You know the answer.

Only God can love unconditionally. As humans, we love each other in many ways, and those ways are usually true and good. But it is only God who can introduce and instill in us unconditional love. Only God can teach us to love each other without reservations. Only God Himself, He who is pure love and shares real love, can break through the doors of the citadel that is our disputes. Only God's love can unconditionally take the weight of hurt from our shoulders that seems as strong as the fortified city. As much as we want to, of ourselves and without Him, we can't love unconditionally. We always mess it up even when our hearts are clean and our intentions good. But with Him as the center of that love, then we can't help BUT to love unconditionally.

And doing that is when we start to let go of the hurt.

For me, that's the hardest part of it, that letting go of the hurt. I wrapped it around me like a safety blanket, letting it keep me secure behind the walls of pain so that no more pain could get in. I never knew that it was a one-way sieve, letting more pain in and keeping the healing divine love out. All my life I've hoped and waited for some moment of epiphany, a single moment when I felt all my woes and worries evaporate. It hasn't happened yet. There are times when I think of being bullied in the halls, or on the playgrounds, or even in classrooms and the embarrassment and hurt are back as real as they were when it happened. Over and over I replay the months in Montana, asking myself why I didn't see it coming and asking if the people who did this to me knew how terrible it would be for my family. Over and over I replay other pain from my life and it is like an opiate, like an addicting drug that won't release me from addiction.

The hard part is letting go, but that's the trick you see. Unless you let go of the pain, you can't feel the soothing relief of the loving medicine. If you've been offended, if you've been hurt, long enough, it's hard to let go. I'll let you in on a secret,

though: once God holds you tight, it's even harder to break free of His loving grip because He never lets us go and always pours out His love into our lives in ways that can heal any hurt or cover over any offense.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 12 January 2011

From the fruit of his mouth a man's stomach is filled; with the harvest from his lips he is satisfied. Proverbs 18, verse 20.

Let me rephrase this one: we reap what we sow. If we lie, we are lied to. If we are honest, people are honest with us. If we gossip, people will gossip about us. If we hate, we will be hated. If we love, we are loved.

What about that last one, though? Is it universal? If we love another person, are we loved in return? You know the answer: not quite. Ever had a crush on someone and felt crushed when they didn't have one in return? Ever loved someone and been unable to commit? Ever given more than you've gotten back? We're fallible humans, and we are fallen and imperfect. That's no excuse for our failure to uphold Christ's primary command, that is, to love one another. But it is also still the truth. You can't make a heart love somebody (George Strait sang that), and you can't make it not love them as well. Yet we all know the hard truth that we don't always get back the love we ourselves give.

That's where that whole treasure in heaven concept comes into play. I think of the homeless. When the world has abandoned them, there are people on the streets who have lost all human hope. God still hasn't lost them. I think, too, of single parents, who always give out so much. I think of hero firemen and military and rescue workers who may not realize how their willingness to give their lives to save others is the highest expression of love. And I think of loving extended friends and family, people far away, and the friends and loved ones we support with our prayers, our listening, and our hearts even when we're far away. All these people may not get back all the love they desire (and maybe even deserve) from the people they themselves love.

God doesn't forget though. He loves when we don't; He loves in ways we can't. He loves in hard ways even when it is hard. And He loves despite our faults. He, who is pure love, gives comfort to our hearts, strength to our willpower, fuel to our bodies, and perseverance to our hearts. He gives us what we need, and He does so unconditionally, in ways large and small. Sometimes it feels like it isn't enough, I know; I've been there too. But that's where the Spirit reminds us "have a little faith and hold on." It's coming.

Mind you, this isn't a way of saying "just put up with it because heaven waits at the end of this life." I think of the scene in "The Color Purple" when Whoopi Goldberg tells that to an insistent Oprah Winfrey, and The O responds by, shall we say, insisting otherwise. There's truth in that response. I struggle with the idea that the ultimate love awaits at the end of this life. I fully expect, if I grow old, to look back on my life and realize it was just a flicker in time, yet from mid-life now looking forward, I hope I see many long days ahead. Those many long days would be barren without love in them, and I find truth in the idea of wanting to love here and now. I don't like thinking "what about me" but I'll admit that I sometimes do. I think that makes me human, and after that thought I still want to know love in this life.

So then the question becomes, "what's stopping you?" You know the answer to that too. That can only mean that today is the time to take the Lord at His word and return that love. That can only mean telling the people you love that you do love them indeed. That can only mean holding your loved ones close as often as you can and making sure you do whatever you can to inspire that love in their lives. And that means giving, lots of giving, with no expectation of anything in return. By and large, I believe love does come back, usually in unexpected ways but usually in good ones. Parents love your children and children love them back; husbands love your wives and vice versa. And show the people most important to you (through words, actions, cards, smiles, kindness and whatever works for you) that you love them. That would be a satisfying harvest that would keep my heart full for all time.

So before I end up sounding like a Hallmark card or a bad soap opera, I'll stop. I'll also stop focusing on me and start sowing a better field. I'll plant a little love, nurture it, and see how it grows. Me, I'm betting on a garden full of beauty for many others to share.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 13 January 2011

A poor man pleads for mercy but a rich man answers harshly. Proverbs 18, verse 23.

In two days, I'm leaving for Africa. Uganda specifically. I've been all through North America, many places in Europe, and quite a few in Asia as well; I've never been to Africa though. This trip has me feeling nervous, and in a good way I hope. I'm privileged to be going as part of a team that will visit several villages in southeastern Uganda, ministering to children and delivering some supplies. From what I've been told, there are thousands of orphan children just in the area we'll be visiting, orphaned by civil war and AIDS. That's why this team is going: to spend some time with these kids, spread God's love quietly and in person by playing games, and to learn what is happening so that we can come back and share it with others.

At the two-days-out point, I am amazed at how prescient this verse is. The people we're going to visit are desperately poor in wealth. By our standards, they have nothing with little hope for acquiring much in life. The hearts of such poor people must be quietly occupied with pleas for mercy, wishing and hoping that someone, somewhere would help them in some way. When you are struggling to find something to eat, that may not be the first thing that comes to mind, but I believe it's always there in the back of your mind. "Why" must be a constantly pressing question.

The constant answer then comes from the rich. Like it or not, that's us: you and I. Ours is the most generous nation in human history. Americans give, tithe, share, and aid more than any other nation on earth, and we do more to spread our wealth than anyone else around. I am proud and glad to be an American yet I know in my heart that my answers to the poor are usually harsh. If we're doing so much, why are there still these poor? I know the answers are legion, and that there are factors at work beyond our control. Yet one need not go to Africa to find the poor. They are here, and they may be us. I see them and I walk away, or I look down on them. My reaction is usually contrary to Christ's command to 'love your neighbors' for if it weren't, I would follow his command to sell everything I have, give it to the poor, and blindly follow Him. Taken literally, I am completely guilty of always answering the poor harshly. Yes, I pray for the poor, the depressed, the homeless and others, and I have even done things to materially help them in the past. But let's stay real here: what good did that really do? I hope I stored up treasure in heaven and in some small way reflected God's love to people I wanted to help. In terms of actually changing anything, though, did it really do much? I can only trust that God knew what He was doing.

So here's where I will read the verse again and challenge you to do the same: who am I? Am I the poor man or the rich man? You and I, living lives of affluence and relative comfort, are certainly wealthy in terms of what is material. Are we poor in spirit? Are some who live in poverty richer in spirit than us? I'm not advocating that the poor are nobler of spirit than the affluent and this isn't some class consciousness guilt trip. What I am asking is whether or not our wealth blinds us to things like acting on compassion. That's one of the things I am hoping to find out in Africa. I want to see what is happening there, then come back and tell you about it. And I am hoping more than I can say to be moved, to be broken in spirit again. And if He'll let me, I want to see what God wants me to do about it.

Again, this isn't a guilt trip for you. It is a call to action. In the time it has taken me to write these words, a child I've never met in a place I've never visited has probably died. He or she never grew up to become either rich or poor, and I suspect his or her only concern through most of what life they lived was how to eat that day. We'll never know, but God did. Why didn't God save them? Maybe a better question would be "why didn't we do something about it?" If you and I can use our position to help improve someone else's life, shouldn't we do it? I guarantee that you can, you must even, do something and that it's within your power as you read these words: pray for us. I ask for your prayers of encouragement, strength, endurance, and that our hearts will be open to what we see and do. And pray for smiles, that we are blessed to bring smiles to kids we've never met and will probably never see here again. I'm certain there will be many smiles to see in return. It can be a dreadful thing to stand in awe of the living God. I pray that I stand in awe of Him while in the middle of African poverty and that He will have His way on our mission. And I pray that you'll help by starting to pray about it on your own. That's something real, and it's a start.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 24 January 2011

A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. Proverbs 18, verse 24.

Hello again, my friends, and it's very good to be back to share with you. If you look at the dates on the blog, you'll notice the last entry was 13 January. For the ensuing time between then and now, I've been in Africa, working with orphaned children as part of a Lutheran mission team. During our six days 'in-country,' the team visited six villages whose names you've probably never heard before: Kateete, Nakabango, Bufuula, Mafubira, Kamuli, Mbulamuti. Both inside and outside each village I saw the most abject poverty I've ever seen coupled with looking into the eyes of the Almighty. If you've ever seen the commercials for Feed the Children, or films from Unicef, let me testify here and now: they are all true.

In Uganda I was privileged to serve with twenty-two men and women from different churches in Texas, Missouri and North Carolina. We all shared a common, moving experience; you can't see such unspeakable poverty coupled with uncontainable joy and not be affected. Not only that, but three of us from my home church were veterans of an earlier trip. Fifteen months ago, I was part of another twenty-plus member group that traveled to China to perform similar service. Then as now, we worked in a remote village, digging trenches and teaching basic hygiene to villages who didn't have clean water. That trip too was equally moving yet after it I found myself tempted and tortured by an eager devil who exploited my weaknesses and wrecked my family. When it happened, my personal life went to pot, mixed up with infidelity, financial disaster, miscommunications and the terror of feeling utterly alone with the consequences of one's sins. I destroyed my marriage, destroyed my family, and devastated people all around me. The saddest part was how this had happened before, and had been a long time in coming but how I could have done my part to prevent it by simply living a little faith.

I wish I had read this verse back then. I wish I had read it to heed it as a warning that though I was part of a special brotherhood who had been tools in the hands of God, that I could easily come to ruin. Since that time, my family has fought, loved, worked, struggled and prayed to repair the damage that was done through those things that come with being fallen, imperfect people. Last week, on our return, I tried to tell some of my teammates that the hardest part of our journey was coming. It wasn't the leaving, or the flights home: it was the days that start now. The hardest part of the missionary journey starts when we arrive back home and attempt to resume lives of normalcy. I'm not sure they fully understood what I was talking about. While I know I haven't lived their lives, I know too that they haven't lived mine and gone through what I did since that last mission trip. To be frank, this is the part that gives me trepidation, this coming home and trying to process it all, resuming lives that can never be the same.

Yet it would be all too easy to get 'wrapped around the axle' of gleaning full meaning from only the first clause of the verse. There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother, even when others do not. I'm encouraged that even though I am privileged to be part of that brotherhood again, that even when my actions come to ruin, there is a loving God and Savior who is close beside me beckoning me to come back to Him. He tears down to build up, and He encourages so that we might share in His joy...and then share it with others. He beckons me to go to countries foreign to me, to get dirty and out of my comfort zone that I might learn about Him through others, and they also from me. He encourages me when I'm weak, and He is a god of multiple opportunities, not just second chances.

And I'm encouraged to know that, like the song says, these are the days of Elijah when we are each, in our own ways, declaring the Word of the Lord. Last week, I was privileged to wear the African red dirt of honor and share kindness with strangers who hunger for peace, love and food. Last week, I was privileged to have some of my suburban veneer stripped away to see brothers and sisters I've never met before who know and love the same God that I do in ways far deeper than I've ever known.

Now I'm back home and still walking in the days of grace. My body is in America but my body clock thinks I'm in Jinja. I look at the pictures and wonder if it was all real. The red dirt is still under my nails and all over my boots. I'm determined to do better though I must confess that, in 'doing' so, I'm not fully sure just what it is I'm supposed to do. Where the journey leads, what I am supposed to do as my part, I don't know. Perhaps these words here are a part of it. Whatever I'm led to, I'm content to listen this time and realize that I'm not in control. In church yesterday, my pastor reminded us that sins can be overcome, that we need not let them be our master when we rely on the loving grace given by God through His son. In other words, he reminded us that our Savior friend is closer than a brother.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 25 January 2011

Better a poor man whose walk is blameless than a fool whose lips are perverse. Proverbs 19, verse 1.

We're three days back from Africa and things are starting to settle back into 'normal.' Yesterday was the first work-day since our return and, like my teammates, I spent much of it in a daze. Jet lag was at play, but even more than that was this sense of confusion. I tried to perform basic tasks that were common to my work days but found it difficult to do. A week ago, I was in another place, seeing amazing people and perhaps for the first time in my life, truly basking in the wondrous love of God. All day long, people were passing messages back and forth, posting pictures, and communicating that same sense of disorganization. It seemed that we were still sharing a common experience, this one a difficulty in mentally reconciling these sights, sounds, smells and people who had been launched into our hearts. They all seem at odds with the lives we live here from sea to shining sea.

One of the team sent out a message containing her stream of thoughts, part of which I'll quote here: "My head is a mess over so much, trying to understand the differences in our world. And trying to understand if we are the missionaries or if they are. I look around at my life. The comfort, the excess. And I wonder who has it right?" Her words got me thinking even before reading today's verse: would it be better to be one of the poor children we saw in Uganda or is it better to be me here, living in affluence?

On the surface, that's a no brainer, right? I mean, I reject the idea of there being nobility in poverty. I have been poor, and for awhile even homeless, and I will tell you that I felt hungry for status as well as for a home. I didn't feel noble. I suspect the kids we saw last week didn't feel noble. They wanted love, food, and companionship. More than that, they were the most faithful people I've ever met, people who, in the midst of tragedy and poverty, clung to God. But did they feel noble for being where they were? Even more, did they even realize how poor in wealth they actually are? I suspect not.

But, you see, the talk of poverty misses the point, and my friend's message points to it. Yes, part of it talks about the comfort and excess but only to make the point of how unnecessary they are. We come back to our lives, our homes and jobs, our checkbooks, and we look around and ask what it is all worth. Like me, she is in the situation of seeing that faith doesn't need wealth because faith in God IS wealth. We are in a stage akin to shell shock, reconciling the world we have seen with the world in which we find ourselves. We go from living amidst crushing poverty and soaring spirits to a place where there is soaring wealth that can crush the spirit. To remain focused on only the aspects of wealth is to miss the point that the verse extols us to seek wealth from above, not from the mall.

It is better to be one of the uneducated, un-wealthy poor, having little of this world but walking guarded steps in days of grace than to be affluent, educated and soft. The 'qualities of the margin' between what is wealth and what is sin can fertilize the soil of sloth and selfishness; such things make it easy to be a fool. Such foolishness makes it easy for perversity – the wicked, the wrong, what is not of God – to find its way into our conversation, taking root in our lives.

I think that's the matter with which my friend was wrestling. With all our affluence here, shouldn't we be more? Shouldn't we do more? The kids we visited last week had so little yet walked hand in hand with the Almighty. Shouldn't we model them instead of they modeling us? Perhaps the longest-lasting answer is on both sides of the question. Using our position, our American affluence, to help others can be a God-pleasing endeavor. Learning from others who have so little can be a God-pleasing thing. Having so little and relying on God to improve our lot is living a life of working faith. And learning from others who have much yet exemplify what God wants them to do is to follow a good Christian witness.

So there is truth on both sides, but that doesn't make it easy to deal with these days. This phase of re-acclimation is natural, even if it is an abbreviated kind of PTSD. My friend, the members of our team, and myself, well, we are living through the days of trying to make sense of it all, and how to best move forward in a way that walks in God's grace while living the full lives He puts in front of us. It isn't easy to re-adjust to a world that you've called into question while knowing it's YOUR world, the world that is your home. In these times, I'll look at some of the pictures we took, and talk with other people going through the same thing, and we'll all push forward and muddle through. If we do it right, we might even walk the walk of the poor, taking our in blameless grace while holding the hand of the brother who will never let us down.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 26 January 2011

It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way. Proverbs 19, verse 2.

Last night, I attended a meeting of the "Ugandudes:" the men from Water's Edge who ventured to Africa last week. We're all still in the afterglow of the experience and have many ideas on what we can do to channel the Spirit high that comes from such a trip. I'll cut to the chase and say that we didn't decide to 'do' anything last night; we chose no recommendation or course of action. Our group talked over a number of ideas, some of which are pretty darn good, and I think we laid the groundwork for some great things. When the truth is told, it is not us laying the groundwork but God through us. We are the tools and the clay; He is the potter. At the end of the night, we decided to continue praying & mulling it over, letting God work on our hearts and seeing where that leads.

I think it's best that we didn't decide anything because the proverb is right: it's best to not rush. Nine men are full of nine hundred zealous ideas concerning things we could do to act on this high. From the mountaintop, it's easy to see all that needs to be done. There are children and adults in need. There is hunger, deprivation, disease, poverty, homelessness, unemployment, depression and unbearable sadness. Who among us wouldn't want to do what we could to help alleviate some of those problems? In my opinion, though, we should each step back and pause when we want to 'do' something about them. To act without prayerful insight, without involving God's wisdom, would be hasty and just might miss the way.

What way is that, you're probably asking? Answer: I have no idea! Really: no idea at all. That's where the 'trust in God' part comes into it. My dad was fond of the maxim that, for every door that's closed, others are opened. I've found it so true in my life, except that it's usually more than one door that's open at the same time. That's the case here. There are any number of good things we could do to 'go to the next step' and take Godly action on the movement that began for us overseas. We could sponsor a village, sponsor vicars, sponsor children. We could visit again and again, either with or without other congregations. We could do nothing at all. Or we could do something that hasn't even been conceived yet. There are no quick answers, and to do the right thing, probably no quick actions.

That's why taking it back to God in prayer is the best action we could take at this time. There are so many good options and we each want to do what is right, to be both God-pleasing and to focus our resources on the best choice we can make. Instead of taking a good but maybe rash action, it's best to contemplate it, pray on it, and really ask for guidance in it. Isn't that true of so many things in our lives? And isn't it why God gives us prayer in the first place? He wants to be involved in our lives, and He's always teaching, vectoring and welcoming us to make choices that involve him, that help us to live our lives through Him. Our part is to open our hearts to Him in prayer and honestly ask for Him to step in. He always does and He always then imparts His wise knowledge onto our hearts in ways we can live with and usually act upon.

I suspect we won't be waiting for long to settle on a recommendation. I have faith that the way, whatever path that is, will be apparent in God's good time. The Spirit is at work here, and He never does things half-way or (as my friend, Patrick, pointed out) he never over-complicates things. He cuts to the core and works from there. When that happens, it creates opportunities. Last week it was an honor to be part of a team that served others simply by being there and handing out hugs. This week, it's an honor still to be part of a group who want to make sure that the transformation begun by the Almighty in Africa takes root and bears good fruit in the heart of a far away America. I'll keep you posted on what eventually happens.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 27 January 2011

A man's own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against the LORD. Proverbs 19, verse 3.

Like yesterday's verse, this one, too, is timely because I'm in the middle of adjusting back to my life in North Texas. I've traveled all over the world, many times over. I've even taken foreign mission trips before. Until now, though, I've never been impacted as emotionally hard as I have by this trip to Uganda. It's as if God used the people there to slay me, to force me to face myself and my uglier behaviors that I made into an ugly past.

To be honest, this time scares me a little. After the China trip in 2009 (my last mission trip), I came home to problems and folded. I gave up on my marriage and devastated my wife and kids. I got involved with a confused woman whose own life was already a shady disaster, and I became someone I didn't want to be or know. It was my own doing, my own succumbing to the temptations of a devil all too willing to put them in front of me. My pride became my folly, and I let that pride become an inroad into which the schemes of an evil enemy easily took root.

Know what happened? Even in the middle of all this trauma, I still clung onto it as long as I could! It was my own folly and it ruined my life as well as the lives of people around me. I clung to it because my heart was still raging against the Lord. Buried in my subconscious were these thoughts of 'why me' and 'this shouldn't be happening to me.' Taken in small doses with some honest self-analysis (shone clearly through the light of the Word), those aren't bad questions to ask. That is, until you turn them into blaming God for your problems. When you let them become a way to dodge responsibility or correction, it becomes easy to rage against God.

I made mistakes and I paid for them. I confessed them to friends, counselors, family and to God, and some forgave me; God did. Now, I'm back from another trip and my days are filled with trying to re-adjust to a life that's been changed while trying to avoid slipping into old habits. Worry, anger, Facebook, fretting over finances, Type A personality, procrastination, flirting, self-withdrawl and that ever-present pride all beckon me here with every step I take in this place I've chosen for my home. I spent so much of the last year seething in anger and it took going to a foreign country to let God take the hammer of that anger out of my hand. Now that I'm back, it is so tempting to pick it up again, to put on the dark lead clothing of self-loathing that keeps out the radiating love of God.

I take heart in knowing that I'm not unique. If I were, God wouldn't have needed to send a Son to save all mankind who, like me, wade deeply into the waters of sin. I also take heart in communicating these things to friends, to my teammates, to strangers even. These Proverbials you read are, in fact, a product of my experience last time. And I am encouraged by knowing that I don't have to make the same mistakes. Last Sunday, one of Pastor Patrick's themes hit home with me: sin will not be your master. Our God is a down & dirty god, getting deep into the details of our sins like medicine curing a disease, or healing antiseptic that scours out a wound. He does it because of divine love and to teach us that we can do better, we can learn, and we can move forward in Him. Our sins need not rule us; in fact, like the Word says, if we resist the devil he will flee. That's not some self-help advice: it's a promise. It's a promise of hope.

Devotion this morning talked about human anger, about how it is destructive and poisonous. I carried around that anger for months, raging against the hurt of being wronged, against wronging so many people I loved, and against God who only wanted to love me in return. He took that anger away from me and replaced it with a cleaner heart. I suspect that resisting the temptations won't be an easy thing, and it isn't one where you finally get cured as long as you're this side of the grave. It will be an ongoing battle, sometimes even a daily or constant one. But I'll fight it and, with the dangerous weapons of a fighting God, we will prevail. The payoff for doing better, for being more of the man God calls me to be, is more rewarding. It is sharing in the kingdom of the Divine, living a life to be righteously proud of. It is handing out love and hugs to strangers who need them as much as I do. And it's being able to look forward to a hug from the Savior Himself when He finally tells me, "well done, Dave. Welcome home."

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 28 January 2011

Wealth brings many friends, but a poor man's friend deserts him. Proverbs 19, verse 4.

Well, this verse is just a ray of sunshine, isn't it! When I first read it I thought, "Gee, how nice. Even the Bible wants to be a downer." Some consideration and prayerful time helped to expand my perspective. Is Scripture a downer now and then? Well, frankly, yes it is, but only when it tells us things we don't want to hear. And let's stay real: sometimes there are hard truths that need to be said no matter what! So I started to read this verse as more of a true observation instead of advice or a command. It says something about the human condition without judging it to be either right or wrong. The wealthy have friends; the poor don't. Is that true?

I started looking at pictures from Uganda. I looked at them deeply, trying to see into them, maybe discern what the people were feeling. There is unfathomable poverty. I've been to Mexican border towns, inner city Philadelphia, rural Mississippi, slums in Korea, and the backwaters of southern China: I've seen poverty before but never on this level. Wealth has deserted these people, whether it be the European colonists of old, the corrupt officials who oversaw government, or the soldiers of what was called "the Lord's Resistance." Whatever wealth there is in Uganda does not trickle down its benefits to the millions of poor who need it. There are many resources and a population of overwhelmingly talented and resourceful people yet the poverty remains. It pervades everywhere. It's as if the poor's friends have deserted them. It makes you see how there are many, many people in Uganda – and all over Africa – who, with good cause, are skeptical of what we of the West and of Christian faith can do to help. They stand on the sides of the road, and in the cities, and even in the villages; I can only imagine what they must think. Through it, though, kindness and faith remain. I have never met such a people who, in living day to day with such racking poverty, consistently smile and live out practical faith. If their friends have deserted them to the point of hopelessness, then why all the smiles and why such receptive hearts to the word of God? Why the unabashed friendliness? I believe it is faith and kindness.

Then I think about Hollywood. Many are the people who want to bask in the aura of a star. Groupies, strap-hangers, dilettantes, clingers: the wealthy and glamorous have many friends. When you're hot, you're hot. When you're not, though, who wants to be your friend? Ask any of the stars who've fallen out of favor, or the people who make 'comebacks.' I'm guessing most of those comeback-people never really went away. It's just that the using, fickle finger of stardom pointed elsewhere for awhile. During that time, I bet those people struggle. It's a hard thing to be loved one minute and deserted the next.

And I think about closer to home, about school. Or, for that matter, work or church or your circle of friends. The popular have friends. The popular are stereotypically elegant, admired, well-known, maybe even stylish and attractive. But be careful what you wish for because the maxim is true: you just might get it. Everybody has junk, and if you strip away the popularity to reveal the junk, how many of those good friends will still be there? That peppy, pretty blonde cheerleader may not be all she's cracked up to be (no offense intended to either blondes or cheerleaders). Ditto for the coworker who always angles for a promotion, or the church member who's 'selflessly' involved in every program.

At one time or another, haven't we all been poor and without friends? Haven't we each felt alone and abandoned? I know I have. I could stand in the middle of a crowded shopping mall (which I blessedly don't do very often) and still feel very alone. It's a deceptive thought, though. We are never alone. For me, it's like the evil one slips a veil over my eyes and I can't see the path in front of me, or the silent hand of Christ holding my own. In my self-centered spiral, I forget that those 'footsteps moments' are true, and that they happen every day. I forget that God allows for times of contemplation and reflection to draw me back to His grace and help me refine out the dross and clutter that clouds my better senses. He gives me these times to remind me that He's saying, "I'm still here and I always will be, even when you won't let yourself believe it."

Besides, the longer I live the more I find friends who will listen and understand in the most improbable places. Just recently, I've come to know and cherish people who I never truly appreciated until now, while others I've known for years have fallen to the side. It's the way of the world, I suppose. And it's that way on which the verse opines. But if I sit back and look at some of the less obvious lessons from it, I am blessed to see that as long as I have Him who never deserts me as a friend, brother, teacher and Savior, I'm never poor. That light, my friends, is sunshine for all time.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 31 January 2011

Many curry favor with a ruler, and everyone is the friend of a man who gives gifts. Proverbs 19, verse 6.

I have another Uganda story to share. We gave out gifts while we were overseas. Nothing huge, and nothing expensive, but gifts all the same. Candy, clothes, trinkets, a few toys, sports equipment: like I said, nothing earth shattering but they were things we could share in an easy way. We shared them with the villagers we met. Like Shriners in a parade, we threw candy to kids along the roads. It felt good to be able to share, and the things were received well. We can pat ourselves on the back for doing that, and even stroke the ego a little to say that there's a gift in taking the time to travel for such a trip. There is a gift in giving time. That's all true but in a small, vain way. So, to quote Generation 21, 'whatever.'

Wanna hear the crazy thing about it? In coming back, I don't feel like I was the gift giver. Instead, I came away from the experience feeling like it was I who had been given a valuable gift, namely the gift of kindness and love. I, who had traveled so far to give of time and trinkets was given something far more valuable. Yesterday in church, a few of us Ugandudes were privileged to share some of our experiences. One of the things I shared was the unique greeting that the Ugandans gave us. They clapped several times and gestured their hands towards us, as if to say "take our love with you." It was a small token of esteem, but it was a very genuine one and it has remained with me. They gave their love away for lonely Americans to carry home and share with family and strangers.

Another thing I shared was how genuine were the smiles of all the people I met. Those smiles were infectious. We were among people who had known only physical deprivation yet were undefeated. They desired to love and be loved, and when you saw a smile, you simply knew it was from the heart. Something I've told others was that I've traveled all over the world, even gone to churches on four continents, and it took going to Uganda to actually feel I was standing in the presence of God. That kindness, the smiles, the genuine love all reinforced that feeling. They made easy to see how people can live with the love of God as a practical, real thing in their lives instead of a Sunday morning sabbatical.

How could you not want to befriend such people? They certainly wanted to be friends with us and I suspect it was not for the tokens we gave away. Indeed, I am blessed and very fortunate to have befriended people with whom I will be keeping in close contact. The longer I live the more I believe there are no coincidences, no random chance or blind luck. Things happen for a reason; God puts people in our lives for a reason. Therefore, I feel very thankful to have met such people. I'm content to know we met because of Providence, not per chance. Their kindness and Christian practice were very real. Even you and I, in our bond as friends and readers, aren't we put on this same page, in this place, for a reason? Perhaps, like Esther, it is for such a time as this that we are who we are, where we are.

So along those lines, here's a confession that may surprise you: I don't care for flattery. I'm uncomfortable when people try to butter me up. If you know me well, that may surprise you because I crave attention. Long ago I felt the warmth of the spotlight and I still crave standing in it. I like compliments and kind words, but I become skeptical if someone is fawning. I want to be in the spotlight because I earned it, not because someone is trying to flatter me or make me into something I'm not. Now, I'm not a ruler, but I have been a manager, crew commander, and leader. I can't say that I'm a particularly quick judge of character; I am too trusting and want to immediately assume the best about people. I do, however, have a finely tuned BS meter which pegs at the first hint of flattery. When someone tries to butter me up, my ears perk up. Personally, I'd rather deal with facts. If someone wants something from me, I prefer they simply say so.

Do you think God feels the same way? I mean, He understands our thoughts, and could use them against us if He chose to. Do you think God is a straight shooter, preferring to have us ask things directly of Him instead of beating around the bush? I won't speak for Him, but I'll speak for myself in saying I prefer to pray that way, trying to get to the nub of an issue and ask Him exactly what it is I want. I struggle with that, in that it seems self-serving at times. Am I alone, too, in finding that this is a difficult thing to do, that is, to pray directly what it is that I want to say? I don't feel worthy of taking my puny feelings, desires, fears, or foibles to the creator of the universe; He surely must have bigger things to do instead of listening to me. That's the part the willing devil wants us to remember, thinking that God must be too busy for us, that we don't matter to Him. That devil wants us to forget the gifts of love, wants us to forget that we were each important enough for Him to exchange His son so that we might live. He wants us only to take from each other, not give and certainly not believe.

That's one reason why the experience in Africa was so rewarding: if they let such worries get them down, the people I met didn't show it. I'm sure that happens; people are people no matter where we live. But the people I met didn't realize they were giving gifts to us, and that what they gave us was for more important than anything we gave them. They did it without flattery, admiration or fawning. They simply shared the best of themselves and indelibly printed that love on my

heart. It isn't surprising, I guess, when you consider the exchange of love and friendship that comes as fruit of faith in the ultimate ruler of the universe. That gift, freely given by Him, is priceless.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 1 February 2011

A poor man is shunned by all his relatives – how much more do his friends avoid him! Though he pursues them with pleading they are nowhere to be found. Proverbs 19, verse 7.

A few days ago, we discussed verse 4 which says, “Wealth brings many friends, but a poor man’s friend deserts him.” Recall that the entry talked about Ugandan orphans, Hollywood “comebackers,” and how we are sometimes led to believe we’re all alone in the world. Today let’s discuss some of that from a different angle. For purposes of this discussion, let’s think of those ‘poor’ as being people other than just those who are not wealthy. Poor in spirit could mean, ‘lacking in spirit.’ “Poor Dave, he’s so sick” could mean, “have pity on Dave because he’s so sick.” Poorly done means ‘not done well.’ Let’s assume that ‘poor’ could mean any of those things. But let’s also level-set first by remembering two things: one, this verse is another observation, not a command. It talks about condition, and doesn’t recommend action based on divine command. Last, it is true. We are indeed lacking, pitiful, apt to do some things poorly, and even poor in wealth. When compared to Christ, we’re all those things where He is none of them.

So why is it that we sometimes feel shunned? Have you ever run into a situation where you needed a friend and they spurned you? How did you feel about that, or about them? Have you ever felt like even the people closest to you were avoiding you? And have you ever felt so toxic that you gave them reason to? Or what about the other side of it: have you ever been the person who does the shunning? Has someone ever done something that caused you to shun them?

Shunning is a harsh thing. Those closest to you will have nothing to do with you because they hold your behavior to be so repugnant that to associate with you would cause them harm. The Amish shun those who willingly fall away from their order. They literally act as if the shunned person does not exist. Many other churches excommunicate members, which to me is a formal brand of shunning; some of them even do it for good reason, though I’ve seen it before where overbearing pastors and members enjoy it a bit too much. In my opinion, some of the most unforgiving people are devout churchgoers. It’s a hard, terrible thing to be rejected, especially when you’re down. It hurts. Sometimes that’s what’s needed though. Sometimes our behavior is indeed repugnant and needs to be corrected; sometimes we are wrong; sometimes we deserve it. I think that, when we do wrong, others can be justified in shunning us, in ways large and small. Not to be too wishy washy but, seriously, it depends on the situation.

So what about ‘the others?’ You know: them. What about all those relatives who shun the poor? What about those friends who avoid the poor even though he pursues them, pleading for help? What about the people who turn away from you, excommunicate you? Do they ever truly forgive? Do they ever truly come to a point where they put what you’ve done behind them?

I think the short answer is “they must.” They have to come around. To not forgive and move forward is to not live the example God set and wants for us. To willingly keep judging someone harshly is psychologically unsound as well. It’s not reasonable to expect that people we wrong or people who disapprove of our wrongs would immediately get over them and reconcile. It’s also not reasonable to hold grudges, to not let go. We can’t be whole people – or whole believers in God – if we don’t strive to make right what we’ve set wrong through using our faith in the Almighty. Those who would keep us in those wrongs, too, can’t be whole people if they hold those wrongs against us. It’s natural, I think, that relationships change, even Christian relationships, and that’s ok. People come and people go. But when someone says “I can’t get past this,” I think what they really mean is, “I won’t let myself get past it.” There’s no faith and little love, in that statement, only hypocrisy.

The poor in wealth, spirit, action and health have a weight on their shoulders; it’s no coincidence that, through history, God has ministered directly to the poor and provided his greatest miracles through the poor. He’s a god of compassion and mercy as well of one of righteous justice. His example is to confront wrongdoing, to correct it, and to forgive the repentant person who needs that forgiveness. He isn’t the church leader who acts more like the Pharisee than the man from Galilee. She isn’t the woman who turns away her longtime friend because she disapproves of her friend’s husband. And he isn’t the friend who knows another friend is in genuine trouble but has no way to pay back. Perhaps I’m not advocating staying in unhealthy relationships, or in doing things that are unwise or risky to our own safety. But, you know, isn’t that what God did for us?

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 2 February 2011

He who gets wisdom loves his own soul; he who cherishes understanding prospers. Proverbs 19, verse 8.

So, is this proverb a call-out for people to go to college? Maybe...or maybe not. Years ago one of my supervisors told me that he thought everyone should have some kind of college background. Mind you, he was fresh out of the Air Force Academy and was seeking to go to law school. I thought a lot about that because I'd come from college educated parents and I'd been raised to believe that everyone could benefit from education yet not everyone should go to college. Indeed, most people I know here haven't gone to college. Some of the most successful people I work with have no college degree. It proves to me that higher education isn't the guaranteed ticket to advancement or success, though there is value in it and it sure does help open doors.

Instead, I think the proverb is a call-out for love; divine love. We can't take just a human spin on it and expect our education is all it will mean. If I've learned anything from the Proverbs this year it's that 'wisdom' means God's love, and that love is more than just a fluttery emotion. It's an action, a being, a choice, a movement, and an emotion. It is both the motivation and the means to live, and is the driving force behind all that is ever learned. Real love is of God, includes Him, and is for Him. We can love & be in love with other people, but until we do so through God, that love is lacking. We're made in God's image, therefore we are made to resemble and live out lives of love, and real love is knowing, understanding, wise.

I think here about Uganda. In Uganda, there are three universities, and students must test for entry into them. Of the 30 million people who live in that country, only a sparse handful are able to pursue full elementary education, let alone complete the Western equivalent of high school and go on to study at a university. Formal education, a hallmark of what we consider advancement, is still lacking there, and this is typical. From our cloistered haven in the US, we tend to think that all the world's kids go to school like ours do. The truth, though, is that most don't. Hundreds of millions of children alive in the world today don't go to school; billions of people will never take any kind of college. Most of the world isn't like us.

And yet, to me, the people I met overseas seemed like some of the wisest people I've ever met. They are wise in the ways of life, knowing how to eke out a living out of nothing at all. They are wise to the ways of the world, living lives to care for each other while also taking in orphans, extending unfathomable kindness to complete strangers. And they are wise to the ways of God, exemplifying the love of the Savior through that kindness, charity, and contentment. If wisdom is living in God's graceful love, then they are some of the wisest people anywhere.

And there are more such people in the world than there are devout, Jesus-jumping 'true believers' who line up on Sunday morning for donuts and coffee. You tell me who's the smart one? When the end of time comes around, I hope to be one of the strangers. I fully expect to see more of these 'strangers' walking into Heaven than I do the people who walk into our church buildings. That's not up to me to decide and shame on the person who thinks they can. You see, if we judge each other too harshly, we lose sight of love's understanding. If we think that we know it all, or that our knowledge is superior to all else, then we lose sight of wisdom and become unwise.

Besides, tell me if you have known many judgmental people who you thought were truly happy. Have you ever known people who were unloved or unloving yet were happy? I haven't either. It's hard to dislike love, or to turn on it and still be satisfied; it's hard to love your own soul when what you need to fuel it is lacking. By and large, I find that when I am secure in knowing I'm loved, I prosper. In order to succeed, I need for my talents and my affections to be validated and encouraged. To me, success is then a fruit of cherishing how we are loved unconditionally. Success is the good crop that grows from the fertile soil of real understanding and real love.

He who gets wisdom loves his own soul; he who cherishes understanding prospers. It really isn't rocket science, you know, and you don't need a doctorate to understand it. Life throws curve balls at us. All too often, things we don't expect happen suddenly and we are left shocked and reacting. I know this is the case in my life. When those times hit, it's easy to get thrown off by the shock and bounce back by saying, "why me?" Those are the times when we most need to remember that love doesn't promise an easy ride in life, but does guarantee a satisfying one with a happy ending. I have several college degrees and count myself as fortunate to understand that education makes you better but doesn't make you better than anyone else. Sometimes, in fact, I simply feel like an educated idiot. Real knowledge comes with giving up human pretenses of understanding and simply rolling with what a wise, knowing, loving God consistently teaches us. There's no 'maybe' about that.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 3 February 2011

A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense. Proverbs 19, verse 11.

I'm on pins and needles today. Yesterday, with no notice, I was rolled off the project on which I'd been serving since last October. As an IT consultant, I work half of my time at a client site and half of my time at home. The client wasn't satisfied with some of my work and decided to end my participation with them. They pay the bills, so that's their prerogative. Because I was rolled off, as of this morning, I don't know what my fate will be with my company. In this tough economy where so many have lost their jobs, I could very well be joining the ranks of the unemployed. Years ago, a friend of mine shared that he wasn't afraid of death or anything much in the world except unemployment. That's exactly how I feel: I fear nothing the world can do to me, except un-employ me. I greatly fear the inability to provide, support, or make good on my commitments. It's irrational, I know, and some might even call it wavering faith. It's also very real.

So there are days like today when I'm forced to confront this fear and try to glean comfort from the proverb of the day. I don't believe it's a coincidence that this verse was put in front of me today because, more than on other days, it seems particularly appropriate. I credit any patience, forbearance or 'inactive waiting' that I'm doing to God, not to myself. It is a wise thing to remain professional. It is a wise thing to not make snap decisions today, do anything inappropriate, or lash out in anger right now. It is a wise thing to finish strong and remind myself that I am talented at my job and have skills that aren't easily obtained off the street.

It's also very difficult today because my nature is prodding me to do other things. My nature is telling me to say 'why me' and fret about the timing, about how it seems I can never seem to get ahead. My past is crying out to me to fall back on my old patterns, to pick up the emotional hammer of anger that God took out of my hand in Africa because what's happening isn't really my fault. I'm resisting the urge to send out a nasty email, or to sink into the swirling abyss of depression over not knowing what will happen next. I'm also resisting the urge to go buy a pack of Salem's and smoke them to the filter. And I'm fighting to stay positive because that whole thing about doors closing and doors opening is true.

On days like this, I'm comforted by encouraging words told to me by people who love me. I've received emails and messages from the people closest to me, and those make me smile; one has been sending me jokes for the last hour. And I'm comforted by the verse for today: A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense. I don't know all the reasons why the client wanted to roll me off; from those I've seen, I'll confess that some are true but most are simply miscommunications or misunderstandings. I haven't done anything illegal and there's no malfeasance; my work simply didn't meet their expectations. Bad on me for not working harder to anticipate them; bad on them for not communicating better and being more upfront, and for the way they've handled this action.

And bad on anyone who would give up on hope at a time like this because when a man's wisdom is the understanding, loving wisdom of the Almighty, then patience is the least of its gifts. There is always the promise of hope, something I've constantly observed is not some silly wishing well or polite response. There is strength in knowing He has given me what I need, and that is so much more than so many others have. He has blessed me with talents, friends, resources and opportunities in addition to the food, clothing, shelter and family He gave. I also find it re-assuring to remember that, not two weeks ago, I was in Uganda working with people who had real concerns, not just the self-centered ones concerning my over-valued employment. Finally, I'm comforted by knowing that God is in control of this. To some that would seem like a cop out, but I find it very re-assuring. I don't have to worry about what could happen, or worry that it's some kind of random chance occurrence. I simply have to do my best at whatever I do and be prepared to act on whatever possibilities are put in my way.

According to the proverb, it may also be to my glory to overlook any offense but, to be honest with you, I'm not thinking much of that. It doesn't matter to me as much today except where it concerns forgiveness. I didn't deserve all of what's happening today; in a few ways, I've been wronged. It would be very easy to wallow in that feeling, but that too would be wrong and it would even be an offense to God. He overlooks my offenses when He didn't deserve them and doesn't have to. I should model that behavior and do the same. I'll admit: right now that's hard to do, but if I'm going to position myself to do my best at whatever is coming down the pike, then I need to forgive any real or perceived wrongs and move forward.

Besides, I'm not unemployed yet. One of my closest friends has been unemployed for several years now, being highly skilled and educated yet unable to find work in the area around our hometown. For my part, I don't know if I will end the day unemployed; for all that matter, none of us knows how each day will end, or even if it will end. Many things could

happen between now and then, and I'll choose to side on believing that many of them could be good. Whatever happens, I choose to believe it will be for the best.

So I'll keep you posted on what happens to me, whether or not I'm in search of a job or working on a new project. As of now, I think it's a 50/50 chance either way. Even if it comes down on the 50 side I don't want, I'll still cling to believing that God is in control and something good will come of it all. That's hard to do sometimes, but I take heart at rebutting the faith-nay-sayer's remembering that even Christ Himself was genuinely tempted as much as any other man, yet he persevered and succeeded. That, too, is something to model when confronting my hardest days and deepest fears.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 7 February 2011

It is not fitting for a fool to live in luxury – how much worse for a slave to rule over princes! Proverbs 19, verse 10.

Who among us deserves luxury? Yesterday was the first Super Bowl ever held in North Texas; no, I didn't go. With all the crowds, you couldn't have paid me to go to "Jerryworld" over there in Arlington. I felt bad for all the people who came here for the parties and such because our very un-Texas-like weather must have put a damper on them. A friend of mine went to one and saw a number of celebrities; it sounded like a fun time. I wouldn't have fit in. Over time I've come to think that such monster events aren't staged for the enjoyment of the masses but, instead, as a way for the glitterati to congregate. I'm comfortable in nice hotels, and would love to live in a new, bigger, fancier house but, to be honest with you, I would probably feel like a fish out of water there too. I'm a fool and I don't know that I'd be comfortable living in some swanky place. Besides, I have teenagers: they could mess it up in 5 minutes.

But, seriously, do you ever feel like a fish out of water? I'm comfortable in all kinds of social crowds, but confess I feel intimidated by being around crowds of people with 'higher' status than myself. They aren't any better than me and if you judge by the tabloids they live more publicly screwed up lives. Just 2 weeks ago, we had dinner sitting next to a Hall of Fame football player. If you're wondering, no I won't tell his name and no I didn't ask for an autograph. The man was having dinner and I wouldn't want to be interrupted by strangers during my dinner, so I didn't interrupt his. It's not that I couldn't achieve such celebrity myself by doing something marketable with my talents: it's that I wouldn't know what to do with fame. I'd feel like a fish out of water because deep down inside (and sometimes shown closer to the surface) I'm still little more than a prize fool.

In reality, this is a good verse to read for someone in my situation. As of Monday, I still don't know whether or not I'll be employed on Tuesday. I've had several days of pondering what I'll do if I lose my job and, to be honest, I still don't exactly know what I'll do. Look for another position, I suppose, and maybe change careers. If the Good Lord is closing the door on one career, I'm open to hearing about what else could be out there. Know what? It doesn't really matter. You can dress up a Dave but, when you take off the fancy clothes, I'm still me. If I'm going to make something of myself, this proverb is a good reminder to not get too big for my britches. Success, wealth and even that fame could result, but Dave don't let them change you for the worse.

Think about Africa, where there are few luxuries. Every day there, we visited hundreds of people who lived without electricity, plumbing, Western sanitation, accessible food supplies, reliable transportation, and 'modern' communications. Luxuries were something to eat, or a new second-hand shirt, or someone to make you smile, maybe share a little of God's love. Every night, dirty and emotionally strung out, our group of Lutheran travelers returned to our secure hotel to eat full plates of familiar foods, drink cold beer, take hot showers with running water, change into clean clothes and sleep on comfortable mattresses. If I ever felt like a fool, it was then. I felt like a fool taking advantage of luxuries I didn't deserve while living only a stone's throw from people who could only dream of them.

And who among us is wise enough to govern? Is it the people we elected? Are we their slaves or are they our public servants? If we are the princes, why are things done so ineffectively and so expensively? Personally, I'd like to see something better for my money. But to quote Stephen King, we could just as easily argue over how many angels dance on the head of a pin. Thus, I'm reading the second half of the verse as a warning based on the first. Don't get too big for your britches because you're no better than anyone else, just like the glitterati in Congress. One of my lifelong goals has been to earn a doctorate; maybe now I'll have the time. One good thing to remember in doing that is that education makes you better but it doesn't make you better than anyone else. A PhD and a construction worker pay the same amount for a cup of coffee at 7 Eleven; both stand equal before God, and both need a Savior as much as you and I.

God wants us to succeed. Without going all Joel Osteen on you, I think it's a safe thing to say that God gives us talents that He wants us to use for the betterment of His kingdom. Betterment is success whether it generates wealth or not. God wants us to be happy with what He grants us, and to make the most of it. I think God wants us to succeed, and God wants us to do the best with whatever is on our plate at the time, even unemployment. He wants victory for us: His victory, not our defeats. When on the edge of big changes, I'm thinking it's a good thing to remember and it's bigger than the Super Bowl

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 8 February 2011

A king's rage is like the roar of a lion, but his favor is like dew on the grass. Proverbs 19, verse 12.

Clearly this verse is talking about a leader, a king, someone in charge. It's true: cross the person in charge and you risk their wrath. Impress them and you are in their favor. Again, this is one that, on the surface, I'm struggling with. Right now I'm not in charge of much, I'm not in a position of leadership, I'm not a manager, I'm not a king and I'm not president. At times, it seems like I'm more "not" something than I am much of anything.

What I am on any given day, however, is a father. I wear many hats and live out many roles in life, but this verse speaks to me in my privileged role as a father. A father's rage is like the roar of a lion, but a father's favor is like dew on the grass; that substitution works, doesn't it? Fathers must be solid, dependable, wise, learned, forceful, kind, understanding, empathetic, loving, and faithful. We must model for others what God models for us; we must be both 'father' and 'dad.' Like dew on the grass, we must be ready to spring with the morning, to greet each day with life and vigor. I can't say I'm as comfortable with the rage part of the verse, though. Fathers should be righteously angry at times, willing to defend (or go on offense) when their people are threatened. Some behavior is 'over the line' and deserves an angry response. As I get older, I find I regret the frivolous anger of my youth, when I was immature and green. I loved my family and I did my best for them, but I wasn't a mature man (as if I am now). My temper existed on a hair-trigger and I would get angry at small things like messes around the house, bad grades, minor discipline infractions and so on. I have never been physically abusive, but I was emotionally harsh. I needed time to grow up and learn that anger is best reserved for things that merit it and rage shouldn't be used on the people you love no matter what they do.

Maybe I've grown a little, and faith has allowed God to work on me. These days I try to do my best as a father, and I try to be a good dad. I had a good example in my own father. He was a good and decent man who did his best for us. Do I wish he had been or done more? Of course, but I think we all wish that of our parents until we might become parents ourselves and see that it's no small thing to be a father. Giving the best you've got sometimes takes everything and is maybe the best expectation possible. Either way, it builds treasure in heaven. My dad was a good father and I try to model him in many ways.

I did so last month. Nine men went from Frisco to Uganda in January to be fathers. We became interested in the trip because we were told that there were villagers there who had few male role models. When we got there, we saw that what we heard was true: there were few men around. For a week, we nine men got to be surrogate fathers and friends to complete strangers and dear children who needed them. My hat is off to the women of those villages because they open their hearts and homes to children who need them all while performing the roles of wife, husband, mother and father. Men are needed there, but there aren't many men to be had. Fathers are needed, righteous men to rage against the indignities and insecurities of poverty and work for something better for the people they love. Their love is needed to mentor young boys and girls so that they grow into loving adults who honor God, love others, and work hard. Such mentoring, too, is like the soft cool dew on the grass, welcoming the green and refreshing the earth that is the lives of these growing children.

You need not go to Africa to find such a need either. It's in the inner cities and rural towns. It is in families where there is no father, or where the father has left. The need is in our small towns, and in our small marriages where it is all too easy to become distracted by smaller things. It might even be in your own family, in your own life. And, to be perfectly blunt, you don't even need to be a father to meet the need; you don't even need to be a man. You only need to believe that God has a purpose for you, and it isn't all to earn a living, pay the bills, or watch the tube. There is something more intended for us, and I for one intend to do my part as a man, dad and father. Care to join me?

Only an idiot would think that men and women aren't different, or that gender doesn't imbue us with different roles. I won't speak for women, but I'll gladly join the line with other men and be thankful for the roles, tasks, and responsibilities that God gave manly fathers. There are times when I find my role hard to live and I find the work to be difficult. That's okay because I'm learning there is blessing in adversity, privilege in challenge, and love to be found in everything we do. I may not be in charge of much and my future vocation is currently in doubt. I'm still a manly father, though, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 9 February 2011

A foolish son is his father's ruin, and a quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping. Proverbs 19, verse 13.

Ah relationships. To paraphrase Jimmy Buffett, "we all got em, we all want em. What do we do with em?" And, yes, stranger things have happened than mixing Biblical verses with Parrothead lyrics! The point is still valid though: what do we do with them? Are we really the people our parents warned us about (yet another Buffettism)?

You all know that I miss my father. I've often struggled with the truth of that first part of this verse. I've wondered if my foolish mistakes would have caused Dad to grieve. Ditto for the times when I tried in good faith yet still failed. This won't be a shock to anyone who's been there but I find the hardest part of parenting is watching my kids make mistakes. I long ago gave up being a helicopter parent as I came to understand that you just don't do your kids a favor by making all their decisions and choices for them. As they get older, they need to learn what rebuke and struggle feel like so that they understand these are white lines you need to stay between. It's hard to stand back and watch them do things that you know they'll regret, but in the long run it's a matter of tough love. Of course, where safety and illegality are concerned, that's a different story. But relationships are something they need to learn on their own.

I can't say that my kids' mistakes are my ruin, but they keep me up at night and they weigh on my heart; maybe that's some of the 'ruin' the proverb is talking about. Like all kids, mine seem to think that parents nag and fret and come down hard over things that don't matter. It's a small thing to have them slow down in the neighborhood but it's important. It's a small thing to keep stressing they do their homework, but it matters. It's a small thing to nag them to pick up their things and demonstrate self respect but it means something to them in the long run. Don't sweat the small stuff, I know, and not every small thing is worth stressing over. But to build them up so they can be faithful, loving, happy and confident, independent adults is perhaps the greatest compliment a child can give a parent.

That's what God does for us. He gives us our white lines and bids us to stay between them, understanding that we probably won't and that there are consequences for that. He always, then, uses his love and wisdom to instruct us when we do wrong and works to vector us back to the safe and narrow. We sometimes choose the bad and sometimes I believe He lets that happen, knowing it's tough love to watch us learn the hard way even when it's for our own good. He does it so that we become wise ourselves, and we are then on even ground to choose to love Him through our lives instead of simply being automatons who are compelled to.

And what about that dripping faucet wife? Let's extrapolate that further and apply it to all of us. Are you a wife? Are you a husband? Are you a girlfriend, boyfriend, partner, significant other, family member or even a good friend? Without torturing Scripture, I think the verse could logically be read to apply to anyone who is very, very close to someone else. We all get annoyed and we all do things that aggravate other people; that's natural and to be upset about it isn't necessarily a bad thing. If it affects our principles, it might even be critical. But (of course there's a 'but') maybe a gut-check is in order when we find ourselves nagging, harassing, complaining or even commenting. Are we doing that to correct something that affects us or are we doing it for other reasons that we might not even acknowledge? It's a judgment call, I suppose, but shouldn't we always strive to exercise good judgment especially when our loved ones are concerned? We all rage against the world in different ways – ask me about snow days in Texas! – but I think the next time I do it, I'll first ask myself why.

Let's also be honest here: to those who don't believe, God Himself could be considered a dripping faucet annoyance. I mean, come on! His word nags us to be perfect and we can't be perfect! We never measure up to a god who just wants to hammer us down, right? Not completely. God never nags: He loves. And when He loves, he reminds, he corrects, and like that father to the foolish son, He does so to bring us back into the fold. God doesn't quarrel: He loves.

It's true: none of us is perfect. We're fallen in a fallen world. The goofy thing about it is that, even in the world that's fallen, it is still a beautiful place, made for beauty and made to be a reflection of the ultimate beauty that is its Creator. Our wrongheaded sins mess that up and try to introduce ruin. I'll be thankful on a snowy February day that there are supernatural and natural friends who see that what we want for our relationships is peace and harmony. At times we may just act like the people our parents warned us about, meaning that Mr. James was wiser than he knew. I'll remember to keep asking about that as well.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 10 February 2011

Laziness brings on deep sleep, and the shiftless man goes hungry. Proverbs 19, verse 15.

These are great and timely words. I promised to keep you updated on my situation so here's that update: I'm still employed. I was rolled off the account in California but my company is looking to place me on a new project. It means I will be on 'the bench' for awhile, but there is work to be done on other efforts, and at least I'll be pitching in to do that. My manager and I have spent the last few days updating my qualifications and doing things to make me more salable to new clients. In short, I have a job and I'm thankful for it.

The bench is a chancy place to sit, though. If you're a consultant, now and then you need a rest. Even the most productive ball players need a few minutes out of the game to catch their breath. When you're benched unexpectedly, though, it takes you by surprise. When you want to play and can't, you're 'riding the pine' and it can get frustrating. I haven't been on the bench very often in my career, but I've found that, after a few weeks, I get antsy and want to do something. This happens, I think, because I'm averse to laziness. Those who know me well would probably tell you I'm way too Type A, and they would be right. I don't like the feeling of being inactive. What's more, being disposed to depression, I don't like the spiral of inactivity leading to laziness, which is a breeding ground for depression. I prefer to keep active in some way because this is one of my ways to fight those particular demons.

So I think the verse is talking about willful inactivity. It isn't talking about a time-out on the bench, and it isn't talking about taking a breather. Instead, I read it to mean willful laziness, an unwillingness to work. God gives us work as a way to serve His kingdom, to serve others and use His gifts to provide for ourselves. God intends for us to work, whether it be physical, emotional or spiritual work. Christ didn't come here to just talk: he came here to use His words to motivate people to act. Action by another name is 'work.' It is doing. He did something to save us; aren't we supposed to do something with that? In my mind, it's no coincidence that a hard-working, faithful nation is prosperous while those that rest on their laurels atrophy and become vulnerable.

Again, I think of Uganda. In fact, I think of a lot of the places I've been where there is poverty. Where there is a willingness to work, people will gladly work. I find, too, that where God is at work, the people gladly jump in to work. The week we were there we worked at a new church building in a village called Nakabango, north of Jinja. The building was nearly finished; we helped primer the walls on Tuesday in preparation for a Friday dedication. At the time, I honestly didn't think there was any way the building would be finished in time. The paint needed finishing, there weren't enough benches to seat people, there wasn't glass in the windows, the doors weren't hung, the inside wasn't even finished! When we returned to the village on Friday, though, the building was ready. It looked brilliant! The villagers had come together and worked very hard to finish the building and it was wonderful! Walking into the dedication service on Friday was a moment of singular joy for me, like ascending to the throne of God Himself. I think now that part of the reason for that was in looking around at a job well done, knowing that all these people had done this themselves and we visitors had played a part in that. They had used the gifts God provided and had done something magnificent with it.

Now, of course, I have my weak spots. Look at my desk and you'll see a rat's nest of papers waiting to be filed. I used to be so organized but I sort of broke down on that and have struggled to recapture my former skill. We all have those weak spots, don't we? There are places where our armor shines strong and bright, and there are other spots that are chinked. The trick, I believe, is knowing when to dedicate effort to the weak areas and giving them their due when that's needed.

God gives us work as a good thing. He doesn't want us to go hungry in any way. It is hard work to earn a living to put food on your table. It is hard work to maintain a relationship, or to build one, or to build one back. And it is hard work to keep in the Word and maintain your spiritual health too. After all, couldn't this verse apply to that as well? When we take faith for granted or push it out of our lives, don't we all have a tendency to become a little shiftless and hungry for meaning? I know I do; what about you?

So today I am glad to be reminded by the proverb that inactivity can breed laziness, which can quietly, deceptively launch you into the deep sleep of self-loathing and depression. I'm reminded that physical, emotional, and spiritual hungers are all real things. And I'm reminded that the Almighty gives us gifts to fight the times when we can tend towards laziness and hunger. He wants better for us; so should we, I believe. Every now and then I need to rest out of the game, and for me now is one of those times. I'll sit on the bench, rest up, and prepare to get back in the game at the first, best opportunity to do so.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 11 February 2011

He who obeys instructions guards his life, but he who is contemptuous of his ways will die. Proverbs 19, verse 16.

The Bible translation I use most often is the NIV, New International Version for those who aren't familiar with that; being almost 40 years old in this tech-connected world, it seems neither 'new' nor 'international' anymore. In my opinion, there are verses where the NIV translation doesn't do the verse justice. This is one of them. The King James version says, "He that keepeth the commandment keepeth his own soul; [but] he that despiseth his ways shall die." That 16th century language is a bit difficult for me to tackle at 0600 on a Friday. I prefer the New American Standard which says, "He who keeps the commandment keeps his soul, but he who is careless of conduct will die."

Today, I prefer that NAS version mainly for the second part of it because, in the NIV, that's the part that was hard for me to understand. Whose ways is it talking about: God's or man's? Is there an easy way to answer this? Of course not! Nothing in Scripture is easy, which is one reason why it's genuine. Nothing in life is easy; life reflects Scripture and vice versa. This morning, I prefer a translation that'll help me understand the point because it's critical to me right now.

Since coming back from Africa, I've been trying to change my ways. I'm trying to work on my conduct and be more of the kind of man I want to be. I've been online less. I've been trying to act less impulsive, to put away bad habits, to rely more on God and less on my own tendency to jump to conclusions. I've been working on my listening. I don't mind telling you that it hasn't been easy, and I don't mind confessing that I haven't been very successful. Three weeks have passed since returning and I'm back into the world where I was before, seeing how my perspective is different because of a spiritual experience. I look at the pictures and try to think back on lessons I learned, feelings I felt, things we did and said, and I ask myself, 'was it not real?' You go on a trip out of your comfort zone with the hope of being changed and you are, with the hope of serving in a way that will bring good changes to others. Then you come back and try to incorporate those changes and work to improve on the way you were before.

To quote the good Mr. Jackson, "that ain't no big thing but it's a gold star for me...I'm a work in progress." I'm very much a work in progress and sometimes the progress is tough.

When I have a rough week like this one has been, it's very easy to slip up and fall. I broke down and bought that pack of Salem's and am now paying for it. I've had a short fuse and when my kids (being kids) act mouthy and do little things that aggravate me, it is tempting to overreact. At work, just when I thought I was caught up on some reports I needed to file, they get rejected and sent back. At a time when I wonder if my position is in jeopardy I'm left feeling like a fool, like there must be someone at the home office saying, "tell me just why we keep Terry around." I push away people, thinking that I don't want to bother them, and then I'm upset when they don't understand me or, not surprisingly, push away back. And I look for other things, other people to blame, ending up at the end of the day just looking in the mirror and realizing it's the man in front of me who's responsible.

Sound familiar? Maybe your vices are different, or maybe you have different choices but I'm betting that you're faced with similar challenges. Do you obey instruction (to have faith and do your best), or are you sometimes contemptuous of God's ways (to rely on Him and trust)? Whether or not you include God in your life, are you contemptuous of ways you know to be right anyway?

I have been and I'm trying to stop, to learn and improve. It is a tough battle, sometimes hour by hour or even quicker. You don't just change your behavior immediately. It's easy to resolve to do something; it's the decision of a moment. What's hard is following through on it, but that's the part that brings the most rewards. I'm trying to not be contemptuous of the right way. When I'm feeling overwhelmed, the right way is to stop, pray for help, and listen. Take that breather and act instead of react. With work, the right way is to take my time and do my best, understanding that these days are tough for a lot of people and I'm part of a larger team. Instead of smoking, a different way is to get a glass of water or go do something else to take my mind off the nicotine. Rather than snapping at the kids, the better way could be to ask myself, "is this battle worth fighting" or "what's making me say this," then step away to noodle that thought. And genuinely asking, "Lord, help me" always calms and comforts when we need it most. Even when it doesn't seem like much, it's always enough. The alternative is dying inside, a little bit at a time, and there's too much left to live for to ever allow that to happen.

No matter how you say it, whether in the King's old English or something much later, the same words come down to us from old and they're always right. They're given to us as tools for living by a loving God who wants to see us succeed in Him, especially on our hardest days. To be blunt, I don't expect the days will be less hard. I'm not being a pessimist when

I say they will probably get harder and those same challenges may return to attack again and again. When that happens, the advice is still the same: Lord, help me to listen to good instruction and live in celebration of a better way to live this life You gave. That's easy to understand in any translation even when it isn't easy to do

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 14 February 2011

What a man desires is unfailing love; better to be poor than a liar. Proverbs 19, verse 22.

Happy Valentines Day and as a gift, I'll share this bittersweet verse. Maybe it's odd to use this odd observation as a message on the day when we are supposed to celebrate love, but the more I noodle it, the more I think the verse is perfect for the day. And since that's the case, I'm going to make a shocking confession to you that you won't expect. I'm in love with a man. All my life I've known I was like this but it has just been a recent development that I've found this love, and it's changing me. What I'd kept hidden away before I feel free to now confess to anyone who will hear: I'm in love with a man and he's the most extraordinary person I've ever known.

No, I'm not gay. No, this isn't some lurid affair. You're smart enough to figure out where this is going: I'm in love with the Lord. This really is one I've struggled with though. You go to church most of your life and you're taught that God loves you so much that He gave Himself, the part of Him that is His Son, to die for you. You're taught that this kind of love is astounding, beyond our reach yet should be our goal. You're taught that you can't love this way, and that His love is so pervasive that it reaches everywhere in your life. He's up there, you're down here. It's a vertical relationship. It's isn't a love story like we of the 21st century modern man would think of one. He doesn't love us 'that' way.

Wrong!

The longer I believe the more I believe that He does indeed love us in all the same ways we love each other. Phileo, eros, agape, friendship, romantic, undeserved grace: all words to describe the kinds of love that we have for each other. Some more than others, but most in varying degrees. We so often think of God as loving us only in the agape way but it's true too that He loves us in those other ways. His struggle to win our hearts is the story of life. And He knows that, whether we're stoic, reserved, angry, hurt, passionate, lonely, open, loving, or any other way, each of us desires a love in life that won't fail. He knows that, too often, we don't find that in life and that anything less than this love is a liar's goal, a fool's errand.

He wants to be the love of my life and He is. He wants to be the love who I can talk with, who makes His thoughts known to me. He wants to be the friend in whom I can confide anything and implicitly trust in any matter. He wants me to know that He's there for me, and that if comes to a fight or a rumble, He's ready to get his fists bloodied with mine. When I watch a game, He wants me to remember He's right there with me, even if we don't drink the same beer. He loves to respect me, and loves to prove all the ways I can and should respect Him. Our love isn't erotic or sexual, but He constantly reminds me that the love I can share in this way with my mate is a reflection of the rushing love that constantly courses from His heart. The passion we experience for fleeting moments is the kind of fulfilling feeling that He wants to share with me forever. He is constantly reassuring me that no matter how many times I've been unfaithful to Him, as long as I come back and genuinely love Him in return and believe in Him, there's nothing I've done or ever could do that would come between us forever. And He's very cool about it, perhaps the ultimate cool. To quote Mick Dundee, "me and God...we be mates."

And I'm not alone. He wants that for you too. It almost sounds like He's the ultimate polygamist, the universal player. But that's part of the mystery, too, in that He loves us like a groom loves his bride, like a hero loves his people, as a Savior loves us all. He wants a personal earth-shattering love to fill up our senses and overflow our hearts for each and every one of us, even those who openly reject Him.

If you've known me awhile, you might be thinking, "Dave, you're over the edge. You're turned into one of those weird Jesus freaks." Guilty. Let's have us a beer and talk it over, or if you don't want to do that, then just keep reading. Christians get the bad rap and they deserve it because we've made belief in God so un-cool, so suburban and so meaningless that we think that we have to give up things to embrace it. We don't give up anything, but we do choose to put things behind us and live in new ways. What really is freaky about it is that this life-altering, soul fulfilling love is just the beginning. He gives it to us like water from a firehose, then calls us to truly think in new ways, to pour ourselves out, to commit not sacrifice, and to tank up on his faith fuel that we might gird ourselves for spiritual battle. He promises a tough path in life for those who would drink of the water of life, and He promises radical pain, radical movement, and radical trials that we could easily avoid by sticking with the un-cool, suburban, meaningless drivel that we've made Him into. Put on your best Sunday clothes, throw your hands in the air, and dance around to that thought for awhile.

But you see I've found the love I've been looking for all my life and I feel like a prize fool for not seeing it earlier. I feel like such an idiot for thinking that any relationship I have here could be like this one, or that I could love in all the ways He

loves me. And yet He is constantly telling me to love you and others the way He loves me, the way He loves you. He wants us to feel it, to know it, to live and excel in it as a reflection of how He loves us. He wants us to fight for it, live and die for it, be willing to sacrifice everything for it and treasure it, and He wants me to do it unselfishly. He did those things for us; He wants us to have the heart to do them for each other. And He wants it for love because He is love.

Happy Valentine's Day again. I've found the one I've been waiting for, and I never thought it would be in a man but it is. It's a love that I want to share with everyone, especially with the woman of my dreams. My love, my Lord, promises life will be a swift kick in the ass, and that it won't be easy, but that He's right there with me and will be waiting to love me forever in ways I can't even dream of. On this day to celebrate the feeling of love, I want to taste fully of the unfailing love of my life, and to richly, honestly invite you to do that same today and every day.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 15 February 2011

He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done. Proverbs 19, verse 17.

This is a Uganda verse again; obviously, right? Why else would a bunch of average suburbanites get on a plane and go to a foreign country with no agenda other than to love and be loved? God puts some strange things on your heart, and it seems strange to do such a thing. Many good people with good common sense would say, "huh? Why?" That's not something to ignore, but then neither is the matter when God puts it on your heart and says, "go." You don't go to curry favor with God; he isn't some rich uncle who hands out inheritances by playing favorites. You go to serve other people and in short order you find that they are serving you. You aren't ministering to them: they are ministering to you with their kindness, their love of Christ, and their selflessness. Their daily agenda is survival and they could easily shake off the whole faith-thing...but they don't. They wear it as a cloak of honor and they use it to share the love of God with strangers. You are both spreading kindness and God's love, and you envision that He is somewhere smiling, thinking to Himself, "thanks, folks, for doing what I would do." I was part of a group that went to China for the same reason and had a similar experience.

Yep, it's a Uganda verse...or is it? Is it a verse talking about working with the poor in Africa or Asia, or is it a verse asking us to do those things to the poor everywhere? And who are the 'poor?' Are they the people who have no material things, who are starving to death, who are in physical danger of oppression and depression? Could 'the poor' be the wealthy man who is so in charge of his own destiny that it excludes all else? Could the poor be the suburban housewife who thinks she's doing her kids a favor by running their lives? Could it be the woman who pays lip-service to her faith every Sunday and every time she stands in line at the store, or at the latest school event? Could the poor be the kid who has enough to eat and gets good grades but spends all his free time listening to death metal and planning his escape? Could the poor be the faithful churchgoer who goes through the motions but usually comes out of service saying to himself, "I just don't get it and I'm not sure I believe it?"

Are you the poor? Or am I? Who's helping who? Here's where I re-read the verse and see that we're all the poor. We all lack in some ways, and we all excel in some ways. We all desperately, constantly, surely need God's love in our lives, even when we think we don't. We all forget that and get too big for our heads, and rather than slapping us down, God demonstrates His love again and again in a thousand different ways and beckons us back in every one. Sure, that hurts from time to time but the payoff is so worth it. "He will reward him who does;" God will reward us for acts of love and kindness to each other. He will do it at our level, where we live, in ways to encourage us and spread His glory. The love of the universe, my love the Lord, sees that and meets us where we're poor.

It happened in Uganda. It happened in China. It happened by handing out leftover entrees in San Francisco, or at a food kitchen in Colorado. It happens when you stop by the road to help a stranger fix a flat. It happens when your neighbor needs a friend to listen. It happens when you don't know how to make ends meet, or how to get through the day. It happens when you hold a child's hand. It happens when you hold the door for someone, or when you let the impatient guy in the right lane merge over so he can pass the only car on the road. Here in the most affluent nation in human history we are all poor. Both poverty and a small taste of redemption happened to me and I thank God for that because I wasn't looking for it and I didn't deserve it. It can happen to you too.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 16 February 2011

Discipline your son, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to his death. Proverbs 19, verse 18.

Today I was talking with one of the people closest to me; the conversation was about our kids. We each have 2 kids about the same age and they're going through similar challenges. We swap stories and advice, and commiserate about how tough it is to raise strong-willed children. Her two oldest are teens and her youngest is in elementary school; my two youngest are still teens while the oldest is a successfully-launched 'one score' woman of twenty. Though our families have never met, you'd think the kids were cut from the same cloth because they go through many of the same struggles. In many ways, we parent alike, and our kids live in the same high-tech, high-drama world of suburban high schools, Teen Mom on MTV, and the misogynistic pap that passes for popular music on the radio.

Now, I'm not one of the people who believe kids today have it tougher than kids ever have; I reject that, at least for kids in America. Teen pregnancy, drug abuse, bullying violence, split families, high pressure and legitimized venereal disease are all serious problems; I'm not downplaying them. So are malnourishment, dying (or dead) brothers and sisters and parents, a life expectancy of what we consider middle age, living with diseases that have been eradicated or controlled in the US, gang violence on a national level, and the very real threat of systematic persecution. Those are problems most kids in the world deal with every day. Even here in America, as little as 100 years ago, families had many children because so many kids didn't live beyond childhood. It wasn't uncommon for a child to grow to adulthood having known brothers and sisters who died from disease and accidents. It wasn't uncommon for children to work at age 10 or younger. It wasn't uncommon for orphans to have to raise themselves alone. It wasn't uncommon for people to live without the necessities of food, water and shelter, or to live in abject poverty. Those problems are mostly gone here.

I think about the kids of Africa and I wish my own could see them. Kids in 21st century Africa still, in large part, live like kids did in 19th century America. Parents dead from AIDS and war, polio and whooping cough and measles that can kill you, malnourishment and starvation, orphans who outnumber families, forced to work at young ages, homelessness, no education, no family: these are common problems for the children I met. It makes you wonder where God is in all of it, and how is this 'discipline' good or fair to the innocent children who suffer.

And yet, from the handful of villages I saw, the people have a faith and a culture that accepts harsh realities and still learns to cling to loving, saving faith. A fellow traveler on that mission trip said, "they're living the book of Acts in Uganda" and they are. A believer goes to a village, meets people, and if there is interest they start a church. They get in the trenches and work with the starving, needy people and satisfy a need. They learn that they aren't being disciplined by God for things they didn't do, but they are living in the middle of consequences of others' actions and learning from them. Faith becomes a real, living tool for them to use in overcoming a harsh predicament, and they live forever because of it. They learn to live out faith here so that they are not party to death, so that death won't rule their lives or be the only end-all result of living in hard reality.

I wish my kids could see that. I have no illusions that exposing my kids to such situations would cure them of their self-focus. It also wouldn't remove the need for discipline. If we take away our kids' iPhones, or internet, TV or driving privileges, or if we remind them to deposit money in the bank so they can honor their commitments, or if we constantly stress to them to make better choices then we are the worst parents anywhere! There are places even in America today where the realities of Africa are still realities here. Kids need to know that they should be responsible adults, that they should learn about what their God wants and gives them and then use that to the best in life. I want them to know these things because I want them to be disciplined, successful adults, not shiftless vagabonds or irresponsible kids who grow into irresponsible adults. We discipline in the hopeful promise of instilling discipline. The older they get, the more I find that corrective discipline isn't the primary focus. Instead, it's more cerebral, more disciplining of the head and heart. Corporal or physical punishment doesn't apply anymore. Now it's helping them to be aware and informed of their choices and responsibilities.

My friend and I didn't realize that we were discussing the proverb of the day; I hadn't written this at the time. But that's what happened. We discipline because we love our kids. God does the same with us, allowing challenges to stand in our way so that we might rely on Him more and grow. It's the struggle of the ages, and I don't think it ends with the teens. We discipline in the promise that by exposing our kids to good teaching, we will ensure their best opportunity for success. Whether it's Africa, Asia or America, it's the best we can do for them.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 17 February 2011

A hot-tempered man must pay the penalty; if you rescue him, you will have to do it again. Proverbs 19, verse 19.

We had a big argument at my house last night and it bothered me alot. It started with a confrontation over using the car and ended up with a yelling, screaming completely unproductive rant between my daughter and I. Both of us had valid points; both of us had valid grievances; both of us handled them badly, especially me. It doesn't matter who was right or wrong or who started it: I'm the father and I'm the adult and I hold myself responsible for letting erupt the volcano of my temper.

Wouldn't you just know that, immediately after the argument, I went to church to speak about Uganda. It was the last of the formal church sessions where all of us "Ugandudes" told our testimonies of what we saw and did in Uganda. Wouldn't you know, too, that I talked about kids and how I'm not a touchy feely kind of guy, but how one girl there especially clung onto my neck and gave me some hugs and affection at just the time I needed it most. We were supposed to care for the kids there, not the other way around, but God used this precious little girl to minister to my needs instead of me meeting hers. Some topic to witness about, eh, especially after having a volcanic and unnecessary argument with my own kid.

This morning, my daughter and I made up, but it got me thinking, yet again, that I'm a hot-tempered man and it's something I constantly struggle with. All through my life I've worked to master my temper. I'm not violent but I am loud, obnoxious, and I have a hard time backing away from an argument, especially with someone who knows how to say things designed to hurt or get my goat. It doesn't take much to get me to turn up my volume. I count myself as a Christian man, even a man of faith and God, but I am so seriously flawed in this way and I don't know how to stop it. When I let loose, I act in ways so contrary to what a man of faith should do that I dare say I make a mockery of my faith.

Yes, I do things to head off an argument. I pray for guidance, I keep my tongue, I walk away, I put myself in the other person's shoes, I admit my own part in the argument, I try. I do these things with only varying success and more often than not, they are successful. When I fail, though, it is spectacular and I'm left with moments like these when I feel like a heel because I have been one. I'm the hot-tempered man who must pay the penalty only it is not only me who pays it: it's the other person. It's the people I love. Only a fool would rescue me because, given my track record, they would have to do it again.

Does God have a temper? Sure, I'd say He does. After all, He gets righteously angry with us over the sins we do. Think expulsion from Eden, the Flood, clearing out the moneychangers in the Jewish temple, and even the coming end times. When God lets loose His temper, watch out: that is more spectacular than anything I could conjure up. The difference is that God is just, and his anger is designed to mete out justice. His temper and the anger that drives it are righteous. He is rightly angry at His divine good being thwarted by sin that has no place in His holiness. We weren't made for the depravity in which we find ourselves: we were made in His image to be holy. So often we fall short.

I get righteously angry too; I was so last night. Where I erred, where I sinned, was in letting my temper vent, rant, scream, swear and spew invective out of that anger. It wasn't designed to correct: it was designed to be selfish. My temper flared, grew, and escalated to where we were screaming at each other and nothing good was accomplished. I went to church sullen and upset, and I felt even more like a fool for standing up in front of good people trying to tell them what a spiritual experience I had in Uganda. Before I spoke, I sent her a text message, apologizing for what I'd said. The bigger truth is that I should have said those words in person before I left. Better yet, I shouldn't have needed to say them at all.

Sure, no parent should tolerate rebellion for the sake of rebellion, and no parent should tolerate the actions, profanity, or self-centered attitude which clothes that rebellion. No man, though, should lose his temper the way I did, the way I do. There are other ways to handle said rebellion that are just as effective, more Godly, and, most importantly, righteous. I'm tired of carrying around the boat anchor of this temper. I don't flare up as much as I used to; maturity has done something good. But once in awhile is still once too often for me. Lord help me to do better, to be someone worth the rescue instead of just another hot-tempered bozo who doesn't know when to keep his trap shut.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 18 February 2011

Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise. Proverbs 19, verse 20.

The learning never stops, does it? If I were a teacher, I would take heart in this verse because it means Scripture is validating my profession. Students, listen to your teachers and embrace what they tell you because what they tell you will make you wise. Teachers, do well in your work because you are building the wisdom of the coming generation. Learning is a God-sanctioned activity; indeed, it is ordained and directed.

So here's where we get to think outside the box. Primary school teachers: it's not about you. High school teachers and college professors: it's not about you. Sunday school teaches and pastors: it's not about you either. Even parents: it's not about you. YOU don't teach. YOU are not the person in charge of educating someone else. YOU will not ever be the only reason why learning takes place. What you know is not all yours, but it is entrusted to you. The intellect is a gift that God gives us for all to use, not attributable to only one party, and not understood by only one party. You don't need a PhD to teach well; you don't need one at all for most things. What you need is faith. It could even be said that, like all else, learning apart from faith is nothing.

Whoa! I thought this was a verse where educators and learning are to be celebrated! It is, and in my own way, I'm doing just that. Let's please not lose the forest for the trees (or vice versa). I'm not saying that only parochial schools teach well; my kids attended parochial schools that did NOT teach well in many subjects. I'm also not saying that we shouldn't give credit where credit is due. In the past, I've written about my teachers and I owe them a debt I could never repay (especially the good ones, thank you Mrs. Pickens and Mrs. Winn). Finally, I'm definitely not saying that pastors have the inside-track on faith-based learning. I've known many, many great pastors who were terrible educators; I've known great educators who made terrible pastors. I can say I've learned more about God outside the church building than I've ever learned in it.

Instead, I'm reading the proverb to be a celebration of good learning. We learn to become wise. We learn to master skills and become prepared for our roles in the world. We learn from people who are well-versed and trained to instruct us in details we would probably not be able to learn independently. Such people, such tasks, are blessed by God to do what they do. They make us wise, and do so through the divine love of he who founded all wisdom. To be hungry for learning is to be hungry for God's wisdom. To enjoy learning is to revel in His teaching. To understand is to be at one with the ultimate knowledge of the Creator of the universe. His instruction is a gift, and it's for us but not about us. It is about His glory and how we shine in that.

Notice too that it doesn't say "you'll learn overnight." The proverb confirms that learning is a long process. Life-long, in fact, since it says "in the end." That could mean "at the end of your goal" or "at the end of your life." The learning doesn't stop when you finish the grade, graduate or get the degree. Even the smartest professor still has much to learn about outside their area of expertise. We start to learn as children and continue to learn even when we are very old. At the end of life, we will continue to learn. Maybe it's a silly thing but I have the hope of getting ultimate knowledge when I die, of being able to use that 70% of my brain that scientists say we humans don't use. Maybe that's the part where the soul resides; who knows? Not me for sure.

I'm not a rocket scientist, but I worked in rocket science. I'm not a brain surgeon, but I have a brain and I'd be happy to learn (except for the whole bloody, gooey gray mess part...). I'm just an ordinary guy living an ordinary life in an extraordinary time. What makes it most extraordinary is that it's a gift. It's a gift to live, teach and learn, and it's a gift from above. Even I, hardly the sharpest tool in the shed, know that.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 21 February 2011

Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails. Proverbs 19, verse 21.

Sick days mess up your plans. Rare is the day when I call (or email) in sick to work but I'm doing so today. I have a chest ailment that just doesn't want to go away. I spent most of the weekend hacking (no, not smoking) and I feel little better than I did when it started last week. There are many things I wanted to do today. I wanted to read up on PM documents, and start drawing out project plan for what will likely be a new project. I wanted to finally finish the pile of ironing that's taunting me from the chair next to my desk. I wanted to take my daughter's car out for a long drive to charge the battery after I FINALLY installed a new starter in it over the weekend. Looks like those aren't going to happen today because I'll write this note from my bedside and then turn over for a nap.

Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails. I think He's telling me "lay low for a day and get some rest. You're sick." Today I'll listen. I think I'll also ponder the point He's making in this verse. We think up many plans, we dream many dreams, yet God's will still orders our lives. I find that many of the big plans I made for myself when I was young haven't come true. They were things I thought I wanted, things of which I dreamed that haven't come to pass. That isn't to say that none of my plans, hopes, or dreams have been fulfilled; nothing could be more untrue. But some of the big ones haven't. An honest appraisal of that would find that some things of which I dreamed are still in the works while others out of character aren't. If I look back and think about goals and dreams I really thought I wanted, I find that the ones that were far-fetched and would entail me being someone I'm not haven't come true, whereas ones that fit with my character, personality and abilities have either been achieved or are in the works.

So with all these thoughts in a sick day, I'm seeing a connection; walk with me while I noodle this. Or have a seat on the bed and let's chat. Where I have talents, I freely admit they're a gift from God. When I constructively build using those talents, I am using them for the purpose God intended. When I do so, my chances for success are increased. When there is failure, I admit failure and re-group, then I move forward. When there is success, I thankfully acknowledge it and move forward. Either way, there is forward motion because of God, and I am moving forward using the talents God gives me. Using them to their fullest is, therefore, a God-pleasing endeavor. He blesses what He will bless, but I usually feel the blessing of His hand in my life when I've used my abilities to His glory and for a purpose in which I involve Him. When I don't feel His blessing, or when I've made bad decisions, the challenge is still there for me to pray more, listen harder, and see what lesson is being taught before I can begin to move forward again. The best of my plans are those in which I give them to His plans because His are what will rule the day. He is, after all, God. If I want to use my abilities to generate success, I would do well to remember that.

Sure, this is a logic chain and someone better at de-constructing those could probably make mincemeat of mine. I'm okay with it because it doesn't change the faith I have in God. I find that when I've made plans, taken actions, or done things that aren't in concert with the best way to faithfully use my talents, I usually feel the sting of failure. When I forget God, I can forget about success. It's not that God punishes me, but it is that He lets me remove him and feel the consequences of it. We weren't made to be separate from God because separate from God, we succeed at nothing. Christ even said that!

Does that mean we don't have free will? Of course not. We are free to make any choice God puts in our way or allows to be in our way. We are free to take any action, and to reap any consequence, good and bad. He wants us to take the actions He believes are best for us, but we are always free to do something else. The amazing thing is that, in this earthly chess game, He moves the pieces around to still enhance His glory even when our choices aren't the best ones we should make. Yet when we involve God in our lives as an active participant, we are blessed. More than that, we are blessed when we involve Him and let Him lead us along the path He wills. When that happens, He equips us, He expands our abilities, and He blesses us in ways that best satisfy His purposes...even when we don't understand it.

And even when we're sick. My plans for the immediate future involve medicine, bed rest and chicken soup. I'll put my faith in this day being what it is to rest up for coming days that will likely be busy and hectic. I'll need my strength then, so I will be thankful for my body demanding rest now. A sick day now and then may mess up your plans but they happen for a reason. Today will be a good day to remember that

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 22 February 2011

The fear of the LORD leads to life; then one rests content, untouched by trouble. Proverbs 19, verse 23.

Yesterday we talked about how success in life is achieved when your plans jive with the LORD's; no brainer there. This verse walks hand in hand with that, don't you think? Part of knowing you've achieved success is being content with the goal. You reach a goal, you realize it, and you stand there to look around and say "I did it." That's a moment of serene contentment and justifiable (hopefully thankful) pride. At that moment, nothing can touch you. It may not last for long, but it will last forever because, with the help of God, you did it. You get to keep and celebrate that feeling before starting on to the next goal.

And while you're thinking about that next goal, remember to include God. Remember, specifically, that to include Him means to embrace Him. To me, embracing Him means accepting who and what He is: powerful, omnipotent, omniscient, vast, brilliant, complex. He is all those things and He is those things that we are not. I've said it before that I believe 'fear' in the context of these proverbs usually means 'respect' and I think that's partly the case here too. In the context of the verses before 23, we see that the verses mention discipline, advice and instruction, the LORD's purpose, and unfailing love. After 23, however, there is mention of sluggards, flogging mockers, rebuking, shame and disgrace, and how the mouth of the wicked gulps down evil.

Knowing that, perhaps this is also a time to say that 'fear' here means genuine fear too. We should definitely respect God for who and what He is during our walk in life, and that includes understanding that for those who don't love Him, He is an awesome and frightening judge. I have a good friend who I think wants to open her heart to believe in God yet is afraid to. She lives her life as she does and is one of the few people I know of who always, consistently accepts responsibility for that; her life, her choices, her actions, her responsibility. We sometimes talk about faith and she is always hesitant to talk about the subject. I've often thought it's because she's afraid of God. She was never exposed to much teaching about faith, so to expect someone without that background to understand how personal and loving a relationship with the Almighty can be isn't a reasonable thing. To my friend, God must seem like someone who will hammer you down, someone to be genuinely afraid of.

That's because He is.

I truly think that most of our translation of 'fear' does indeed mean 'respect' but we can't throw out the other interpretations because they're just as valid. It is a reasonable thing to dread the creator of everything because He has the power to strike us down with a thought. It is an understandable emotion to be afraid of a God who can crush us since He has dominion over storms, earthquakes, and fire. It is right to feel terror at knowing what God could do if He wanted to. It is terrifying to know what God could do to your soul if He held your sins against you. For those who would knowingly reject God, they knowingly reject the loving side of him. That leaves only the side of fearful justice. To see 'the law' as a reflection of your misdeeds is a dreadful thing. If I didn't know that God is love, I too would likely see Him as a being of vengeance and I'd be terrified of that. I wouldn't want to have anything to do with Him either.

When I remember that fearing God means respecting Him and understanding that He has a terrible, swift, just side to Him, then I am content to know that I need not worry about receiving just punishment from Him because I believe in His promises of eternal, saving love. I'm a proud parent and people were created in God's image: we have our loving and just sides too. I know when I've done wrong and I confess those wrongs to Him, and I accept and know His forgiveness is honest. As I go about living my life, I learn more that living really isn't about me. It's about Him, and it's about using my relationship with Him as a factor in everything I do. That's not always easy, but when I remember both my respect and my understanding of his fearful justice, then I rest contented knowing that my understanding is true and that His universal love always keeps me secure.

I still have many plans for my remaining years here on the big blue marble. I want to be published and am taking steps to do so. I want to see my children become successful, responsible and loving adults, and they are well on their way. I want to travel more and I do. I want to use my talents to persuade, influence and help others connect to the Savior, and this too I am doing. I'm not done yet and neither are you. Knowing that, it's a comfort to know that the strong, gentle love of God always enfolds us like warm silk on a springtime evening. In that we can rest content as we journey along together.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 23 February 2011

The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he will not even bring it back to his mouth! Proverbs 19, verse 24.

Yet another verse about that Puritan work ethic, right? Higher pay from harder work; no work no eat; no something for nothing. It would seem to be an indictment of all that people commonly say is wrong with welfare, right? No, not quite. Yes, the sluggard buries his hand in the dish. Offer up free beer and snacks and see how many good friends will show up to partake. Once it's gone, see how many will stick around to help clean up. Or win the lottery and invite your new long-lost relatives over for a weeklong binge. Ditto that whole cleanup thing when it's all done. I won't even speculate what would happen if you stood outside the Golden Corral and yelled "It's on me!" The verse suggests that you'd have a bunch of people show up and pig out. Feed them long enough and they'll expect it. Keep feeding them and they'll resent you for it.

Today, I'm reading it differently and it's not very nice. Exit from the page now if you don't want to get your tree shaken.

I am the sluggard and so are you and you're damned arrogant if you think you aren't. It doesn't take a week in Uganda to show me that I am selfish. It doesn't take every Sunday in church with my hands in the air to show me that I'm a sluggard. In fact, it doesn't take much of anything in particular for me to see that I take my faith for granted nearly every day. I bury my hand deep in the dish of God's grace and scoop up all I can. My whole life exists as proof of God's tolerance and a gift of His grace. That I even draw breath after the things I've done, the grudges I harbor, the thoughts of lust and malice I conceive, and the inaction of my every day is testament to God's infinite patience. That's why He's God and I'm not. The quiet, still breath of the wind carries God's grace to me and shows me what I am impatient, bold, arrogant, unwise and fully human. How about you?

What's more, in my 'sluggery', I don't even have the brains to really, truly live. God gives me many talents, prosperity, health, riches and love and I don't even use those to the best of my ability! He literally puts the world at my feet each and every day and I can't even seem to rub two sticks together enough to make a spark. Do I spread His real love as He commands me to? Do I use my talents out of agape love for others or do I use them first for myself? Do I really work to increase His kingdom? Do I take up my cross and follow him even unto agonizing death? No, I don't. And when things don't go my way, do I thank God for how He blessed me anyway, or do I fall on my knees screaming 'woe is me' and resent the many silent blessings all around me?

Don't be smug about it. You know the answer. You know it because you do the same thing.

I said it wouldn't be nice and I meant it because the verse is a warning. To me, it's not just about overindulging, gluttony, or greed. It's about taking God's grace for granted. I take it for granted that He'll selflessly provide every day, and I take it for granted that my very condition is fully contingent on His grace. What's worse, when I don't get what I want I put on the mask of the idolater and curse that God didn't give me enough! I richly partake of what He grants to me, and then I don't eat and be filled with that. Instead, I thirst for more, I thirst to take His place and to scream "it's all about me!"

And so do you.

We let the sin of this world lie to us and we believe it. It tells us we don't need to stay on the straight and narrow, that we know better, that we are better. I'm not here to hammer you into a pulp, you worthless damn sinner. I'm a worthless damn sinner too, and it's a crushing thing. It's a crushing thing to see the Lord of the Universe in all his pristine majesty standing over me in my dirty, filthy rag clothes stained with all the wrongs I've ever done. It's an eternally humbling thing to realize that I am the sluggard who constantly wants more and doesn't know when to stop on my own. And it's an eternally grateful heart that sees God as He reaches down, in His grace, and takes my hand. He holds my scarred and stained hand in his own scarred, bloodstained hands and says "I love you." He takes my worthless damn sins and reminds me that He erased them, that He already paid the penalty I owed for them and that I don't need to fret about them anymore. Then He bids me to get up and try again.

That's where hope is, and where it always begins. If that weren't the case, there would be nothing in the world to live for. The verse doesn't say those words, but to me they're implicit in the meaning behind it. Be ye careful of thy ways, ye sinner, and remember that there is a God in heaven and He loveth thee. Scripture? Not hardly; just me pecking out a few 'thee's' and 'thy's.' What is scriptural is the warning, and the meaning – and the love – behind that warning. The world promises only more sluggard ways; the world promises only insufficiency; the world promises death. God promises much more. Hard work does always pay off in one way or another. His hard work has already paid us in full.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 24 February 2011

Flog a mocker, and the simple will learn prudence; rebuke a discerning man, and he will gain knowledge. Proverbs 19, verse 25.

Gee, these keep getting easier and easier! NOT. Let's tackle this one and 21:11 at the same time; that verse says, "When a mocker is punished, the simple gain wisdom; when a wise man is instructed, he gets knowledge." Similar, don't you think, with a few nuances to make them distinct. Chapter 19 says "flog" and chapter 21 says "punished." In 19, the man is "discerning" whereas in 21 he is "wise." Notice the contrasts where 19 says that "the simple will learn," while 21 says "the simple gain," and for the second clause 19 says the discerning man "will gain" while 21 says the wise man "gets." Finally "rebuke" and "instructed" are juxtaposed. Rebuking is instructive but not all instruction is rebuke. Like I said, nuances.

So much of life hinges on nuances, doesn't it? We read meaning into things that aren't meant for the reading. Intentions are misinterpreted. Words mean things and are often overlooked. Simple words like "I do," "I will" or "I swear" can get you married, in the military, on the witness stand, or on the podium behind the presidential seal where you may be ill prepared for what's up ahead. Even little differences can hold a lot of meaning, so when I notice the similarities between the two verses, I'm drawn to asking myself how and why they are slightly different.

The how is obvious: they use different words to convey similar meaning. It is for the writer's reason and his effect; Solomon knew what he was saying and why he was saying it. He was inspired to do so. That's the 'why' as well, I think: inspiration.

Still, it begs a few questions. One, does God really want to flog mockers so others can learn to be more cautious? If you've ever seen "The Passion of the Christ" think of the scene where Christ is being whipped in the courtyard: that's flogging. Does God really want that for people like me who mock Him? Answer: I won't speak for God. I think the point of the words is to show the lesson that flogging and punishment are done, in part, as examples for others. Ditto correction and instruction. Notice too that the verses don't insinuate that simple people are not wise, nor does it say that the wise are not simple. There is truth both ways because so many of us are both, and neither. That's good truth for me to remember. I don't 'walk the walk and talk the talk' very well, especially not at the same time. Just when I think I'm saying and doing things that are ok, I stick my foot in my mouth and say or do something stupid and it undoes any good I've done. More times than not, I've mocked what is Godly, right and good, and to be honest, I sometimes even deserve that flogging. Thanks be to Him that He's patient.

Another thing I ask is whether or not the wise and discerning need rebuke, or instruction? The obvious answer is "of course" because even the wisest among us still isn't perfect. Even the best of us make mistakes, some big, some not. And even the wisest among us still have much to learn. We all become weak in our faith from time to time, and we all are vulnerable, imperfect, and sometimes publicly stupid. Friends and people who care for us will correct, rebuke, instruct and guide us, even when it's harsh. Those who don't are either strangers or not too friendly. After all, some of the most unforgiving people anywhere are regular, public churchgoers.

Perhaps a bigger lesson, though, is that no matter how it's painted, God's word and his wisdom are in both the details and the bigger picture. He spells it out in different ways and different examples through wise inspiration so that we, the imperfect and many varied peoples, might understand Him a little bit at a time. He doesn't promise that understanding His word or His intentions will ever be easy; indeed, I find it is the most intellectually challenging thing possible more times than not. Nor does He promise that adhering to His words will ever be easy; think "flog the mocker" and 'rebuke the wise' and "take up your cross." If those are easy, I don't want to see tough! No matter how it's spelled, though, He does speak to us in many ways so that we can hear Him. He meets us on our level because this side of Heaven it'll be impossible for us to meet Him on His. We aren't God and never will be.

I hope you don't deserve a flogging and that your days of rebuke and instruction are few. Wherever you are, though, here's to hoping you know that He is still with you, and that through that you can gain knowledge, healing, and forward motion

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 28 February 2011

He who robs his father and drives out his mother is a son who brings shame and disgrace. Proverbs 19, verse 26.

I struggled with this verse most of the weekend. If you noticed, I didn't write one of these last Friday; I just couldn't latch onto what the verse was telling me. My parents and I always had a good relationship and I have little experience in robbing anyone. I suppose that we can rob people (especially our parents) figuratively instead of just literally, and if this is the case, then I'm very guilty of robbing them of time, affection, trust, and even sometimes loyalty. Everyone has regrets, and while I try to not dwell much on mine, I have them and they're real.

The biggest regret (and robbery) to which I'll confess is being unforgiving. That was the subject of this morning's devotion (in fact the last few mornings): forgiveness. For years, I robbed my parents of forgiveness. It took growing up to see that they were doing the best they could to be good parents when experience, economy and even faith were working against them. We always had enough to get by, but there was rarely little left over and they spent much of my youth very much in debt: a cycle I regrettably re-created with my own family. They were parents of the Depression when most of my peers had parents of the 50s and 60s. My own parents thought the whole Counterculture and Vietnam protesters were lazy cowards; I grew up to share similar opinions of similar creatures in my own generation. They didn't know how to be 'cool' and I wasn't mature enough to see that they didn't need to. And while I've been a mostly lifelong churchgoer, I haven't always been a very faithful witness or even devout believer. We were Sunday morning Christians for a very long time, and that's a hard legacy to grow from. It was hard to forgive these things that weren't really wrongs, but still affected me in ways I don't yet really understand.

I'm also sad to report I repeated the cycle of un-forgiveness in that there are people in this world against whom I've held grudges. Some are former managers, one is a pastor, two are former lovers, many are faithful churchgoers (some of the most unforgiving people anywhere), a few were school bullies, and there are even family. One of the hardest things I've ever had to learn was not just to admit my wrongs and not be afraid of them. A harder thing to learn is how to forgive. It's so hard to let go of the anger, guilt, resentment, shame and hurt of things done to you. It's hard, too, to realize that some people are dysfunctional and that you were simply the target of their dysfunction, their sin; it could have been anyone but it happened to be you. It's hard to admit that some things were unintended, but couldn't be retracted. And it's hard as well to admit that some of the people who we counted on weren't our friends, and that the things they promised in the winter were still frozen over in the summer.

It's even harder to forgive yourself. The reminders of your sins are only a memory away; sometimes they're in everything you see around you. Sights, scents, movements: you're reminded of things you did wrong and that you need to let go of. In pastoral counseling once I was told to just leave my sins at the cross. It was the correct advice but the pastor was lacking in sharing just how to practically accomplish that; the spiritual platitudes simply ran into cold reality. Some of those sins hurt deeply and molded me into who I am today. I wear the hurt like a warm fur coat, and on cold days like today, it feels good as it envelops me and keeps out what I don't want to feel. Even as I know that hurt, that guilt, is deceptive in its warmth, it's hard to release it. Difficult as it is to swallow, that lack of self-forgiveness is selfish. It's like saying "I need to do this because it's about me." What is it the song says? "I wrapped my fear around me like a blanket...I sailed my ship of safety till I sank it."

But in devotion this weekend, we talked about how forgiveness is turning over to God the hurt, guilt, anger and shame of our actions. Even as we confront the people who have wronged us, we turn over the emotion of those wrongs to God and say "please take this for me. I know I did wrong but I can't handle it and you can and I need you." Even if all we can do is pray for their forgiveness, that act of involving God is still the same. We still ask Him to intercede. If I mull it long enough, perhaps I'll even get it through my wooden head & heart that, when I confront myself with the hurts I still cling to, I still need to tell myself that I didn't mean to, or that I was wrong, and that I still need God to take that hurt away from me because I need Him and I can't do it on my own anymore. We may not forget them, and those reminders may not even go away. Those consequences may go on and on. But some of the slate is wiped clean and our hearts, my heart, can be repaired to be whole and filled once more.

And that's where the robbery can end. I know my sins are forgiven. I know the Son of God counts me as one of His friends, and that He daily, constantly implores me to set aside what I haven't forgiven and rely on Him alone. If I've hurt you and haven't gotten around to talking with you about it, please know you're on my list and, God willing, we'll get together and maybe have the opportunity to share forgiveness, to set accounts free. If we don't get that opportunity, please know you're in my prayers. We all carry around enough hurt and pain; isn't it time to do something about it? I don't

know about you, but I'm tired of robbing others of forgiveness. It's just as bad as if I robbed them of their money. At the start of a new month tomorrow, I believe it's time to do better.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 1 March 2011

Stop listening to instruction, my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge. Proverbs 19, verse 27.

We're struggling with the near-future here at Chez Terry. Last night, we were discussing options for Youngest Daughter after graduation. Said daughter is a senior in high school and will be leaving the nest in a few months. She's stalled for months on making any permanent decision, mainly out of fear. College, work, military? Who knew? She stonewalled every time the subject was introduced until she finally ran out of time. We gave her until last night to mull it around, then said there would be a sit-down calm talk to discuss what's next. We talked for over an hour and reached a few conclusions.

At such a time, there are many things to say, many morsels of advice to share, but I'll just stick with the one from today's verse: you stray from knowledge when you stop listening. It's a choice, you know, to turn off our ears, to close our hearts and stray from the words of knowledge. It's a choice whether or not to love, and when we do love, it is because we choose to. Therefore, in order to love, we also choose to listen to instruction. Just like she chose to stall (and we chose to let her), we each choose to listen to things that can build us up, tear us down, or do something in-between.

And the instruction never stops. High school is ending for my daughter, and college (some kind of college) will start in a few months; through both, the instruction only stops if we stop listening. One day she'll be done with that too, but the instruction never stops unless we count ourselves out. We've talked before about how the learning never ends, and that's true. We always continue to learn, but today let's step back and acknowledge that we only learn when our ears, hearts, and minds are open to hearing it. The lessons come as they will, whether we're receptive to them or not, but I find that if we close our ears, hearts, and minds, it simply makes things much harder to accept.

The alternative is dire because, frankly, it's a hard old world and that hard old world doesn't give a flip whether we succeed or fail. "Stray from the words of knowledge" is, to me, a kind way of saying 'death.' That's what it is: to stray from God's love and wisdom is to court death. It is to choose the ways of man over the ways of God, and that never leads to a happy ending. It's easy to do, to choose poorly or unwisely, to choose things that lead us away from what we know is right and true. I've been there and done that; I've suffered much of my life living the consequences of making bad choices, and I've hurt the people I love the most, hurt my God, and mostly hurt myself by doing those things. At the start of her adult life, I want my daughter to remember that it's easy to fall off a narrow path.

I also want her to know that you aren't a prude if you stay on that narrow path. Believers get a much-deserved bad rep continue in that so many in the 'outside world' look at the faithful as a bunch of lily white do-gooders. Saccharin squares who spout off Scripture and wouldn't say s*&^ if they had a mouthful. I laugh at that now, considering I regularly worship with profane, beer drinking, overweight, Nascar-loving, classical music talented, vigorous, unethical, sagely, educated and illiterate thieves, adulterers, killers, swindlers, liars, cheaters and generally bad rats. And that's just the lay leaders! I've said it before: what do you call such a group? Answer: a church. We struggle with sin but side with God. We work hard, repent when we're wrong, do our best, believe fully, and try to live out that belief in a skeptical world.

At the end of last night's discussion, we reached several conclusions. Youngest Daughter's first choice involves wanting to go to an out of state college, so it was left that she needs to do the application this week; ACT must be scheduled for next month and we have to line up housing. A backup plan is that she'll move out and attend a local college here in Texas; that too has to happen immediately. I gave her the option of the military or civilian work, but she didn't want to do that. Until this year, she wasn't a very diligent student and has found out that all those "do your homework" nags weren't just so we could hear our dulcet voices. Now, she's paying for it in that her senior GPA is good, but when totaled throughout all of high school it's another story. Her choices are limited, and she's scared to start out on her own. Reality is setting in and it's telling her that the real world is dead ahead. I hope she finds some comfort in knowing that the learning may be over for high school, but learning in the bigger world always continues. She's bright, smart, witty, talented, and in my opinion the prettiest girl in school. Her future will be bright as long as she's open to listening and learning.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 2 March 2011

A corrupt witness mocks at justice, and the mouth of the wicked gulps down evil. Proverbs 19, verse 28.

Do we each mock at justice and are you and I are corrupt witnesses? Admit it: you've told white lies to get yourself out of a pinch. I have too. I hate a liar and I hate even more when I have done it myself. If I'm gonna be honest with you now then I have to tell you that I've lied in the past. I've lied to my wife and kids, to other women, to friends, to family, to strangers, online and for no good reason other than my own vanity or my fear. Big lies, small lies, big fat liar. And if I tell you that, even now, I don't think of taking the easy way out when confronted with crises, I'd be lying to you again. After all, sometimes it's hard in the spotlight and even harder when nobody is looking. Just ask Charlie Sheen.

Walk up to your pastor and ask him how his week was. 90% of the time he or she will say "fine" or "good" or "ok" and they're being polite. They're also lying to you because everyone has up's and down's. Ask your kids if they took the cookies out of the pantry and they'll probably say "no" and they're lying to you. Turn on the network news and half of what they report is half-truth; the other is suspect or a lie. And, husbands, when your wife says "does this make my butt look fat," what will be your reaction? If you're clever with your response or mangle a syllable, well, I bet I know what happens. One of my favorite movie lines (from "Wild America") is "you know what a white lie is? It's a lie." Great line, and it's the truth about the untruth.

Our lies are evil and we gulp them down while vomiting them out. We are each liars in our own ways and we are corrupt through and through with it. If you don't think you are, take a good long look in the mirror before you answer. We are. In the light of all this negativity, the verse seems pretty hopeless, doesn't it. Some of the Proverbs are simply stark observations on the reality of life. It hurts to read things that are harsh and convict us. Sorry, everyone, but that's a very real part of faith.

Here's another real part of it, namely when we show the other side of that mirror. Let's do a little word substitution to reveal the opposite side of this very convicting reality. 'A perfect witness reflects justice, and the mouth of the righteous gulps love.' Sweet, isn't it, almost sickeningly so. I won't take liberties with God's word and I won't be bold enough to insinuate 'that's the point.' But if the mirror reflects truth back at us, and we see the negative in what the verse obviously says, then we have to see a harsh truth to which we need to adhere. That harsh dark cloud has a silver lining, though, in that there is just as powerful a message in what it doesn't say as what it does.

Sure, it's a stretch, and I appreciate you're walking through it with me. We're Americans, we're free, and this is the 21st century, not 7th century Mecca. God's word hasn't changed since He gave it to us, but our uses for it have. Sadly, too, liars, corrupt witnesses, and mockers of justice who gulp down evil haven't changed much since Adam, Eve and Cain. The sin is the same, whether it's a little white kindergarten lie or a big, fat Federal government type. Another thing that hasn't changed is the love of God who forgives all our weaknesses, faults, and lies. He stands in front of us and holds up that mirror to show us our wrongs, to convict us with them, because He's also saying, "believe in me because I forgive you." He believes in us even when we deny the obvious truth of his existence and try to find cute excuses to not acknowledge that He is who He says He is. He believes in us despite the ways we try to deny the truth of his word. And He believes in us even when we don't believe in ourselves, even when we don't feel we can stand on honesty alone.

That's the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth...so help me God.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 3 March 2011

Penalties are prepared for mockers, and beatings for the backs of fools. Proverbs 19, verse 29.

Not surprisingly, I struggle with this verse. Isn't that the case with most of Scripture: our nature fights against it. So many verses explain how God is love, and how He wants only love and the best for us. So many others also talk about how He disciplines those He loves. There are whole chapters in Old Testament books that talk about God smiting people, about God acting against ancient Israel's enemies, about Him meting out justice against wrongdoers. He wasn't a deity on the sidelines back then and He isn't now. He is engaged in the fight for our souls.

The point where I'm struggling is in asking myself, "does God actually punish us?" Does God punish us when we mock Him, or when we do foolish things, or is it that He removes Himself from the equation and lets the natural consequences of sin play out as they do? Is bankruptcy a punishment for the spendthrift, or is it the natural consequence of personal irresponsibility? Is AIDS a punishment for sexual promiscuity, or is it just a disease you get from unprotected sex? If you lose your job, is it punishment for not doing more to secure your position, or is it the fluctuations of a changing job market? If you're constantly unhappy or miserable, is that a punishment for bad choices or a consequence of choices that resulted in things you didn't foresee? Like so many other fundamental issues of faith, this is a question for the ages.

Here in my house, that's teen ages specifically. Teenagers live here, so the concepts of consequences and punishment are always close to my heart. Sure, kids of all ages present challenges, but until you have teenagers, you ain't seen nothin' yet. I go back and forth over how much my reactions to bad behavior should be punishment, and whether or not it's more effective to simply let natural consequences take the place of that punishment. As a parent, you do your best to re-train the constant mocking, sarcasm, rebellion and general disorder that comes from growing up. The punishments you administered to the kids when they were little are no longer effective when they become young adults. You're forced to learn how to reason differently, how to appeal to their sense of reason. One way is to spell out what could happen if they choose X or Y. The hard part is to hold your ground when they actually do mess up, to actually let the phone be turned off when they don't pay for it, follow through on the promise that they won't go to Six Flags, to let them fail Spanish (even though the teacher was a troll), to let them live in the questionable situation with the gangstas, or to let them spend that night in jail.

That's hard to do because it's where the proverb comes into play. In a hard, cruel and fallen world, penalties really are prepared for mockers, and beatings really are given to the backs of fools. Mock the law and face the penalty; foolishly push too far and someone may beat you down to size. God's justice is not our justice, and more and more I believe that, where most free will is concerned, God plays the parent and we play the teenager. He says "well, you can do that but Z could happen." When we do 'it,' Z happens and He stands out of the way. Sometimes it hurts, too, for both of us I think. In those times, He's still there, still speaking to our consciences and hearts, still saying "none of that matters because I love you. Try again."

That's the model I'm trying to learn as a parent, to act as an earthly stand-in for the Almighty. No, I'm not playing God or even claiming to be like Him. I'm simply saying that He is a parent and so am I, and I get to follow His example. Kids can do some strange, amazing and downright shocking things when they become teenagers. The penalties for misbehavior become adult penalties yet they are given to people who physically, emotionally, and legally aren't yet adults. And it really is a cruel world out there. In so much of the world, teenagers are indeed adults. In Uganda, I saw kids who weren't even teens raising other, smaller kids; if not them, who would do it? In the 'hood's of LA, Dallas and Miami, real kids are really beaten or murdered every day by real punk street thugs who want to use them and spit them out. Life and death really do play out every day, and in our world, the latter is all too often the consequence for bad decisions.

So perhaps the best thing we can do as parents is to keep the faith, keep praying, and keep teaching our kids the best we can. Teach them about their Maker, (as Christ taught) teach them to be shrewd as snakes but as innocent as doves, and prepare, fuel and equip them to make the best decisions they can in each moment. A world set against them will try to pull them apart, so they must be ready to stand firm and fast. God may not punish them when they slip and fall, but it's more than likely that He'll let them slip so they can see how they, like me, always need His help and guidance.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 4 March 2011

Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise. Proverbs 20, verse 1

Everything in moderation: to me, that's an implied message in this verse. Notice that it doesn't say "no drinking allowed" or "you're damned if you drink" or even "Baptists must drink in the closet." I enjoy wine, beer and the occasional cocktail. I have little toleration for people who use Scripture to ram home their personal belief that people shouldn't drink, but here's a point where Scripture clearly tells us to watch what we do.

It does that because alcohol deadens our senses. It eases our inhibitions to say and do things we might not otherwise do if we're in better control of them. This is a no brainer, right? What's more, it's a good, common sense set of white lines. Face it: the laws prohibiting substance abuse are in place for good reason. Drink and drive and you're a hazard to yourself and others. Drink before or during work and you're unproductive and costly. Drink to excess at home and your home life will fall apart.

So why do so many of us worship at the altar of a good time? Fallen nature, I suppose. God knows I've done enough of it myself. I can regale you with many, many stories of famous times when my chief instigators were the grape and a crowd. "Think I'm gonna go down to the well tonight and I'm gonna drink till I get my fill." That's Bruce Springsteen. "Gonna get drunk and be somebody." That one is Toby Keith. Van Gogh, Manet and Toulouse-Latrec were brilliant when under the influence of absinthe. Some of the funniest stories I've ever heard are of my grandfather's prodigious thirst and the things he did while satisfying it. And, get this: the most enjoyable Bible studies are the ones I've been attending the last few months where we discuss movies and their Biblical themes while consuming themed meals and generous quantities of red wine.

Why do we do this to ourselves? Again, back to that fallen nature. It helps to deaden the nerves, I suppose, maybe provide the illusion of escape. Being one who lives a life under stress, I understand this. Too often, I'm one of those people who has a drink to complement my day. I'm not usually a multiple drink user, but too often a day on the calendar won't go by without me having at least one drink. Do I feel I need it? No, not really. Do I want it? Yes. Does that make me an alcoholic? Technically, it does.

That's the point of the proverb: that this isn't wise. It is unwise to trust our judgment to a substance that can rob us of it. It is unwise to think that we 'need' something to take away our hurt, stress, guilt, anguish, or worry, or that we need something to help us have a good time. We can logically extrapolate that out to mean that it's unwise to use alcohol, drugs, or anything that will substitute false comfort for God's comfort. God wants us to turn to him when we're hurt, stressed or the like. He doesn't say "don't drink," but He does say "be careful. Rely on me instead." He cautions us because letting something else take control of us can lead us astray. That 'something' here is obviously alcohol, but let's keep it real and say that it could be anything that trips your trigger. Booze, drugs, porn, work, family, hobbies, work, people: anything could become an addiction. The larger point advises caution.

Please don't walk away from this, though, thinking that I'm guiltig you into feeling bad if you have a beer, especially since I have exactly zero room to preach. I love me some beer with my friends; love me some pinot with family even more. I'd be a lying hypocrite (and closet drinker) if I ragged on you while pouring myself a tall one. But as with so many things which God teaches us, here He reasons and implores 'moderation, people.' Everything in moderation. On a Friday after pay day, that's a good thing to remember. Besides, for the judgmental among us, don't forget that Christ's first public miracle was turning large volumes of water into wine; that's not a metaphor or a coincidence. It's an enjoyable gift He gave us to use wisely. Tonight, I may just have a glass of red, or I may not; we'll see where the hours of the day lead.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 7 March 2011

The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out. Proverbs 20, verse 5.

I skipped ahead a few verses because I've already commented on ones that were similar to 2 and 3, and I'll write about 4 tomorrow. This verse is speaking to me today, about love and forgiveness.

There are people who know me better than others, but only God knows my whole heart. The people closest to me don't really know all of me. I've been in love a few times, and yet even those dear women didn't know all of my heart because I didn't let them. I've only let a very select few get in closer, and yet even to them I haven't revealed all of me. I can say I've only let two, maybe three, people be really, truly intimate with me, intimacy being a real connection at the heart instead of just physical passion. Even they, I'm afraid, don't fully, truly know the real me.

That's not to say that I haven't loved, or that I've not shared the purposes of my heart with others. I have, or at least as best I could. When I've become friends, I've tried to be the best friend I could even when time, circumstance and choices seem to work against it. Yet when I've said "I love you," I meant it, even when those saying it in return truly didn't, and even when I knew they didn't. I do believe in love at first sight, but the real, lasting, forever love is the kind that comes with full submission to the other's feelings. After all, love isn't a word to waste, or to say lightly. Hence, when I have held back, it is like I have not made full disclosure, like I have not always been fully honest; I recently wrote about lies and white lies. I, like you, have told them. When it comes to matters of the heart, though, that's never been a lie even as the matters of my own heart are ones I have rarely, fully shared.

It's never been a lie because the only person who fully knows my heart, who fully dives and sails the deep waters is God. We as people simply do not have that capacity. Given our natural bent towards evil, I don't believe we ever could this side of heaven. I'm a man of understanding, or at least I try to be. I've spent most of my life trying to understand myself, trying to improve what I've done poorly or better who I am. I pare away the motives for things I've said, thought or done, and I've done it to learn, to hopefully do better. It's hard to draw out things you've buried for years, trying to analyze and get your arms around them so they cannot vex or trouble you any more. But it's a task I keep on doing, and it's one reason I haven't shared fully everything I could. Some things about me, I'll admit, I don't even understand. They're buried because they hurt. I know people who buried things about their own past to the point that they no longer even remember them. In some ways, I think that's the case with me. There are things that bother me for reasons I don't even know why, and there are reasons why I am as I am but I don't know yet what those reasons are. I may never know.

But I don't have to because God does. As I said, only He fully knows all of my heart; only He fully knows my motives. It's the reason why I can trust him and believe in His words, promises and advice. He knows me completely, and understands even what I don't. He knows what I've been through, and what I will go through. Even when I don't understand things about myself or about this life, He does. And because He does know me, and does want the best for me, He constantly challenges me to do that which I've failed to do, namely to love as He does fully and without reservation. He challenges me, through His love, to share the deep purposes of my own heart and to do so as a witness for Him.

It's a lifelong conundrum you see, a struggle for all the ages, as old as Adam and Eve.

It's a hard thing to love sometimes. It's a difficult thing to fully expose your heart and trust it to someone knowing full well that they could stomp on it at any moment, that they could willfully do something that they believe is for the best that will leave you heartbroken and alone. It's a hard thing to love unconditionally and, as I've learned, it's impossible to do without God in your life. And I've not done it nearly enough, or with a full and yielding spirit. It has kept me from repairing healthy relationships while care-tending others that aren't. Today will be a new day. Today I'll resolve to be a better man, a better mate, and a better love. I'm a frail human sinner, and that keeps me from being as God, but I wouldn't want to be Him. I never can be. Instead, I'll work to better model the way He loves and share a little more, be a little more, give a little more, and love a little more. Maybe then the deep waters that enfold all my purposes will be brighter and warmer instead of the cold dark they had once become.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 8 March 2011

It is to a man's honor to avoid strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel. Proverbs 20, verse 3.

If it is to our honor to avoid strife, what is to our dishonor? If we rush to strife, are we dishonorable? A big part of my psychological makeup is being co-dependent; I've discussed this before. I'm a fixer. I flock to people who, like me, have problems in their lives and I befriend them. To be friendly and caring to another person, and to increase one's circle of friends, I think this is a good thing. There is love and honor in it. To take on their strife, however, and to try to solve their problems for them brings dishonor. If we aren't careful, I'm liable to take on your issues, problems, junk, or things that just bother me (but may not actually bother you) and try to solve them. If I rush to do that, not only am I not helping you in the long run, but I'm also publicly doing something that can't be defended. We each have the tools with which to deal with our junk; for starters, we each have a private channel & conduit to God: prayer. It's not up to me to 'fix' someone else because let's face it: they don't need an unfixed me trying to do it! To sum up this little nugget, it isn't honorable to rush to strife in this way.

What about trying to stop strife across the world? Government social programs, intervening in other countries' affairs: are these dishonorable? Without 'going there' I think a reasonable argument could be made that it's easy for government to cross the thin line between honor and dishonor when social engineering or nation-building aren't the rightful functions of government. But is it dishonorable in intent? I say no. Intentions are good; it's that follow through that paves the road to hell with them. To sum this one up, it may or may not be honorable.

What about a mission trip. After all, what business is it of mine if people in some far off land are starving to death? Their government, their culture, their system got them into the situation....except...that it's also an affront to God to let your brothers and sisters suffer when you know you can help and should. There is honor in giving, and helping others get by or learn to do so on their own. Here I see honor in rushing to strife.

Firemen, our military, policemen, rescue workers: strife-rushers of honor without compare. In my book, throw in single moms, fathers who commit all, brothers and sisters who raise their brothers and sisters, and the people who make sandwiches at homeless shelters. These people rush to the front to take up their physical and spiritual arms and bring battle to the enemy no matter what that enemy is. They wear their honor as a matter of course.

But what about that larger, underlying concept of honor itself? In a place where Jersey Shore, Charlie Sheen, and the newest Ipad are a primary focus, is the concept of honor still valid? How can we be honorable in such a world? Not long ago, an online detractor called me on my honor during a debate. It was her way of changing the subject (thus signaling her surrender due to the weakness of her position) but it got me thinking. She yanked me by saying that, as a Christian, I shouldn't post, on a Facebook page, icons that showed I liked a movie like "The Hangover" (which I thought was rude, crude, socially unacceptable and so funny that I cried). I quickly responded to the vapidness of her tactic but her larger point stuck with me and I'm glad it did. It questioned my honor.

As a daily witness in the world, if you look at me and don't see a reflection of who God wants me to be, then I'm not bringing honor on Him, I'm sending conflicting messages, and I'm being hypocritical. If what I think, say or do tears someone down without lovingly trying to build them up, honor is lost. It was the apostle Paul who insinuated that he would try to be all things to all people if it would win them over for Christ. Shouldn't we try to do the same? I'm not advocating being untrue to yourself (neither was Paul), or to be someone you're not. But shouldn't our message at least be consistent, and shouldn't we be willing to do anything within our reasonable power to advance that message? If a person of different or weaker faith looked at me, would she see a witness for something better or would she see just another Joe caught up in a bunch of things of questionable value? It's a tough line to walk, but it comes with living as a member (and not an outsider) of a fallen and struggling world.

And about that fool quick to quarrel: guilty here on that one too. I'm a work in progress and learning that not every battle is worth fighting, not every argument is worth debating, and not every point is worth winning. In time I hope to look less like a fool and more like a man of honor. How about you?

So, I removed the 'like' button from The Hangover, but I'll still say it was one of the raunchiest, funniest movies I've ever seen. Yes, I caved to the pressure of a person making an inferior argument about a superior subject, mainly because she (badly) made a point. Feel free to check out my online page and nitpick at it, though if you do you'll also see I like "24" (about killing rogue bad guys), "The Sopranos" (about the mob and chock full of bad language), "Almost Famous" (a brilliant Cameron Crowe movie about hedonistic rock stars and coming of age), and "Forrest Gump" (which is the story of

my life). Some of these have questionable material in them but I'm owning them, not deleting them. Some of you have questionable material in your past too. So do I. I believe the trick for both of us is to strive to live our lives to the fullest while avoiding the creating of strife in this world where we don't need to. In doing so, we bring honor to us and maybe some honor to God as well. He tells us to be in the world, not about the world. That isn't a constantly renewing 'get out of jail free' card nor is it an excuse for bad behavior. It's just our predicament. In for a penny, in for a pound: that's my approach, and I won't touch your penny if you don't touch my pounds but we can both hold our heads up high if we do it with the right heart.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 9 March 2011

A king's wrath is like the roar of a lion; he who angers him forfeits his life. Proverbs 20, verse 2.

The word 'king' conjures up a few thoughts that I'd like to share centering on anger and, I think, helping to explain the proverb. I'll steer clear of any mention of the governmental aspect of kingship because I've thought a lot about anger instead. On the treadmill today, I listened to a lot of loud rock music to keep me going. Theory of a Dead Man, AC/DC, My Chemical Romance: "so tuck in your clothes or strike a violent pose, maybe they'll leave you alone but not me." It's angry, violent music with a driving beat that gets your heart moving. The tune may be intoxicating but so are the words, and that's dangerous.

You see, I'm nobody's king. In youth culture today, there's this thing for teenage girls to find a boyfriend and say, "he's my king." I think it's insipid. I want my kids, especially my daughters, to be strong, independent, Godly, and wise. They need no earthly king in their lives except He who is the King of Kings. It's the same for me. I fear no man here and will have nobody rule over me except Him to whom every knee will bow. In my house, though, as the man of the house, I'm also the biblical leader, so maybe there's a hint of kingship after all. Like other mortals, kings also have emotions and every now and then those emotions bubble up, especially when you're vulnerable. When they do, they point to a need for forgiveness.

Lately, I've felt vulnerable. I've been very sick for a few weeks and am only now getting better. Over the weekend, I had an argument with someone close to me that affected me, left me feeling angry. That anger fed itself and opened up other wounds. A couple of days ago, I posted a very long poem I had written months ago, one brimming with anger and rage. I write a lot of poetry in my spare time, and to be honest, this one is very good. The meter and rhyme are well timed; the language is descriptive and edgy; the flow is like a lyric, almost melodic. It's as close to rap music as I've ever written, and the more I review it, the more I see it's also one of the best pieces I've ever done. Like a good rap song, it has strong undertones of threat and rage.

I'm very ashamed of it. I think the best place for this well-written bit of verse is not online, but instead in a deep, dark vault. The poem is about the anger I held inside over a destructive relationship that ended last year. I risked so much to have this relationship and destroyed much more. It cost me my family, my marriage, many of my friendships, my dignity, my honor and almost my faith. At one point, this person even told me she wanted me to think of her as my queen; I should have listened to the clanging warning bells. To have her in my life, "I became somebody nobody would trust with anybody." I hated myself for what I became, what I did. To say it ended badly is to just begin with all the negative things I could and should say about it. To say I'm ashamed of what I did underplays shame. Despite counseling, working back from the edge of suicide, and despite many successes since, I started to bury all this anger and bitterness. It seethed inside me, unaddressed and unforgiven. So, like Sauron with his ring, I poured my all rage and cruelty into my words.

Now, even though I am satisfied that it captured all I wanted it to say, I'm ashamed to have said it, ashamed even to have shared it. I'm ashamed to have let loose my king's anger for no good reason other than to have vented it. Yes, I know that it's good to constructively let go of anger, but the depth of rage I felt over being hurt so badly surprised even me. I'm ashamed to have held onto it. I'm thankful that all that's happened from it was a poem. It could be much worse. I'm not given to violence, but if pressed I wouldn't want to learn if I'm wrong. I'd rather keep the beast chained up, de-fanged and powerless to hurt again.

In the year hence, there are many blessings for which I am thankful; blessings of love and kindness and forgiveness that neither deserve nor thought possible. There has been reconciliation, and friendships on which I could rely. The subject of devotions for the last week has been forgiveness, and I see now that this is no coincidence. The devil is a coward, striking at us where we're vulnerable; for me, this time it was in my anger. He doesn't strike where we're strong, namely on our full frontal breastplate of forgiveness. God forgives each of us and he wants us to forgive each other...and ourselves. When we believe in Him, He doesn't hold our sins against us and He doesn't want us to either; there are enough people who will do that anyway. His forgiveness is unassailable, unshakeable. God forgave us through Christ because He knew we couldn't combat desperate, angry evil all on our own and because He wants us to live with Him forever. He forgives us and remembers our sins no more and He wants us to do the same, even to ourselves. This week, when the anger came at me, I reacted, then talked it through with several people, then saw my need to forgive. I went to God again, asking Him to forgive me, and for the strength and love to do the same to others, even to 'her.'

As regards that woman in the poem, she's a closed book and that's a good thing. I haven't seen her in almost a year. To paraphrase the rabbi's prayer from "Fiddler on the Roof," 'may the good Lord bless and keep her...far, far away from me.'

I can't confront her in person because I don't want anything to do with her, but I hope she knows I forgive her for the wrongs she did. Without doing that, I couldn't move on. It's what God modeled for us and wants me to do. I hope she can do the same, but whether she forgives or not is almost a moot point. I can move on and am thankful to be doing so, to be repairing some of the damage done and building something better.

A king's wrath is like the roar of a lion; he who angers him forfeits his life. One need not wear a crown to be a king; one need not even be honorable, or a lion. One need only be an all too human, confused grown man in the ghetto suburbs of north Texas. I pray this anger never sees the light of day again. At least it won't today. I finished my workout by turning to a different song. Jim Reeves was crooning that "it is no secret what God can do." I believe that, even when I have misplaced that belief from time to time. And when I got home, I took down the post and put the poem – and my anger – back on the shelf where they belong. Some of the anger is cooler, but I expect that, from time to time, it will percolate up again. At least it won't burn as much, or hurt as much, the next time it happens.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 10 March 2011

A sluggard does not plow in season; so at harvest time he looks but finds nothing. Proverbs 20, verse 4.

This is going to hurt you but I think you are a sluggard. Keep in mind that “sluggard” is defined by Webster as “a lazy person.” That makes you lazy, and I’ll say it again: I think you are a lazy sluggard. Keep in mind, too, that I don’t mean this as an insult (even though that’s what it is) and do mean it as a wake up call (which is also what it is). I know that it’s hard to hear, especially since you DO so much and you give, commit, and sacrifice so much. My question to you, even knowing all that you do and the wonderful friend and person you are, is, “do you do enough?” Have you plowed in season to sow a good crop?

Now let’s be fair. If you think I’m a lazy sluggard too, go ahead and call me that. I’ll help you: I AM a lazy sluggard. I work, I parent, I love, I share, I write, I do and I am STILL a lazy sluggard. I don’t do enough. I’m Elia Yelnats, the no good dirty rotten pig-stealing great-great-grandfather from “Holes.” How have I been lazy? I’ve squandered times when I could have shared some of Jesus with other people. I’ve held onto anger like a baby’s blanket, like I needed it. I’ve carried grudges so that people saw angst instead of angelic. I’ve bragged about worthless crap instead of boasting about what I really believe. I’ve been silent when I could have said something. Does all this sound familiar to you? Maybe have you done some of the same? If I know you, I believe I know your answer. Welcome to the lazy sluggard’s club. Take a seat of honor right here next to me.

So what is it that we don’t do enough, you and I? Share our faith, folks. Live our faith. We, the sluggards of the world, do not plow in season and make no mistake about it: THIS IS the season. At harvest time – at the end of each day and at the end of someone’s life – we could look back and find nothing. We would not have provided a crop for the harvest. We would not be able to be called rich, or admirable, or good. We would look back on our no good, dirty rotten, pig-stealing, great-great lazy sluggard lives and see that the fields are still fallow. When we could have lived out our love as kindness, and our understanding as peace, we instead lived our lives as people still caught up in a bunch of junk.

Let’s be clear on something, though, lest we let ourselves get sidetracked: we DO NOT earn our way into heaven. There is NOTHING you, me, or the Pope can do to earn God’s mercy and get our way into heaven. No Sunday tithe, no working with orphans, no singing the same mindless verses over and over, no good intentions of ours can DO anything for God to say “well done, come live with Me.” It just doesn’t work that way. He already earned us righteousness and gave it to us freely, not because He had to but because He loved us and wanted to.

You know where this is going, don’t you? Of course you do because of course there’s hope. There is ALWAYS hope, just like there was hope for the criminal on the cross next to Christ. There is still time for you to get better, change, live better, be more. If you have time to read this, then there is still time to say a prayer of thanks and ask for God’s help, then go out into your life today and try again. Be better. Live and love generously. Stop being spiritually lazy and start sowing good seeds for others to grow.

I’m reading a book (“The End of Reason”) that refutes atheism quite resoundingly and convincingly. One of the author’s quotes is from a conversation he had with Mother Theresa. He asked her, “do you tell people about Jesus every day?” Her answer was, “no, we just love them.” Her answer was perfect because just loving someone who doesn’t know Christ is perhaps the first, best way to show what He is all about. It is DOING something with that love. Practical faith living is about caring for others, listening, ‘being there,’ and loving them because you can. It IS doing something. The Apostle James (himself sort of familiar with Christ considering he was His half-brother) said that faith without works is dead. What he meant is that faith without demonstrating it in how we live our lives is useless, it is hypocritical and worthless. We don’t DO anything to get God’s favor: God gives us His favor in love because of His love and faith. But how we demonstrate that faith and love does matter. It is showing we love in return, in thanks, and in peace for others. It’s like farming to sow a crop of love in the world. Faith without works is dead; love without living it each day is sluggard and lazy.

And that brings us back to our proverb, and my mild insult to you. I apologize if I offended you, but I do hope it got you thinking. I’m betting that, every day, today even, there are more and better ways you could show God’s love for you. You don’t have to be some Jesus-jumping proselytizer with a Sunday morning Baptist vice-grip handshake and perfect hair. You also don’t have to wear sackcloth and ashes, or walk around with your head hung low in regret of all the things you’ve done wrong. Being a believer in God means understanding that He has forgiven us the guilt and shame of our wrongs and gives us the peace and strength to deal with the consequences we brought on ourselves from them. Being a believer in God means being REAL, being human, and being a true worshipper of Him by carrying ourselves honestly, fruitfully, and peacefully in a world where those are naturally foreign concepts.

The Christian season of Lent is now underway, a time for reflection, penitence and repentance. It is also a time to give thanks for something precious and wonderful, for a love so astounding and fulfilling that it could only be a gift from God himself. Now is a time to sow good seeds, especially since it's almost spring. Like me, if you've been a sluggard and want to avoid a bad crop, don't you think it's time to do something about it?

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 11 March 2011

Many a man claims to have unfailing love, but a faithful man who can find? Proverbs 20, verse 6.

This verse really slays you, doesn't it? We all say "I love you more than X, Y or Z" but who among us actually does have unfailing love, then actually proves it?

I think about my own fidelity. I don't have a good track record here. As a friend or as a husband, I have failed spectacularly, publicly and repeatedly at being faithful. I claim to have unfailing love because I do. Love is a blessing and a choice, and I'm blessed to have had it truly and honestly in my life. I'm blessed to have shared my heart with wonderful people, with wonderful women who gave their all. And I'm blessed to call many people across the world 'friend,' to know well hundreds of people whose colorful lives have made mine into a beautiful mosaic. But when I'm alone I might ask myself "are you unfailingly faithful?" I'd be lying if I said 'yes' because I haven't been. I have loved and lost and deserved it. I will be friends with anyone and yet some of my closest friends de-friended me or ended our friendship when I became toxic, and most have not resumed that relationship. My sins are legion and are well known to people who well know me. I can't even say I've always been a good representative of the faith. I don't hide my sins and won't let them define me any longer, but I also can't hold my head up and say that I've been loving or that my fidelity as man, husband or friend has been worthy of any praise.

I think about the kids in China and Uganda. For several weeks in my life, I was blessed to share the lives of dozens, hundreds of children who were total strangers yet changed my life forever, for the better. You go to visit these remote villages full of starving, needy people and you do what you can, do your mission, while you're there. When you leave, your heart and mind are full of them, and you vow to go home and try to do something, anything to help. Before long, you're back in the world you came from and back to HBO, Friday night pizza, weekly bills, daily work, and the soft apathy of comfort (which could also be called the soft comfort of apathy). You sit back and feel regret because you feel unfaithful to them, to what you felt overseas, who you vowed to God you would be. It's not that you're a bad person: you aren't, or at least you don't try to be one. But you feel just as unfaithful.

I think about the suffering that will be happening in the next few days in Japan, and all over the Pacific rim. Millions of people were displaced today, had their lives turned upside down; thousands are dead and more will die in the coming weeks. They will need help. You and I will pray for them; not being there and not being a part of it, perhaps that is the first, best thing we can do. But is there more we could do, more ways in which we could help to demonstrate that we care for those who need our care? We might donate to a charity, the Red Cross or a telethon; we might organize something through our churches. The statistical, sad truth, however, is that when aid organizations come looking for the faithful to step up and help in some way, those organizations probably won't find you or me. Our unfailing love will have failed in a small but meaningful way.

And then I think of the innocent, faithful man of unfailing love on the cross; a man who unfaithful, guilty and failed men hung there. He did nothing to be worthy of murder, but they murdered him. He lived openly, unabashedly, publicly, without reproach, and always taught in love, even when it was stern. And yet He was executed for a 'crime' that was no crime at all let alone a crime He did not commit. Through it all, when He could have raged and smitten His accusers, He prayed for them and forgave them. He demonstrated unimaginable faithfulness and unfailing love in His dying hours, and he took on my infidelity, our comfortable apathy, and our uncaring attitudes. He didn't have to: He chose to. He did it to show once and forever what unfailing love means, and where we can find a faithful man whenever we realize our need for Him.

That's why this is a very slaying thought. It's rightfully convicting to admit that I'm not God, that I don't love like Christ does, and that I don't always act, love, or live faithfully. But He does, and He does what I couldn't. Like the old hymn sings, "He bids me go through the voice of woe...His voice to me is calling. He walks with me and He talks with me and He tells me I am His own. And the joy we share as we tarry there none other has ever known." His example is faithful even when I've given up on fidelity, love, hope or charity, and His example always restores when I'm slain with it.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 14 March 2011

The righteous man leads a blameless life; blessed are his children after him. Proverbs 20, verse 7.

If this verse is THE rule of thumb, my children are toast. Their father, of himself and on his own, is anything but righteous. You know of my story; no need to keep rehashing it today. Let's just say I have more than your garden variety of sins and some of them are real doozies. In other words, we're alot alike, you and I. Of course I have some thoughts on the matter, and they're dedicated to my friend Deb, who's off to Russia on a mission trip this spring.

What about those poor orphans in Africa, Asia and South America? Or even here? If children are orphaned and disadvantaged, does that mean their parents were not blameless and were unrighteous? That's really a loaded question and we could answer it together with either broad generalizations or specific answers for specific scenarios. I prefer we do neither. Instead, how about we say that orphans need love, and orphans need mentors to follow. Most aren't to blame for their situation. If you are fortunate to mentor a child who has nobody else in the world, know that you're working a mission of love. You may not realize it but it isn't you doing the work: it is God working His way through you. What's even better than that is knowing that, because He's doing it, you neither have to do it all yourself nor do you have to worry that you won't be doing enough. He knows what He wants to accomplish through you, and whatever you do with a willing heart, at the end of each day it will be exactly enough.

But be warned: some of it will be frustrating. You will want a sign that things are happening and you may not get one. You will feel like you haven't done enough and not realize that it is the Deceiver trying to needle away God's success through you. You will feel like you let someone down, like you could have helped just one more person if only...if only...if only. You will be exhausted inside and out. And when you're exhausted, you will have moments when you find yourself all welled up in tears, and they may just flow when you least expect it. They will be tears of cleansing joy. They will be tears of celebration knowing that somehow, in some way God has moved and had His way through you in the lives of children you had never met before.

What about if you're righteous but far from blameless? Are your descendants not going to be blessed? This is the one where my kids should watch out because their parents aren't blameless, and neither of us are righteous either. It's like my kids have 2 strikes against them already. Here's a news flash: so did you. Whether you know it or not, your parents were good people in their own ways, but they weren't righteous. Neither are you. Personally, I'm one of the more un-righteous people I know of, so being blameless and upright for me is pretty much out of the question. Even if it weren't, though, on my own I couldn't be righteous. There are things I've done in this world that I don't even know of, things I don't even remember that would keep me from ever being anything close to righteous on my own. Thank God for the Savior who did that for us.

And because of that, when we live in ways that let His kindness show through, we are blessing those around us, especially our kids. What is it that Galatians 5 says? "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." When we let God work on us, when we give up holding onto our junk and let him replace it with His righteousness, we become the fruit. We start to want to act in different ways. Those Galatians behaviors become ways that we let that righteousness show. When we do that, our behavior becomes a blessing to others.

It doesn't have to be in big ways; you don't have to turn into Mother Theresa overnight. I think it would be better to start small, with just a smile and some human kindness. That way, the behavior stands a better chance of taking, of sinking in. We could listen more, speak softer, respond less, maybe lend a hand where we hadn't before. Kindness builds on kindness; God grows us steadily and it always produces good fruit in others, even when we don't see it or know how it happens. If you want to build yourself up in the eyes of others – while building yourself into a better person – then let God work through you. You may not be blameless, but other people may just think so.

And if someone thinks good of me, well, who am I to tell them different? I won't let it go to my head (or at least I'll try to not), but I'll gladly give you a smile in return for a compliment and maybe say, "oh, it's nothing" or "not me, it wasn't me." I'm not trying to be coy: I'm simply not wanting to take credit for something I didn't do. God through me; God through you. Not a bad way to live our lives, don't you think?

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 15 March 2011

When a king sits on his throne to judge, he winnows out all evil with his eyes. Proverbs 20, verse 8.

I started writing this yesterday evening; I like to write them ahead of time if possible. It was nearly complete and then events of the evening took me in a different direction, one that still segues off verse 8. You see, we are all kings and we are all both privileged and responsible for winnowing out evil with our eyes. God gives us these verses as tools to use in our lives here and now, and this one I believe speaks about more than just a king, president or leader, or even as an allegory to God Himself as our ultimate king. No, I read it to mean that each of us is like a king, responsible for perceiving and judging the evil that happens in the kingdom of our lives, and for rooting it out so we can avoid it or learn from it. It is important because we're the first line of defense against the sins that would trip us up. Satan is a coward who won't usually attack us head on in the areas where we're strong, but he will continually attack us with his petty little evils in the areas where we are weak.

For me, one petty, insidious and destructive evil is un-forgiveness. Last night it came home to roost, and it did so in the context of these Proverbials. I send these out via email, Facebook, and WordPress blog to (literally) thousands of people every day. Last night I received a message from a lady on my email list asking to be removed. Of itself, that's no big deal, and I immediately granted her request. After all, she wasn't the first person who asked for this and probably won't be the last. But her request, specifically the terse way in which she asked it, upset me. She and her family are people that my family have known as close friends since the early 1990s. Our families spent quite a lot of time together during our years in Colorado. We were best friends, and helped each other through some tough times. As so often happens, when we moved to Texas, we started to drift apart. When all my sins yet again came home to roost last year, she ended our friendship. I couldn't really blame her; I had been toxic and a very public sinner. I had been a hypocrite. As an olive branch, I recently added her to my email list, but then yesterday I received her abrupt request.

It upset me because we had been friends for so long and share both that common history and faith in God. I suspected she'd been angry with me about what I did last year, and I knew that she had good reason to be. But she never told me so, and I never asked. One person's sins affect so many others. I talked it over with several people last night, and was rightly told that I might still seem hypocritical. I'm not always good at walking the walk and talking the talk; it happens to most of us. I hope I don't come across as holier than thou, or as a hypocrite here but, instead, as a fallen, fallible man who is learning to apply God's wisdom in many ways. It might not seem like that to my now-removed friend, though. We aren't in the same place anymore, either in the same town or on the same spiritual level. That's ok; it happens in our crazy mixed up world. When it does, it becomes easy to judge based on incomplete perceptions, and then reach conclusions that may not be wholly accurate.

It also upset me because I read into her request and found un-forgiveness. More than that, it pointed, yet again, to my own fault in being unforgiving towards others. She doesn't know what we've been through, and I can't reasonably expect her to. What I've done in life wasn't done to hurt or offend her specifically, but what I've done in life did affect her and probably did upset her. And instead of asking what I had done wrong, I held a grudge; her request only added to the anger. Aren't friends supposed to counsel you even when you do something wrong? Yes and no, and maybe only up to a point before, in friendship, they turn you over to the consequences of your wrongdoing. Here I too run the risk of making a judgment that might not be wholly accurate; after all, I don't know much about the situation in which she finds herself; it's that drifting apart thing, as much her responsibility as mine. It could be something serious, or her words could have simply been an off-the-cuff way of saying, "thanks but I don't need more emails than I already get." The only way to find out is to ask, and in God's good time, I hope to be able to do so in a way this is neither offensive nor proud. Here and now, I need to grant and ask for forgiveness. I think that, for most things, God wants us to do this in private, to build intimacy and trust. Sometimes, though, I believe He moves us to do it differently.

Wouldn't you then know it that today's devotion was about keeping our word to others, about keeping our many kinds of vows and how Christ tells us to let our "yes mean yes and our no mean no." No more and no less, we should mean what we say, then do it. In the context of the proverb, it includes looking in our lives for even the smallest evils and winnowing them out as if we are threshing chaff from wheat, bad from good. It goes back to that kingly responsibility for keeping to the straight and narrow, of keeping our word and forgiving others even if they don't do the same. With a genuine heart, again as Jesus taught, we are to do this as many times as is necessary, seeking forgiveness from others where we have wronged them, forgiving ourselves as God forgave us, and granting forgiveness freely and fully when we have been wronged.

The time to do that is now. If I have acted hypocritically, or if I have written these words in a way that seems self-serving or proud, please forgive me and I ask you to accept my heart-given apology. Hurting you with my words has never been my intention, nor are these writings some personal soapbox on which I can trumpet out my thoughts. Throughout my adult life, several people have suggested I enter the ministry, but I've rebuffed their suggestions by saying that I don't believe I have those talents or that calling. Just last night I was saying that I would LOVE the weekly forum of speaking to hundreds of people, but like I said, I just don't feel that calling from God. I can't do that...but in my own way, these writings are a small ministry of their own. I hope and pray that God speaks to you through them because all I am is a scribe and a storyteller for Him using this available forum. On my own, I'm neither righteous nor perfect, and I'm betting I do indeed sound like a hypocrite from time to time. I pray that it's different for you.

And I pray for my friend too. It is my wish and desire that she and I can become friendly again, or remain friends through a tough patch. I hope she can forgive me for whatever wrong I did to her. I freely and here publicly do the same.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 16 March 2011

Who can say, "I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin?" Proverbs 20, verse 9.

If this isn't a question for the ages, then I don't know of one. It speaks for itself; it needs no commentary from me, you, or Billy Graham. Naturally, though, I have a couple of questions and I don't want to come off as holier-than-thou, or even holier-than-anyone-else. I pray these words don't sound that way. So if your heart is pure, if you've never looked at that hot number in the restaurant and said "wow," if you've never considered shaving off a few extra dollars on your tax deductions, if you've never told a white lie to 'protect' someone's feelings, and if you've never harbored anger at someone for saying something stupid, go ahead and breeze past this paragraph. Everyone else may want to consider reading.

For the 'lawgivers' out there: Who appointed you to use God's law as a hammer to beat down others you judge to be of lesser purity than yourselves? Who told you that you could continually preach about how DAMNED we are and not become arrogant? Who appointed you judge? Some of you may be formal, called servants of God; thanks be to Him for that, and thanks to you for your service. If, in executing your service, you continually use His law as a way to suppress questions, avoid conflict or exercise control, then you need to read the verse again. It's gut-check time: we are ALL guilty of sin, and you are one of the 'all.' You know some of my sins but I guarantee you don't know all of them. Only God knows that. I may know some of yours but you can guarantee I don't know all of them. Only God knows that. Mine aren't your business; yours are none of mine. Let's leave them up to God, shall we?

Some of you are also like me: common people who share what they think, not a certified (or certifiable) preacher. If you have gotten to the point that you KNOW you can ALWAYS juggle all those sins like balls in the air without getting tired, letting one fall, or getting too proud, congratulations! Let's see you do it for an hour or two. If you don't mind (and even if you do) I'd like to add a few balls to your trick. How's THAT kind of hope and change workin' out for you? Me, I'm still learning how to juggle and the more I do it, the more I see that I'm really not very good at it. I need help. I can't juggle my sins very well; in fact, I can't do it at all. I need a Savior. So do you. Sorry if I'm a glass of cold water but facts are facts. Neither of us is clean and without sin. I've been there, you know. I've been the Pharisee (or the pastor, elder, deacon, and all around good guy, just like George of the Jungle) who looked at others and said "thank you God that I'm not like that." Hypocrites.

And for the 'perfect' who stand opposite the lawgivers: So you think you've finally arrived, eh? You don't need reminding of your sins anymore, right? You're beyond all that. You finally got to the point where you are OVER all those things you used to do, where you're past them and where you will NEVER do that again. I'll confess: I envy you because I'm still mired in all this crap. As my friend Patrick says, "got skin, got sin." I wear alot of skin. Word of caution for you, my friend: that old devil is sneaky and he's a coward. He likes to mock our 'never's' and turn them against us; he likes to do the same stuff to us over and over again. Why? Because it works! Here's another confession, too: I've been one of you. Just like I've been the one holding the hammer, I've been the one who thought the hammer was for someone else. I thought I had mastered certain vulnerabilities, and knew enough about God's love that I didn't need reminding of the consequences of our wrongs. Years of wreckage behind me testify to what happened when I thought that way.

Who can say, "I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin?" I can't say it and I'll be bold enough to say that you're fooling yourself if you think you can. It doesn't matter if you're a preacher, teacher, student or a sheep. Yes, you CAN (and should) rightly congratulate yourself if you've overcome a weakness or risen beyond adversity. You deserve credit for that and I hope you remember to thank God for your blessings in doing so. Soon as you're done with it, how about we both then remember that we're still thick with the dirt of other sins and still, always, and forever need that Savior to purify us and make us clean. On my own I can't do it; on your own, neither can you. On our own WITH God's Son standing beside us, on our side and in our hearts, we can't NOT do it. We cannot fail. Only with Him can we be made clean, be seen by God as pure, and rise beyond sin.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 17 March 2011

Differing weights and measures – the LORD detests them both. Proverbs 20, verse 20.

Weights and measures matter. It matters if you go to the store to buy a pound of hamburger and are forced to pay for only a half-pound. Or a gallon of gas: these days, getting a full gallon of gas for your money really matters a lot, doesn't it? I think, though, that the verse goes beyond these. Consistency is also a brilliant and Godly thing. Consistency speaks of quite a number of other traits, things like patience, integrity, reliability, self-discipline, a willingness to learn and selflessness. I admire consistent people because they are indeed reliable. They're the kind of people we aspire to be, and the kind of people we model in the way we act and work. So what about consistency in our relationships? Is that what the verse is talking about? Do we treat each relationship the same? Hmmmm...

Is relationship consistency what the verse is talking about? Yes and no; gee, that's such a specific answer. Yes it is talking about consistency in that we must be consistently forthright, honest, caring, and dependable in our relationships. If we value the other person, we will hopefully treat them as God treats us and follow the Golden Rule no matter what relationship is involved. That's a matter of personal character and integrity (not to mention honesty and dignity). If right is right and wrong is wrong, then we must consistently apply our judgments of them no matter who's involved. I was watching a TV show last night in which a female, minority Army post commander had to carry out punishment of a friend's child. Her comment on the thing: 'I have to apply the standards consistently no matter who it is. My position as a commander depends on it.' Amen.

Then what about using different standards to judge relationships? Should we treat every relationship differently? Yes, we should, and I don't think the verse condemns it. Here's why: it all depends on the meaning of the word 'is;' thank you Mr. President. It depends on what the relationship is, where it is, who it is even. We should use consistent standards to judge character, behavior, compatibility and things like that no matter who our relationship is with; no doubt about it. But would you treat your relationship with your mother the same way you would treat your relationship with your best drinking buddy? Or would you treat your son and daughter exactly the same? How about a spouse versus a stranger? Of course we differ in how we treat people. It depends on what the relationship is. Our standards need not change just because the situation does.

But there's another underlying concept here: judgment. Differing weights and measures – the LORD detests them both. There are underlying messages about both us and God. We know that God judges. He is, after all, God and is final arbiter between good and evil, right and wrong. We are to judge too, though, and the verse talks about that. When it mentions the differing measures, don't you think that, implied is the message about how to use those measures? We are to use them and apply them honestly and consistently in our lives in order to be forthright, Godly people. In using them, we judge. We are NOT to be unfair judges, and in my book that includes being Pharisees. We aren't to be arrogant, haughty, self-righteous, self-convinced that we "have all the answers" or holier-than-thou: all common and justified complaints against good churchgoing Christians. They're justifiable because those attitudes are different measures used against different people (not to mention being un-caring and distinctly un-Christian). We aren't to use our knowledge, our position, our attitude, or our lives to hold our faith against other people or to look down on people who believe differently than ourselves. We are to serve as God's loving witnesses in these things, not as His blitzkrieg storm troopers.

That's a fine line, you know, especially given 'the Great Commission' in Matthew 28. It's our task to talk about faith in God, about faith in Christ, and to share that willingly. Sharing and proselytizing can be easy to confuse, though; it's a confusing mistake that Christians make quite often. Read these columns often enough and you'll rightly accuse me of making it. Nobody forces me to talk about faith: I enjoy it and feel motivated to. Nobody forces you to read about it; I hope you enjoy the reading, though, and that you are motivated by it. I hope that these are a blessing to you, and that you want to share those blessings with others. It's what makes the world go around.

More than that, though, I hope my messages are consistent. I hope that I'm not guilty of using different measures or different weights, and I hope that I'm not judging harshly or indiscriminately. Our relationship as friends and readers matters to me, and your views, your opinions matter to me. Please be sure to let me know if I am dropping the ball in any way and hope you're having a good day, especially since it's St. Patrick's Day. After all, St. Patrick's message was consistent, loving, and forthright and he converted an entire nation just by being God's witness.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 18 March 2011

Even a child is known by his actions, by whether his conduct is pure and right. Proverbs 20, verse 11.

To paraphrase Jesus Christ, 'Let your yes mean yes and your no mean no.' In the case of this verse, let our actions mean what they are intended to mean, and let us always make them the right ones. That's the goal. The goal is the A+, not the C; the goal is 100%, not 99; the goal is full and complete, not half empty. Simple, right? Um, if you say so. The verse is black and white but we, the fallen, operate in the gray zone. Still, the verse is the standard and the standard doesn't change. When people judge us by our actions, are they making a fair judgment of us? Perhaps, yes. After all, people can only judge by what they know and see, especially strangers. It's why we always want to put our best foot forward. The truly fair person, though, is she or he who will not judge without thoughtfully examining if there is more than meets the eye. Snap judgments aren't always reliable and first impressions aren't always accurate.

When I was a kid, my father insisted I get A's. I was a good student; graduated 7th in my class in high school and through three college degrees never got a GPA below 3.5; good student. Yet I struggled in some things. If I brought home less than an A, he would say "you could have done better." It was his way of saying "always go for the gold." And other kids pinned labels on me: nerd, brain, dork; I was Screech; some of those labels were correct and some were typical high school drama. But my actions showed I was the skinny kid who got good grades, something pure and right? Sort of, I guess. I always wanted to be the good looking guy who got the pretty cheerleader instead. If I had acted out that particular desire, perhaps my conduct would have been judged differently. Gray, not black and white.

And then there is my son, Mr. Energy. He has been an energetic kid since the day he was born. He's brash, smart, and physically burly. Years ago, a friend from church labeled him "Kid Rock" and at first I thought it was funny (and appropriate). But that wore off quickly. He's always been more than you bargain for. In public, he's all show; those of us who know him see a different side. He's intuitive, tender, and deep. He could also knock you on your tail if you crossed him. By his conduct, people might judge him as pure or right, or they might judge him as being a mouthy teenager; both assessments are grounded in truth. Get to know him, though, and you'll see the latter is simply veneer and you'd miss the pure and right if all you're interested in is the superficial. Most folks judge in the gray, and in truth that's where my son lives (along with the rest of us).

I think, too, about the Ugandan refugees. When they could radiate despair, they radiate love instead. If you judge them by their actions, you see pure and right hearts. You see people desperately wanting love and affection instead of the lot in which they find themselves. Dig deeper and I think you'll find common, struggling sinners no different than ourselves. They don't let that define them. They rise beyond it and are the truest reflection of the love of Christ that I've ever encountered. Gray.

And what about our politicians? No comment, or should I say "I vote present." Definitely NOT black versus white; all gray.

Finally, there's me. I am a liar, a cheat, an adulterer, a philanderer, an enigma, a deceptive man, a procrastinator, a drunk, and a man of sometimes questionable character. At times, believe it or not, that's the GOOD news, but I'm also going to look at the equally true flip side of the coin. There I see that I'm also a father, a friend, a loving man, a great mate, intelligent, resourceful, thoughtful, kind, sharing, motivated and an enjoyable guy to have a drink with. I am known by my actions, and by those actions people will judge whether I am pure and right. Sadly but truthfully, I can't be judged to be pure and right all the time. People have rightfully judged me to be all those negative things I am. I don't like it, but it's a fair judgment. I think that, like my son, though, if you look closer you'll find something different. At least I hope you do. Most people don't bother with the second look. Full gray all the time.

In all this, I go back to the verse and Christ's command about your yes and no. We do indeed want to talk the talk then walk the walk, and that is rarely an easy thing to do. The standard doesn't change. It stays black and white even when we are all gray all day. And the hand of God touches us all the time, in everything we do and despite our bad choices, not because of them. His message is black and white and He blesses us with it, through it, beckoning us forward in Him instead of in ourselves. Every day is a new day for we children to repent, truly say we're sorry, move forward and try again.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 21 March 2011

Ears that hear and eyes that see – the LORD has made them both. Proverbs 20, verse 12.

Have you ever really thought about your senses? I know that some scientist could tell me a whole, long story about how they think the senses evolved, how it was a coup of adaptation to a world that presented the need to be able to hear and see. I reject evolution, but the story would be good because I think it would reinforce what a miracle ears and eyes really are. I believe that miracles don't happen by chance. That I can walk into a room and see colors, shapes, textures and light always amazes me even as I take this for granted. That I can hear rolling thunder, music on the radio, and the crunch of leaves under my feet always reassures me that I'm more than just some post-evolutionary conglomeration of cells. The sight thing especially amazes me because I don't see why sight is necessary to living, but I think of what a miracle it is that the cells, fluid, nerves and structure of my eyes can communicate something called 'vision' to that other bunch of gray matter called a 'brain.'

And what's more, what is heard and what is seen, isn't it implied here that God made those too? Read Genesis 1 and of course you read the story of creation. For a fallen place made imperfect by all the junk we've done it's an amazing thing that sight and sound even happen. If you don't believe me, did you see the super-moon this weekend and listen to the sounds of the night as you watched? Or have you watched some of the video of the tsunami in Japan rushing in and thought about the magnitude and malevolent power of it? Best of all, if you want to see something and just KNOW in your heart that God is in this world of miracles, sneak into the room of a sleeping child, then watch them for a minute and listen to their breathing. You get to hear and see these things and realize what blessings they are.

Sure, it would be nice to have some super-human power, some additional sixth sense, just so long as it doesn't make me see dead people, you know? I can't conceive of what that power would be but I still find myself content knowing that the LORD made us with all the senses we need to fully experience the miraculous world He made. He gave them to us for enjoyment, protection, health, vocation, and most of all to glorify Himself in knowing we can revel in His creation. He made this world out of love – remember, He declared it good and we pre-fall humans to be 'very good' – and isn't it a wonderful thing to think that we have just what we need to make the most out of our time here?

Two of my children are dyslexic, and I've read alot about dyslexia during the time we've known of this. My daughter wasn't formally diagnosed until much later in school Early on, though, my son was identified. He was then taught to adapt to the world around him, how to control his 'disability' so that he can operate at the same pace as the rest of us. After watching him, though, and all that reading, I've come to actually believe that his dyslexia isn't a disability at all. Their brains are wired different, and they can conceive of things and perceive of others in ways different from most people. He can look at a piece of wood and see in his mind how to sculpt and shape it. She can listen to music and pick up themes and rhythms that escape me. He can take a basic drawing and bring it to life, then describe the scene, life-scape and environment all around it. She can figure out things at the root level without clues and without any assistance. It is as if God instilled in them a creative ability that the rest of us, myself included, simply don't have. It's a gift, and though the rigid world tries to mold them into conformity, the 'disability' truly is as close to a sixth sense as anything I could ever create.

Thank God that He created it and I don't have to. It goes back to that concept of Him making us with just what we need to fully appreciate and maximize our lives here in service to each other and, in doing so, to Him. I find that much more comforting on days like today, when I'm in a new city about to undertake a new project. I'll do so using my eyes and ears, keeping both open so that I can learn quickly, move forward, and make the most of it. Thank God for that too.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 22 March 2011

"It's no good, it's not good" says the buyer; then off he goes and boasts about his purchase. Proverbs 20, verse 14.

Drama queens. Was any time in US history so full of drama queens as now? The subject of co-dependence came up in a conversation I had last night with my best friend. We were talking about kids and how they adopt 'broken' people who they try to fix (because they need fixing SO BADLY don't they?), and how our kids learned those dysfunctional patterns from us. I think I've talked about that here before, how I'm co-dependent and how I have sought out people to 'help' all through my life.

Through that life, I've been a drama king all my life (not a queen here, though I'll use that generic term to describe others of both sexes; sorry, writer's prerogative), even before I was the lead in the class play. I used to pretend that I was someone famous, important, or rich, and I was usually quite flamboyant when I did so. If I read the news, I always looked for the worst and often made more of it than it was; it really WAS the end of the world! If I was bored, I would search for something about which to overreact. My tone was always too loud, my movements too accentuated; I could go 'over the top' in no time flat.

It was all pretty artificial, you know. Hollow, shallow, and vapid. Like the verse, it was me being a drama queen, seeking the spotlight, or pulling the spotlight on me if it wasn't. Worse, it was disingenuous. People who knew me well (and there weren't many) knew that, deep inside, I was shy and insecure. They saw the me who went to the back of the room at a gathering. They knew that I was intimidated by the jocks, the people who had degrees, and the people who had 'been there' before me. It was all a front I put up to try to make myself feel better and it was a lie. Was it any wonder, then, that I developed co-dependent tendencies and tried to fix other people's 'flaws' to make myself feel better about myself?

No. It wasn't any wonder at all. It wasn't any wonder because there's nothing new under the sun. Solomon knew that when he penned this verse, and he knew about people who would put on a show just to get the king's attention. He had seen it all his life and, being wise, he saw through it. To be fair, there's nothing wrong with acting. I grew to enjoy being on stage, acting out scenes, mastering lines and trying to honestly convey complex emotions instead of simply mouthing the words. It was a chance to shine at something other people couldn't do, or were afraid to do. I couldn't perform on the football field; I wasn't built for it and I didn't have that kind of skill. But I could perform on stage.

The hard thing to remember is the lesson in all this, namely that we should be who we are, we should let our yes mean yes and our no mean no (thank you, Lord) and not act one way in front of one group and differently in front of another. It's ok to act in the theater, but don't lose sight of who you are in God's eyes. He can see everything, including deep inside where our soul lives undeniably, and He doesn't suffer fools. Enjoy the spotlight, and even ham it up. Best of all, really put yourself into the part. Inject your feelings into it and don't leave anything on the stage. Put all your cards on the table and go for broke. When you're done, enjoy the adulation, walk off stage, and be thankful you get to be yourself when you take off the makeup. Just like the spotlight, getting to be ourselves is a privilege and a gift from God, not the burden of a drama queen.

When I was in 8th grade, in speech class, each student had to spontaneously act out a role in front of the class. I was in the same class as some of the kids who had bullied me, and some of the football jocks of whom I was so intimidated. I couldn't think of anything original to do that hadn't already been done by the others. I worried and fretted until my turn came up and then an idea hit me. I got up and staggered around like a drunk, going from student to student and miming that I wanted to drink with them. I got to mime throwing up on one of the bullies, and I spilled my imaginary drink on a footballer. And I got to put my arm around the cute girl on whom I had an unrequited crush for most of that same year. In truth, I wasn't a closet 8th grade drinker, but the character was a lot like the boy I was: lonely, wanting to escape, wanting to be liked, and sometimes willing to puke. My classmates all liked my performance even if the teacher chewed me out for it; she said it was inappropriate and out of place in a school (which was probably true). On the way out of class, though, one of the bullies came up to me and said "you did good." It didn't mean he liked me or wanted to be friends. But it also wasn't something he had to say...yet he did. Afterwards, the bullying gradually ebbed and I learned a good lesson. Best of all, the girl gave me a smile that lit up my heart for a week then walked off to talk with her friends about me.

What lesson can you learn from this today? Today, I'll learn that it all is actually good, and then I'll be satisfied with whatever has been purchased – or redeemed – for me. I'll gladly take off the costume of the drama king and substitute it for being in the presence of the King of Kings. If I am your friend, I'll love you enough to encourage you to improve your own lot and not try to fix it for you. And if I'm on stage, I'll love standing there in the spotlight I earned, then I'll say that prayer of thanks as I exit stage right.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 23 March 2011

Gold there is, and rubies in abundance, but lips that spread knowledge are a rare jewel. Proverbs 20, verse 15.

Several thoughts come to mind in talking about this Proverb. First, not long ago I was in Sam's Club, looking at jewelry for a birthday present. Rings, earrings, necklaces: of all places, Sam's Club had it all. "He went to Jared!" No, and I'll admit that "He went to Sam's Club" just doesn't sound as good. Many different kinds of gems were available. I think gems have become more plentiful at lower prices because many of them aren't natural. They're manufactured in a laboratory. The quality is great and they look beautiful, but is it the same as a gem mined from the wild? You decide. For what I wanted, the gem looked quite pretty; I'll let you know later if the purchase was made. Whether it's made in a lab or found in the great outdoors, it seems that gems and gold are indeed in abundance. It's almost as if we take such things for granted.

Another thought is about spreading knowledge. I just finished reading a book by Ravi Zacharias in which he reasons and completely skewers the 'morality' of atheism. In the book, the author refutes the atheist arguments of Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens as being intellectually vapid and failing the common sense tests of the world around them. I can't say that the author's method was kind and gentle, but his arguments were faithful, knowledgeable and well made. It's a rare thing to be able to spread knowledge, especially knowledge of the Almighty. We can all witness and tell about ourselves, talk about things that matter to us. In this way, each of us is like that precious jewel, spreading our own knowledge. It's a rare thing, though, to be able to spread the news about the Savior because for something so simple, it sometimes seems so hard. To be able to strongly, fully, intellectually, and fearlessly refute arguments defending the void of unhappiness that is atheism is an even rarer jewel.

And then there's tonight. I'm planning to go to a Lenten service at a church over in Glendale. A friend and his family live there. I haven't seen them in several years and am looking forward to it. My friend was the principal at the Christian school my kids attended years ago. He took the job in Arizona as a promotion, to run a larger, more modern school in a bigger city. I'm excited for the opportunity to see old friends and also to see the place where they work and worship. In a way, I envy them because I like this area of the country, and I think the critical work they do lasts a lifetime. Providing an education to young children is serious and important. Providing an education within the context of a parochial school is a calling of divine honor that only a few of us have the courage to accept. My own kids got a lot out of their time under my friend's tutelage, and I'm betting the children here would gratefully make the same boast.

I think all three thoughts make the point of the proverb. Gemstones are in great abundance but the knowledge of God is what's most precious. An argument well made in strongly defending the faith is precious indeed, but not as precious as the Good News itself, good news of Lent and the Easter that follow. And to be able to both educate and evangelize in the same role is a wonderful thing, but not as wonderful as the message the educator and evangelist carry. It isn't an easy thing to stand up and defend what you believe, especially in a pop culture world that thrives on scandal and sex. Indeed, I think the most powerful testament that anyone can give is when they calmly, humbly, and serenely stand and say "this I believe" without backing down. We think of Martin Luther as being this firebrand of power. After all, it took guts to nail 95 theses on a church door, then challenge the Catholic Church and all the political powers of Europe to defend themselves. He was in danger for the rest of his life for that singular act of courage. If you could flash back to the 1500s, though, and talk with Brother Martin, I bet he would tell you of many times when he felt scared, small and meek and that he only got his strength from God.

So it is here with us. It takes rare, valuable beauty and courage to work as a missionary in Uganda, where there was so recently war and where there is always death and pestilence. It takes rare, valuable beauty and courage to stand behind your faith when your friends make fun of you for it, when there are so many more enjoyable things to do in this world of pleasure. It takes rare, valuable beauty and courage to preach the Good News in cities and suburbs, where selfish apathy and mellow complacency are the foundation of existence. And it takes rare, valuable beauty and courage to do what you do every day, to rise in the morning, prepare for the day, and give it your all in doing the best that you can. Couple your efforts with the blessing of simple faith and you're the kind of person I have always wanted to be.

In fact, someone might just think that you're so beautiful and rare that they went to Jared to get you!

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 24 March 2011

Take the garment of one who puts up security for a stranger; hold it in pledge if he does it for a wayward woman. Proverbs 20, verse 16.

This is a hard verse to understand, so I did some research. The best source I found (http://www.pbministries.org/Landmark_Baptist/Seminary/Bible_Study_Courses) says: "One should never pledge nor promise anything for use as a surety that he is not willing to lose, for this is often what happens to sureties. Many make a living getting others to stand good for them then leaving them to pay the creditor." To the fixer, the insecure man who wants to make himself feel better by fixing other peoples' problems, this is an amazing thing to read. It's amazing to me because it got me thinking: how long should we pay for our sins? If I put up my own sanity as security for other people, should I be surprised when someone takes it away? If I do something unwise, should I be surprised when something unwise is done to me? And no matter what causes it, how long do we pay for the myriad ways in which we colossally mess up?

Yesterday was a long day, a productive day but a long one. At the end of the day I got into a text argument with a friend of mine, someone who knew me well but was stunningly displeased with my conduct, with the fact that I'm a struggling sinner who has said and done things of which they disapproved. The subject was relationships and how I had been such a dismal failure as a man, friend, husband, example and so forth. Some things said were things I didn't even do. It came out of no where as I was trying to finish up what had been a pretty good day at the office. When I got to thinking it over, though, I saw they had a good point. I'm nobody's ideal: I'm highly imperfect.

So then I went to church, to that Wednesday night Lenten service I mentioned. I didn't see the friend I'd gone there to see, so I took the time to ponder what all this meant. What was God telling me? The sermon lesson was about Nicodemus, and how he quietly believed in Christ. That's about all I remember of it, even though it was appropriate to my situation. After all, I too have snuck out of my comfort zone to find Christ, and I too have sometimes been afraid of what that could cost me. I've been afraid it could cost me friends, or that my real friends would rightfully accuse me of being a hypocrite because I haven't lived up to the lofty words of these Proverbs.

The thoughts took me down the path of confessing yet again that I haven't always 'walked the walk and talked the talk.' I have fallen short more times than I've risen up. I repeatedly broke vows to the woman to whom I made them and I destroyed her heart in doing so. Because of that, I let down my children and took away the good example of the father they should have had. I wasted friendships, and I injured the lives of the women I sullied in breaking those vows. People who know me well know this, so my friend's texts resonated with me. They judged and convicted me. The guilt of it all never leaves me, and at times it has dared me to lay it down and check out. Those who judge us don't always understand that. Usually they don't even consider it.

I put up my reputation as collateral. I put it up and lost it and it was my own doing. Bad choices caused default on the debt, my default, leaving my reputation in shreds, gone from me forever. The consequences of this go on and on, and when I think I have finally done enough to learn from it and become someone better, my sins try to ensnare me and tell me the suffering isn't done. I'm Michael Corleone, because they keep trying to pull me back.

How long do we keep paying for our sins?

The answer, my friends, is "no longer." We don't pay for them at all. If the reason for Lent is for us to examine who we are becoming from the things we have done, then the only honest answer is that, of our own device, we have become the destroyers of souls. But when we accept the love of Christ, we see that we don't pay for our sins any longer. We learn that we don't pay for them at all, that the spiritual penalty required for our wrongs is wiped out, washed away, and made right by God Himself. It makes me think about the video we saw in church last Sunday. A bunch of people get to heaven, where they give the files of their sins to the gate keeper, then step on the "Good O'Meter" to see if they're good enough. Not surprisingly, nobody is. The man with the thickest file of sins steps up, does the same, and is stopped in the nick of time by Jesus, who comes up and gets on the meter Himself, rendering the sinner good enough. Much to the yelling consternation of those already judged, Christ puts his arm around the guy and leads him off to wait for the train to heaven.

On my own, I'm not nearly good enough. No matter how many words I write here, how many orphans I visit around the world, how many lessons on forgiveness that I put into practice, or how many times I say I'm sorry to the people I've hurt, I will never be good enough to get past the Good O'Meter. Like water, air, food, and shelter, I need Jesus. I need Him to make me good enough. I need Him to redeem my garment that I put up as collateral and lead this wayward man to some

place where none of what has happened here matters. What I don't need is to constantly pick up the stained garment of my sins, thinking "I have to have this" or "I have to do something about it." I don't. If you want to get real about it, it's a sin to even think that way because it denies the validity of what Christ did for each of us. It's a sin, and it's a weakness, and it's an oh-so slippery slope that slides back into the mud pit from which He pulled us. He met me there, and He forgave me, and He got me out of it, teaching me to try again, to do better, to pick up the pieces of the wreckage I created.

You need Him to. So does my judgmental former friend.

How long must we 'pay' for our sins? Again, it's simple: no longer at all. Knowing that, this will be the last time I talk of some of these things. There's no need to continually drag out the litany of my sins and air them like dirty laundry. It's too much of a temptation to let them drag me back. There will always be people who want to judge us, to let us know that we've messed up or disappointed them. Some of them make good points, and some don't. We may never know who sets themselves up as our judge and jury, but if we set ourselves up as holier than thou, there are those who will gladly take the garment of our iniquities and smother us with it. We only let what they say convict and damn us if we forget that the garment of iniquities is covered in the cloth of righteousness that Christ puts upon us.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 25 March 2011

Make plans by seeking advice; if you wage war, obtain guidance. Proverbs 20, verse 18.

What is it to wage war? Is it President Obama lobbing missiles and airstrikes into Libya without consulting our allies or Congress ahead of time? Yes. Is it President Bush invading a sovereign nation that had threatened us but not actually done anything in a threatening but traceable manner of late? Yes. Is it World War I (or II), or any other war in which men have fought and died? Yes.

Or is it more? I'm reading a book about Andrew Jackson, and how he 'waged war' on the Second Bank of the United States. Did he physically make war on them, bringing violence to the bank? Of course not, though his fiscal ineptitude and class envy did cause the Panic (Depression) of 1837 two weeks after he left office; current government please take note. What about the "War on Poverty" that our government has been 'waging' with tax dollars and entitlement programs since the mid-1960s? The government isn't using tanks and soldiers to rid the nation of poverty but it still says it's fighting a 'war.' "War on Drugs?" Sometimes a hot war, most of the time not. War on the Deficit? War on Christians?

War, war, war: we're thick with war and thick with conflict, and it surely means more than the use of force (or even "kinetic military action"). We make war on each other with our anger, with saying and doing things out of that anger. We make war by reacting instead of pro-acting in frustration, in hurt, and usually in the dark. Sometimes it's justified; sometimes that anger comes from being hurt or wronged or unfairly targeted. I believe that the Proverb is saying that, if we act in anger, we should talk about it first. We should ask questions, we should confront, we should be honest, we should be forthright. I'm guilty of not doing those things more times than I can ever hope to recount. I'm guilty of making war without adequate provocation. How about you?

With all this talk about anger and actual warfare, isn't it appropriate, too, that we back up and address the first part of the proverb: make plans by seeking advice. It's obviously important that the verse talks about waging war after making plans by seeking advice; again, current government (and all of them, in fact) please take note. But let's not gloss over the more generic aspect of the clause because God is saying something there as well. We should plan things in our lives. God is a god of order, not chaos. Chaos is a symptom of sin. If God is that god of order and we are made in God's image, then for us to succeed, we should move forward by planning. We should live our lives in an ordered fashion. That doesn't mean that spontaneity is impossible (or even discouraged), or that every miniscule detail of our lives should be planned out. If that works for you, then go for it! I don't believe you'd find anything in Scripture that says to plan 100% of the details.

But you will find it (here) where God says (through the Proverb) "make plans." It's a directive as well as good advice. Further, He says "make plans by seeking guidance." In the context of the verse (where war is the result of much planning), I read it to mean that we are to conduct the important matters in our lives by seeking guidance, HIS guidance, in how we decide to attack them. It's another instance of how He wants to be involved in the way we live our lives. When we are presented with choices or when we decide to undertake something big, we should ask God for help. He wants to be there when we are forming the plans, when we're considering our options, when we're struggling with decisions. He wants us to live in this way so we can understand His will in our lives, that we can do the right as we're given the right to see it.

And He wants to be in the planning because He knows we will need him if it comes to war. He knows that, if we become angry, we will need forgiveness and help to reconcile. He knows that if we are threatened, we will need patience and justice in how we respond. He knows that, if it comes to blows, we will need comfort and healing. And he knows that, when the shooting starts, we will need His strength and guidance to calm our fears, to persevere that we might conduct ourselves in the right, and to steady our actions when the fog of war thickens.

I am a warrior, you know. I've said this many times here. I was a warrior once and I'm a warrior still. It was my honor to wear the uniform of my nation, and it was my honor to serve beside the bravest, best men and women you'll ever meet: all of them imperfect, flawed and varied people like myself. Warriors make plans, and they learn too that all plans change when you start to execute them. God knows that too, which is why He implores us to stay on the straight and narrow. What did the song say? "From a distance, you look like my friend even though we are at war." The only plan that never changes, never fails, is the plan of the Almighty. In God's plan, from a distance and up close, He wants us ALL to be both His warriors and His friends. That's a plan you can count on.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 28 March 2011

Food gained by fraud tastes sweet to a man, but he ends up with mouth full of gravel. Proverbs 20, verse 17.

Today' is my youngest daughter's 18th birthday. Parents know that every child's every birthday is important and special, but to keep it real, some birthdays are more momentous than others. It's not every day your growing girl officially becomes an adult. It's not every day that you can mark as a milestone and say "I remember that birthday." For my daughter, today is one of those days. Of course I want to mark it with a few words of my own, especially since work finds me far from home, far from where I want to be today.

The words I want to offer are from the verse above. On the eve of becoming a single woman on her own, they are words I hope she will remember well. It doesn't take you long to discover that all our sins are fraudulent; all our wrongs are a deceit. They trick us into thinking we can handle them; they convince us that 'just one more' will be ok, or that it really doesn't hurt as much as we think it does. They all do. Little by little, they're like popping little pieces of gravel into your mouth. Before you know it, you can't chew, you can't swallow, and you can't go on. If you bite down, you'll crack a tooth; if you swallow them, you'll choke to death. If you do somehow manage to get one past, some of that gravel may not make it out of your body, and it'll cause you problems far beyond any you had before.

My girl is one tough cookie, though. She's been through a lot, and has seen a lot in her 18 trips around the sun. She has an independent streak a mile wide that, in my biased opinion, could serve her very well in her years ahead as she learns how to channel and apply it. She's street-wise and savvy, and she's the prettiest girl in her class. With a Jersey Shore attitude and a go-along demeanor, those qualities can be constructive in many situations, but can easily get her into trouble in others. My girl knows this, and where others have turned a scathing finger, word or pen at her, they did so perhaps not realizing that they were tearing down someone who's already been through so much. She understands the consequences of what can happen in life, and she understands what it is to deal with a lot of emotional baggage that shouldn't be yours to keep but is because of the choices we make.

And yet inside, there's a scared, vulnerable, and very human young lady who just wants to love and be loved, who just wants to be appreciated for who she is, and who just wants to do the best she can. She's been a party girl, to be sure. She's also gone on a number of church mission-trips. I've seen her in that element, and I've seen her wear both her missionary and her game faces under the same makeup. Those who don't know her well don't see that they're both important sides of the same young woman. She is multi-faceted and always fascinating, and you'll have to travel far and wide before you find someone with as rich a heart as hers...if you can win it. You'll walk many miles before you ever meet such a fierce friend, or a better companion. Strip away all the senseless veneer of bravado, tough-girl nonsense, and trash talk and you'll quickly find someone worth knowing, someone worth your time, and someone very much worth loving with all your heart. Give her more than just a passing glance and perhaps you'll be fortunate enough to see her as we do, or as God does.

That's the kind of girl she's been all of her life. On birthday number eighteen, I invite her to remember the words of the proverb as she ventures on her first steps as an adult. There will be so many up's and down's, and (as Pastor Mark said in yesterday's sermon) there will be so many arrows shot at us in life. It hurts when they hit and hit us they will. Not all the world is like high school, though if you work long in any office you might take me to task for that thought. Not all the world is like Facebook, though the drama of it never seems to stop. The world can be such a terrifying place in which to venture out. I think it's why she's scared to see this phase of her life passing away, not realizing what good things await her just up ahead. She knows fully well, probably better than most people do, how the world can be a harsh and cruel place, how the food of temptation tastes sweet for a moment but ends up like a mouthful of something that you wish you had left on the ground. Today, I invite her to remember that and use it to God's advantage every day.

I also invite her to remember that not everything need be as bad as all that. For all the mouthfuls of gravel there are indeed many more sweet things of which to partake. People who don't look beyond the superficial don't see the hard worker she is, don't hear the playful tone in her voice when she's happy, and don't understand how much of a joy it can be to have her in your life. She's worked hard in school, on the job, and in her personal life, and for every failure that could give you pause I guarantee there are five successes that would make you stand up to cheer. It's a fine world if you choose to make it, and there can be so many blessings in which to share and revel. I invite her to remember that as well.

Finally, because she's now eighteen, I invite her to take my hand as an adult. I invite her to take mine in one hand and her mother's in the other, and then let us walk her these last few months until graduation. In that time, she will launch successfully into the world. We'll always be her parents, through tough times and good, and no matter where life takes us

or her, she will always be our daughter. Starting today, though, she'll also be our peer. My own parents did a great job of treating me in this way, and it's a gift of love that I hope to now pass on to my own daughter. It's a privilege to be an adult, to work, to struggle, to worship, to suffer for your beliefs, to fight hard and to overcome. Every day is a battle and it's our lot as adults to fight each one, to rest up and prepare, then to rise again to fight again. Yesterday she was a child, a little girl, and a kid. Today she's walked past a milestone and is an adult, a peer, a woman of her own, and someone of whom I'm intensely proud.

So tonight, while I'm far away, her mother will cook her favorite dinner and it will taste good and sweet, and it won't be a mouthful of gravel. I'll call her to sing 'happy birthday' and I'll toast her in celebration. There have been tough meals in the past, and there will be tougher ones ahead. All that is okay because today is an occasion to celebrate. The words of my favorite hymn say it best because today, with eighteen years behind her and a life up ahead in a sometimes scary world, it's my prayer that she'll say as I do that, "it is well, it is well with my soul."

Happy birthday, Samantha Morgan, from your dad who's so very proud of his little girl all grown up, who loves you more than you'll ever know, and is so very honored to be your father and friend for the rest of his life.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 29 March 2011

A gossip betrays a confidence so avoid a man who talks too much. Proverbs 20, verse 19.

Warning to you: avoid me. I talk too much and that could be a warning sign. Last weekend, I had a therapy session in which my therapist asked if I drank coffee. "Of course," I replied. By the time of the session I was on my third cup. "I thought so," was his, "because you seem caffeinated. You're talking a lot." It made me stop and think that maybe he had a point. Maybe I do talk too much. And if I do, what does that say about me?

Get me at a party and, unless I know the people there, I'll bee-line it to the back of the room, the kitchen, or the bar. Get me in a new group and I'll keep quiet. Get me in church and, unless I know people, I'll dodge in and out as quick as possible. But if you get me in front of a crowd where I feel like I'm in my element, say leading a group or teaching a class, then I will talk. Get a drink in me and I may not shut up. Get me really talking and I REALLY may not shut up. I'm sorry to say that I tend to dominate conversations and talk over people. It's a nervous habit too: if I am tense, I chat. After all, God made me this way so it's His fault, right? Not quite.

Do I do this because I'm a gossip? No, I don't think so. Mind you, I'm not blameless. I have played or caused enough of the he-said-she-said game to know that I'm guilty of gross sins. I find gossip to be an obvious wrong, though. I don't like people talking about me. While I really don't much care what they say, I still don't like to be the object of conversation, nor do I want to do things that open myself up for that gossip. Heaven knows I've done enough already. Because of that, I don't like spreading trash talk about others. It's been done about me and I don't like doing it to others. You never know what damage it could do to them, and you never know how it could come back to bite you either. Gossips never come to a good end, and gossip never builds up in a group. It ALWAYS tears down and it always spreads discord. That's why I hate doing it so much.

So does this all prove the proverb wrong? Absolutely not, because a talkative person may indeed be a gossipy person. The warning sign is still valid. I'll confess: sometimes I do indeed do it. Sometimes I find myself talking out of my element, or passing on rumors that would be better off left alone. Sometimes I find myself talking about things I shouldn't, and that just lends credibility to something I wouldn't want to make credible. Sometimes I am the gossip I don't want to be.

Admit it: when you see the gossip magazines at a checkout stand, they both fascinate and repulse you. You're attracted to find out the latest about Teen Mom, Brangelina, and the latest celebrity train wreck and yet you're embarrassed to be caught reading about it. All the gossip that's fit to print is, after all, still gossip. It's fascinating, and it's alluring, and it's lucrative, and it's tediously fun, especially if the pictures are attractive. If they're attractive enough, they'll get you talking. And if you get to talking, you might want to be careful because you might just find yourself gossiping about things that walk the thin line between Saturday night and Sunday morning. Is that what God wants of us?

Or you might be part of the "in-crowd," that likes to comment on what others say or do. You might be the women who run the nursery in your organization, seemingly talking down others even though they don't really want to. It could be that you pass around the small talk, cutting small jokes about him or her, things that aren't really derogatory but aren't exactly kind either. You might share way too many details about your spouse, about their personal habits at home or a thousand other details that aren't harmful but might not be helpful either. And you might not intend to but you might just pass on something said to you in confidence; you know, changing the name or being coy about what was said yet still sharing part of a story just to round out the details of something else you said. Before you know it, you might be talking a lot and you could step over that elusive line that hides in plain sight.

In other words, you might be like me. You might just talk too much, and that might just get people to thinking about you in ways that you wish they wouldn't. A reputation is a hard thing to build and an easy thing to lose. Don't I know that all too well. Don't you sometimes know it too? Behind that risk, there might actually be nothing wrong. You might just like to talk; so might I. I might tell you things in confidence that you might never divulge; I've kept many secrets for many years, and there are things about the people in our lives that might just shock the heck out of us if ever we knew. If I can keep them, so can you. I'm betting you do, and yet the two of us, well, get us talking and we probably can talk up a storm. Talking isn't bad, but next time why don't we do it with a cleaner heart?

So you've been warned: you might want to avoid me. I talk too much and that might lead you to think that I'm a gossip. After all, where there's smoke there's fire; in for a penny, in for a pound. Of course, as long as I'm throwing out clichés, let's not forget the ones that say "looks can be deceiving" or "all is not what it seems." With thoughts like that, it doesn't matter whether I am or not, whether your assumption is right or wrong. It doesn't matter whether you are or not either. The

sin is inside, and it starts inside where all sin does. It's dangerous, which is why the proverb is important. It's the lesson God is trying to teach us.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 30 March 2011

If a man curses his father or mother, his lamp will be snuffed out in pitch darkness. Proverbs 20, verse 20.

I was blessed to have always gotten along well with my parents. We all know people who don't; we all know people who fight, argue, obsess, acquiesce, or rebel against their parents. To be sure, each of us does those things. It took me becoming a parent to see that we, as parents, also feel those same ways towards our kids. We unconditionally love them, but we don't always like them or what they do. We fight but we usually do so out of love if we want what's best for them. Sometimes we're selfish about guarding our time, our treasure, even our homes when we perceive that our kids endanger those things, but, usually, most parents I know do whatever they can or have to do to provide for their kids' well-being.

We do it because of love, and to be honest we do it to maintain that love, to keep their love and affection. We do it because, hopefully, we know that someone did it for us. Hopefully, you had a parent or parents who loved you unconditionally. That's why the verse says what it does. It's a natural extension of the Fifth Commandment, which lists a positive promise along with a directive. This verse takes it a step further, saying that if we reject our parents, there will be a negative consequence. Where the commandment directs us to live in honor of our parents that we may live in turn, the verse reminds us of the consequences for choosing the opposite, that if we live in dishonor we will not live in the light.

And to take it even a step further, it's a reminder of our relationship with our ultimate Father.

Here's where I think of "The Shack." If you haven't read that book, it's a great read and a very encouraging one. Not to give too much away but you might be surprised to learn that in the book the Father takes the form of a woman. Let's not get into all the Biblical arguments about why this is or isn't the case. The author takes the position that God is God and He can take whatever form He wants, male, female, or something we don't fully recognize. It doesn't say that the Father isn't a He; it simply says that He, as the ultimate father of us all, can and will do whatever He thinks is right to reach us (in the case of the book, Him taking the form of a woman to relate to the protagonist).

What got me thinking of The Shack was how the verse is a reminder of our relationship to God. He is both father and mother to all of us. He gave us life through the vessels of our male and female parents, yet He is God, neither male nor female, neither father nor mother, but also both. He is a 'both and' being and person. We are reminded that we must not curse our parents – or our ultimate parent – in violation of the first, second and third commandments lest our life light be rendered dark.

How does cursing your parents render you dark? How much time do you have to read this? If we curse our parents (even if they have done things worth cursing) don't we show ourselves to be vengeful, unforgiving, unthankful, judgmental, pig-headed, obstinate, haughty, arrogant, spiteful, rebellious, unwise, thoughtless, unloving and a whole slew of other adjectives with decidedly negative connotations? The biggest one I see is "unloving" followed closely by "unthankful." If we are that way towards our parents, towards those who gave us life, should we then be surprised when our children are one day like that towards us?

So I'm thankful that I always got along well with my parents. For the most part, they let me grow into who I would be without interference. They were usually good about not meting out advice or trying to micro-manage my life. Only occasionally did they say or do things that I considered out of turn or inappropriate, but in those cases I remember that nothing is unforgiveable, especially in a family. And I remember that there are many times when my actions gave them pause or reason to heap scorn and punishment on me.

I don't want my lamp to be dark, let alone deliberately snuffed out in total darkness. My dad is gone and my mom is greatly advanced in age. For whatever time we have left on this earth, I choose to cherish our relationship and forgive the wrongs, to build up instead of tearing down. That doesn't mean we overlook slights or accept bad treatment, but it does mean understanding, rightful rebuke (to both of us), and love instead of discord. In this way, we build our relationship to model the relationship God wants to have with us as parent and child. In this way, our light shines in the dark instead of joining it.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 1 April 2011

An inheritance quickly gained at the beginning will not be blessed at the end. Proverbs 20, verse 21.

Considering that today is April 1st, I could start this out by talking about the phone call I got the other day telling me about the rich endowment that I just received. Or I could mention how five of my six numbers hit that MegaMillions drawing two weeks ago. Those would be stupid April Fools jokes though. This verse isn't a joke. On the surface it seems to be talking about treasure, un-thankfulness and greed. Dig deeper and there are undercurrents talking about being rash, about being ungrateful for a gift of grace. If you are given something at the start of something else, there's the better than average risk that you won't appreciate it at the end.

Think about Christmas morning. Think of all the expectation kids have looking at all the presents under the tree. All those gifts and how they want them, need them, just have to have them. Then comes the big event and all the paper is ripped off. Faces light up and there are smiles and squeals of joy, then comes all the playing the rest of the day and for awhile afterwards. Then comes July. Do many kids still play with the toys in the middle of the summer? Are they still grateful for them after the bloom is off the rose? Let's be honest and say that it just isn't the same. Does Paris Hilton seem grateful for the millions she inherited from her ancestors' hard work? Do you think Warren Buffett's children fully grasp the potential of the fortune they stand to inherit?

Do you seem grateful for yours? What? You say you don't have a fortune or untold millions in an inheritance waiting for you when your rich uncle passes on? You do have an inheritance and so do I and what's more is that you know it. If you are even the slightest bit curious, try reading the verse again and then ask yourself what it means to your faith? The NIV translation of the Bible has 220 verses that contain the word 'inheritance.' Each one of them talks about more than just money because it really isn't hard to figure out that our inheritance is God Himself. Love, peace, hope, heaven, eternity, God: the ultimate reward is what He gives to us from Himself.

A skeptic could pose the argument that the verse is talking about how life-long faith fades away, and on the surface I think one could argue that it looks like the proverb is saying just that. I mean, if faith in God here and now is our inheritance and we get that early enough, over time and a long life that endowment is worth less and less, right, especially when there is so much hurt and evil in the world? Not quite. Common sense itself disproves this position. I consider it universal that people of love, people who live with faith, grow that love and faith in others. Like a successful investment, it keeps growing despite the harsh world around it. God's love is the ultimate compounding interest. In my experience, the people of faith I've known project happier outlooks, act in ways that bespeak satisfaction and contentment, and are generally a pleasure to be around. In no way does that say that they live without struggles or that those struggles and sin-challenges don't cause conflict in their lives. I've seen it over and over, though, that people who gain faith at a younger age use it as bedrock on which to build a life of love instead of a life of pain. It helps them to deal with that pain that inevitably comes their way.

There's another undercurrent flowing through the verse though. This morning's devotion was about plans, about making plans and about being organized. Disorganization is a hallmark of living an unplanned life. To me, an unplanned life is symptomatic of being impulsive, perhaps rash, usually irresponsible. I've said it before that I'm not criticizing spontaneity; doing things in love on the spur of the moment is usually a relationship-booster, you know. No, here I believe the Scripture is talking about disorganization as a way of life. An impulsive act can yield good immediate return, and immediate success. In the long run, however, the luster of it quickly fades. Yes, this is painting with a broad brush, but I think that this is a case where such a painting yields more good than not. God planned out creation to take the six days it did. He plans our lives and knows every moment of them. For the things that matter, shouldn't we do the same? I think this verse indirectly alludes to that.

I wish I had a rich uncle somewhere who has millions of dollars in an account just waiting for unsuspecting me, and I'll admit that a share of Berkshire Hathaway would come in quite handy here and now. It would sure make it easier to build that house on the lake that I've dreamed of for years, but to tell you the truth I neither have a rich relative like that nor do I need one. God gives each of us talents and to use them to make good dreams come true is a blessing of its own. Living in faith, I get to do that every day, a little bit at a time. So do you and whether we know it or not, we're rich because of that. Sure, a few extra dollar signs would be nice, and I'll keep working to make them appear. Whether they do or not, there's an inheritance in waiting for me and I'll be thankful for it now instead of later.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 4 April 2011

Do not say, "I'll pay you back for this wrong!" Wait for the LORD, and He will deliver you. Proverbs 20, verse 22.

Today I write to you from a small town in southeast Oklahoma where my mom is retired. She and Dad kept the house they bought here years ago despite their son's inability to understand why. My dad is buried a few miles north of here; he died in 1997. I've been to this place dozens of times since his passing, yet every time I come here a part of me still hopes I'll meet him at the door to give him a "where have you been all these years" kind of hug. Illogical, I know, but it's the truth.

Another thing that's the truth is that he liked movies, lots of them. He collected them and so do I. Have you noticed that many of the best movies deal with some kind of revenge? They deal with someone, somewhere getting even or getting back for a wrong done to them. Even if the overt theme isn't about revenge, a good movie contains themes about anger, overcoming, struggle and getting back (or at least getting ahead). To me, this verse is a distant kin to another old saying (ethnicity unknown): "before you seek revenge, first dig two graves." That's one of my favorite sayings, and it's even from a James Bond movie. I like both, though, because they address that fundamental desire to get even.

You've read about my battles with anger and how it was hard to let go of it. I'm thankful that I was able to. So it's funny that I write this from McAlester: a place from which I could not wait to exit when we lived here once before. We moved here in 1978, when I was in sixth grade. It was an immediate, shocking cultural change from the small, green, welcoming Pennsylvania hamlet that had been home for several years before. Here it was dry, depressed, western, foreign; here, people spoke differently, thought differently, acted differently. I was too young to understand that, to the people I met, perhaps I spoke, thought, and acted different. When you're an adolescent, you don't think about such things.

For me, here was the place where the bullying started. Here was the place where kids picked on me for being skinny, awkward, pocked with acne, smart, wearing funny clothes, and having long stringy hair. Here was the place where I got to experience, for the first time, what it meant to have the 'rich kids' look down on me because we weren't rich. This was the place where I got to have the books pushed out of my arm, and be shoved in a locker, or be called out and laughed at, becoming a social and physical outcast. When Dad got orders back to Iowa in 1980, I couldn't have been happier. I had finally made a few friends and started to fit in...just a little. Leaving was like being delivered. I didn't know things would become even harder back up north.

More times than I'd like to confess I wished I could get back at the kids who were mean to me. More times than I can remember I thought of worse thoughts than "I'll pay you back for this wrong!" More times than I would like to admit I didn't want to wait for the LORD to deliver me. I wanted deliverance NOW, on my terms, in my way. This was the place where we first had HBO in our house; heck, when we lived here it came on the air for the first time. Just off to my right is where the TV used to sit, and I still remember the HBO box sitting on top of it. This was the place where I really started to get into watching movies, mainly because we could watch so many of them. It was great escape when you got picked on so often.

Oklahoma was the place where anger at my situation sank in deep. I so wanted to get revenge for all the cheap dirty tricks that were played on me. I wanted to hit the kids who hit me; I wanted to spit in their faces like they spit in mine; I wanted to hurt them the way they had hurt me. I wanted to humiliate and degrade them the way they did those things to me. That's what happened in the movies. That's what they deserved and, by God, I wanted to give them what I thought they deserved!

Oh how wrong I was.

It has been 30 years since then and it felt good to let go of that anger. It never got me anything except ulcers anyway. Life isn't a movie; McAlester, Oklahoma sure as hell isn't Hollywood. We don't live lives like movie stars, and drama is usually more trouble than it's worth. No, life isn't a movie. If it were, I suspect that we'd find it hard to follow. I mean, life happens in a long, unending chain of events that are strung together by at least one common denominator: you. Movies are never shot in the way in which they're shown. They are discombobulated scenes shout out of order from the script. Scenes are often shot and re-shot, and scenes are carefully staged for effect...

...including those scenes where the character gets to seek revenge. You don't realize that it's all artificial, choreographed, crafted. It isn't real, and much of what it says shouldn't be considered to even be realistic. In real life, anger and revenge can consume you and often lead to trouble. Unresolved anger hurts all those who it touches. Unrestrained revenge

always causes collateral damage. You usually don't get to see how it grates at the character (and the character's character) for years. We don't get to see how much it can hurt.

That's why the verse says that we should wait for the LORD because He will deliver us. God always wants what is best for us and always works in His own ways to put what is best before us. If you think about it, at every choice and juncture in your life, there have been choices you could deem 'good' and 'bad.' Doesn't take too much to consider where the 'good' choices come from. God's time isn't our time and because He loves us and wants to share His wisdom in our lives, He will deliver us from evil in the way that's best for us. He will deliver us even when it hurts.

And He will deliver us even when we're angry teenagers who want to hurt the people who hurt us, even when we grow up into middle-aged men who thankfully, finally see the futility of carrying around that anger and desire for revenge. My life is unexpectedly, inextricably tied to this place where I was privileged to learn a few hard lessons about life. My parents will both be buried here, and even if I never come back again, a part of me will always belong to this place, to these people. It wasn't what I set out for, and to be honest, being in this place isn't even what I really wanted. But here I am, even if it's only for a single night this time. Here I am and I'm glad to have finally let go of the hurt, even if it took 30 years. It's live, not Memorex. It's life, not a movie.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 6 April 2011

A man's steps are directed by the LORD. How then can anyone understand his own way?" Proverbs 20, verse 24.

Apart from me, you can do nothing. Jesus Christ said that, and he meant it too. It wasn't something trivial he said to get people to do what He wanted them to do; it wasn't some political, managerial, or a motivational slogan of the moment, as if it were some first century Six Sigma belt or an Agile scrum. No, He said it as a matter of fact, and as a clarion call to action.

He said it to echo the words of his ancestor – and his prophet king – Solomon. Hundreds of years before Jesus ever walked the Earth as Himself, Solomon channeled Him through his pen. The long & short of this verse, I believe, says “don't worry about a thing.” As king of a nation at relative peace, he reflected that the peace wasn't of his own making, nor was it unintentional. He had seen first-hand in the life of his father and in his own life how an active God participated. God had personally communicated with him and imparted wisdom and its blessings on Solomon. Solomon knew that his life was rich not because of his royal station but because of his faith in God.

And yet he, the wisest of all antiquity's kings, still pondered the basic mystery of life that is our search for meaning. “How then can anyone understand his own way” is both a question and an observation. I think it's a question because Solomon honestly wanted to know. Perhaps, with all his God-given wisdom, he understood the foolishness for people to think they could ever do without God. Or maybe this was his way of saying “the world is so much more than we know. Only God truly knows it.” In both questions, some things never change for aren't they still true today? Or maybe it was a way for King Solomon to acknowledge his own sinfulness and his need for a wiser God to guide him through a difficult life. It could just be that it was his way of acknowledging, in honest desperation, that even with all the wisdom God had granted him, he was still little more than a lost sheep.

Even with all that Godly love imparted to him, Solomon had to know this. Like his ancestor Jacob, Solomon and his mother had conspired to make him king when the birthright of kingship fell to his older brother. All through his life, Solomon was then given wonderful blessings that were also double-edged temptations; it couldn't have been easy to resist them. When it came to women, he didn't, for Solomon had dozens of wives, and his love for them was his downfall. Towards the end of his life, he gave in to temptation and drew away from God, following the pagan gods of Ashtoreth. Some traditional accounts hold that Solomon recanted of this and came back to God before he died; the Bible is unclear so we don't know. Either way, the lesson is the same: it can happen to him, it can happen to us.

And it can happen when we forget that our steps are directed by God in a world much bigger, more complex, and definitely more challenging than anything we can make of it. You might have realized that I travel a lot for work; this morning finds me in Phoenix, AZ . I have seen and continue to see quite a bit of the US of A and I'll tell you now that I wouldn't be worth the sand on my shoes if I didn't submit to God leading me where He will. If you read my words and are encouraged by them, that's a wonderful blessing and I ask you to remember that it isn't me working on you through them: it's the Spirit. The man who writes them is a struggling, fallen, fallible, imperfect but trying-hard-to-be-good man. Too many times I've been like Solomon: made king of my own domain and had so many blessings but I ripped them apart. Without fail, that always starts with me forgetting who my navigator and captain is. Invariably, when I forget that God directs my steps, my actions, my movements, my motion, then I slip and fall. Sometimes it's big and sometimes it isn't, but even the little slip-up's mean something, don't they?

Finally, here's another question for you: does this verse insinuate that all our worrying is sinful? Brace yourself for the “yes” that's coming. Ready? Yes. If we acknowledge that God navigates our course in life, then worrying about it is, well, wrong. Obsessing, worrying, fretting, compelling over what COULD happen is just a diversion designed to get us to take our eyes off the ball. I'm guilty of it too, you know. I come from a long line of worriers who got skin, so they got sin. Is it a bigger sin than, say, adultery or murder? Sorry, I'm not in the business of weighing our wrongs. After all, the fall of man occurred for little more than the petty disobedience for which we no longer even scold little children. But it does no good to worry about things out of our control any more than it does any good to worry about things in our control. If we do our best, make our plans, and live righteously with God as our director in life, then there's no need to worry. Easier said than done, I know, but it's still true.

And it's still true because apart from God, apart from Christ who is God and through whom all this was even made, we can still do nothing. We can't make morning coffee, write a daily column, run on the treadmill, take a shower, watch TV, or get in the car and go to work; surprise, you've just read the gist of my pre-8 AM Phoenix morning. In getting all wrapped around the axle of each day, it's so easy to lose sight of the fact that God is walking with me at every step. He's here making coffee, sitting with me while I write, was in the exercise room, and will be with me all along. He's choreographing the dance of my day just like He's doing the same for you. Without that, I can't succeed; if you take it far enough, without His willing it to be so, my heart can't even beat. I truly can do nothing without him and can go nowhere without Him making it so. Neither can you.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 7 April 2011

It is a trap for someone to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider his vows. Proverbs 20, verse 25.

Guilty. I am so guilty of this. This is more than just the typical foot-in-mouth syndrome (with which also I'm terminally affected). Some friends of mine asked me to run for office and I remarked that I wouldn't ever do this because I've put my family through enough. If you've read these columns long enough you've read about some of my indiscretions, infidelities and misbehavior. They are all true. I've been a bold and sinful man, and I've paid the human toll for my bad choices; I still am paying for them, and so are the people affected by them. Here, I have tried to use my confession as a way for others to learn. I'm guilty, and if I were ever to run for office, my past is something that's already public, not hidden, and would make great fodder for the tabloids. When I did those things, I wish I had had the brains to read this verse, to consider how true it is.

Consider this as well: it's not just talking about adultery and it isn't just talking about yours truly, so if the hammer is in your hand, please feel free to put it down. If you promise to do something with your kids, you've made a commitment. If you promise something at work, you've made a commitment. Ever promised to raise your grades but didn't do so? Ever buried the guilt of a deep, dark sin while telling other people, "I'm fine?" Ever told a lie? If you give an opinion, or state a view, or take a stand, you've made a commitment. When we tell somebody we are going to do something, we are making a vow. When we say something, we're taking some kind of stand. In fact, if you open your mouth and the air coming out does so as a voice, there's a better than average chance that you're saying something attributable to you and only you. It's on the record for others to see. If they want to, they'll hold the mirror up to you and face you down with your record before, perhaps, smashing the allegorical mirror over your head and rhetorically stabbing you with the shards.

Be careful, then, of what you say. That's a lesson I've found very hard to learn because, when you're in the thick of your sins, you often don't consider all the possible outcomes. I have yet to meet someone who cheated who had also mitigated every possible outcome so they could get away with the sin; I know I didn't. It would be the behavior of a sociopath. I've committed adultery, lied, deceived, harbored anger and grudges, wished harm on those who would harm me, and I have been a downright no darn good dirty dog. When I did those things, I may have given a quick look left and right, but I guarantee I didn't think ten steps ahead. I'm a man, not Superman (and Nietzsche was a fool).

What about you? I don't want to know your sins; they're between you and God. In what ways have you acted rashly so that you have compromised your word, your vows? Forgive me my skepticism but if you say you never have, I'll respond with an upturned Mr. Spock eyebrow and a sardonic "really." You may not have stepped out on your spouse or partner (or maybe you did), but we all fail in ways large and small, even when we don't make our failures known to the public. You're guilty as H.E. Double Hockey Sticks of your own personal sins and whether you ignore them or publicize them, they're there and they're yours. It's a unique and age-old condition called "being human." It's also inexcusable on our own.

I think that's why Jesus said "let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' be 'no.'" He reminded us to be judicious with our words as well as the actions that follow them. He knew that words mean things and He wanted us to know it too. He said that because He knew that our vows, whether they be our wedding vows or any other kind, could trap us if we failed to consider them. That word, "trap," brings to mind an animal with its leg caught in a steel jaw. Or maybe being caught in a Burmese tiger trap; you know, the pit covered with palm fronds. More to the point (but without the pun), I think of it like a trap on the Ho Chi Minh trail, that same pit but now with sharpened pungee sticks pointing upward. That's the kind of trap our broken vows will find us in, one that stabs us through and through and leaves pain, suffering and even death as the result. Christ knew that because, on our behalf, He had been there, done that.

Still, you don't think of these things when you're in the middle of breaking those vows. The depth of them comes to you only after the fact, after you realize what you've done and why it was so important to keep your word in the first place. The seriousness of the charge only comes to you when you take the time to let the hurt expose itself, or when you're alone, or when someone judges you, or when you're confronted with the reality of it. You think of it when you remember the promise you made to your kids and the resulting disappointment. You consider it when you're paying for your actions at work, scrambling to meet a deadline or produce a deliverable under the gun. And you can be tortured by it when you look into the eyes of the spouse you betrayed and strive to once again find common ground.

You may very well be a great person doing wonderful things, but you're still a sinner of some kind. Apart from the Son of God we can do nothing because all our vows, promises and words can be a trap when we don't consider the real meaning of them. Thanks be to God, then, for Him who takes away the spiritual guilt of our wrongs and teaches us how to deal with the consequences of them in a fallen, challenging, and always convicting world.

I won't be running for political office any time soon, not even for dog catcher. There are people who don't think I'm fit for even that. I don't spend time worrying about them or their opinions, but I do spend lots of time trying to be better than I was. Daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, forever: that's a work in progress and a personal reformation that's never complete this side of the dirt, especially when you live under the spotlight in the public arena of ideas.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 8 April 2011

The lamp of the LORD searches the spirit of a man; it searches out his inmost being. Proverbs 20, verse 27.

This verse seems both encouraging and terrifying. The good news first: it's encouraging because I know that, no matter what I've done or how terrible I act, God will search me out, through and through, and He can root out the evil that lives within me. I already know that God can do anything, and I already know that He wants to work His miracles through my life. This verse reminds me that God is like a light, a bright shining light that illuminates the darkest corners of my soul. No matter how deep I bury my sins, His light can shine warm day onto them, expose them, and begin the healing. No matter how deep the sickness has taken hold, He can shine His medicinal lamp on me and begin to make me better. He is like the warm spring sunshine He made after a long winter of gray darkness.

But here's the terrifying thing about the verse too, and you know what's coming. Namely, it's that God can shine His lamp on my inmost being. No matter how deep I bury my sins, His light can bring them to light; His light can expose them and root them out. He can do it whenever He wants to, and He wants to do it all the time. There are things I've done in life that I don't want other people to know about...but God knows about them. There are things in life that I deny, things that are ugly and unappealing about me that I want to keep secret so that neither they nor anybody can use them against me...but God knows about them.

God knows about those bad things now, not just when I die, and I can die at any moment. He knows the evil thoughts of my mind when I think them. He sees through my eyes when I turn my head to see that attractive woman walking by. He feels the anger in my nerves when I boil at the stupid things done at work. He sees all the things that I think, say and do and He knows what's right and what's wrong. He shines His light on my dark soul and He does it through His penetrating word, through my conscience, through my senses of right and wrong. To both encourage and convict us, God shines his love-light on our motivations, on our souls, so that we might be persuaded to do what is right. He uses that love to search out our inner-most thoughts to test and build us up. He knows when it will happen, but I believe He does it so that we are ready because in fact we can die at any moment. It is a terrifying thing to have your sins exposed for the unholy mess they are, and then to stand in front of the living God to be judged on why you did them.

Knowing that, in shining light on our sins, does God seem rather manipulative? No, I don't think so. Let me pose it this way: do you ever want to know where your friends or loved ones stand? Do you ever want to know just how they honestly feel about something? What do you do to determine that? Do you ask? Do you put them to the test? I think we all want to know these things, and I think we all do things in our own ways to ferret out those feelings from others. It's not malicious or even really doubtful, but it is honest. We simply want to know and we can't read others' minds. We ask, we test, we search.

But God CAN read our minds, and He does search our hearts, searching deep inside us to know. Notice that the verse implicitly states that He allows us the free will to think and feel what we do. If He were manipulative, why would He search us? To me, that searching implies that He allows us the free will to think, feel, say and do whatever we will knowing that it's a matter of choice; we aren't forbidden to do evil: we are allowed to choose whether or not to do it, even when those choices seem subtle. When we do choose evil, God searches us so that WE understand why, so that WE understand the sin and its consequences. He already knows the terrible things that could happen as a result of our sins. It's not to hammer us down: it's to point it out to us in a loving way so that we can turn from it and not get hurt or cause any more hurt. And the way to not get hurt or to cause any more hurt is the reason for Lent, don't you think? In that light, this is a good verse to remember in this time before Easter.

So if you think about it, that's an encouraging and terrifying thing. He can and He could destroy us with our inmost thoughts, but instead He desires to shine a healing lamp onto them so that we aren't consumed by them. He can and He could hurt us with our thoughts, words and actions, but instead He works to turn them around for the good. I suppose that if you believe all this God-talk is a bunch of nonsense, then verses like these are either more nonsense or they make you a little uneasy. Even that isn't designed to hurt you. Even that is designed to shine a light on things you don't want to consider so that He can take away the guilt and then you can be considered in His sight as his loved and precious son or daughter.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 11 April 2011

Love and faithfulness keep a king safe; through love his throne is made secure. Proverbs 20, verse 28

Is this verse contrary to human nature, and does that mean Scripture is inconsistent, saying something in one verse but something different in another? After all, Scripture tells us that man's intent is all evil from his very core. We are rife with wrong and it can consume every cell in our beings. Wouldn't it seem more consistent with our nature that a king would build the foundation of his kingdom on stern resolve and, possibly, repression? That makes more sense, you know, especially given the fact that, of the dozens of nations that populate this big blue marble, most are dictatorships of one flavor or another. It's human nature.

Maybe this is a good place to grab hold of the word "king" and replace it with "father." Since the proverb was originally written by a king, I'm betting that wasn't Solomon's intent, but given also the fact that he isn't here and I want to discuss a larger point, I hope the good king of Israel will forgive my liberties with the verse. "Love and faithfulness keep a father safe; through love his home is made secure." Kind of puts a different spin on things, don't you think? Personally, I don't think it's much of a stretch (though of course I'd think that because I'm the one stretching). A father is the king of his family, right? He is the ruler of the roost and the male role model for his kids despite what popular sitcoms would have us believe. A good father keeps his home secure by being manly, by being strong, by being decisive, by being at the ready for whatever comes along. So why is it that the verse talks about how it is love that makes his home, his throne, secure? If you think it through, doesn't love underlie those other qualities.

It's a tough thing to show your love when you're a man, you know. I never knew my own dad was manly, strong, decisive, and ready when I was growing up. He wasn't a man's man; he wasn't macho or cool or tough; he wasn't physically imposing or bursting out with testosterone. One time we were in Minnesota over my birthday, and we were coming out of a football game. Dad cut off a cab driver while trying to change lanes. It wasn't a malicious move, but you couldn't convince the cabbie of that: at the next stop sign the guy parked behind Dad, came up to the car window and tried to start a fight. Dad didn't say much in response – he had, after all, cut the guy off – but when he did respond it was in an almost obsequious manner to avoid a fight in front of me. After the irate (and out of line) cab driver returned to his decrepit rat-trap on wheels, Dad was ashamed, talking about the whole episode all the way back to our hotel. He was embarrassed about it; so was I because I thought he had looked small and afraid. I thought he should have gotten out and given the guy a fight. He definitely wasn't tough...

...or so I thought. He had seen what I didn't and couldn't see until later. The cabbie had been drunk or strung out. We were in a bad part of town and Dad suspected the guy might have been armed. And besides, Dad had been a cab driver in Minneapolis before. It was hardly East LA but neither was it Pleasant Valley. He knew what people were capable of and he made the snap judgment to avoid the fight because it wasn't worth the risk of getting stabbed or shot, especially in front of his son on his birthday. It was love, not fear, that kept both me and him safe. That's a tough stand to take.

Another time, when Dad could have walked away from a fight, he instead walked into it. Or the aftermath of it, that is. Anyone remember the 1991 Gulf War, when President Bush ended the ground war after we had thoroughly shellacked the Iraqis? When the president directed the combat forces to drop their ammunition and withdraw, that's exactly what they did. Dad was an ammo inspector and it immediately fell on his division to go overseas and secure all that ammunition before the 120 degree temperatures of a Midian summer settled into the Arabian Peninsula. Dad was senior in the program, and was even approaching senior citizenship. He was overweight and diabetic and not in generally good health having survived a bout with cancer ten years before. But younger, fitter, lesser men (also known as "cowards") turned down the assignment citing one Barbra Streisand excuse after another. Not so my father. He loved his country and he loved his work. He also loved the idea of an adventure where he could do important things that lesser men had backed away from. For six months, Dad was in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and even southern Iraq retrieving and securing ammunition so that it wouldn't cause problems later on.

He did it out of love because he was tough. While he was over there, he was exposed to harsh chemicals launched into the air from the well and chemical fires that Saddam lit up when his troops exited Kuwait. Six years later, my father died of cancer contracted through that chemical exposure. You'll never hear me complain that we finally got Saddam. Indirectly,

he was the SOB responsible for killing my dad. Given the opportunity I would have gladly sprung the gallows trap myself. But Dad never regretted it. He did it out of love and pride (and that sense of adventure, to show the young guys that the old man still had it). He won a great many awards and accolades for his service over there (as well as the lasting enmity of the people who managed the Army program to which he gave his career).

Being tough in love: I should be blessed to be the same. Until he died, I never knew my dad was a tough guy, but then I was immature in my ideas of what 'tough' ought to mean. For some guys, it means being Arnold (who, while having a tough image, was a failure in his larger mission of governing). For most, I believe, it means founding your life on love and being willing to faithfully commit all you have to the people you cherish. More than that, it means committing EVERYTHING to the God who loves you more. Sometimes it means sacrifice, and such sacrifice usually costs you much more than you thought it would. Sometimes it costs you your dreams and maybe even your life. As I heard in church yesterday, our faith in God calls us to be willing to give up everything and walk away from things that would hold us back or interfere with our being who He wants us to be. I'll tell you from my own experience that's a tough thing to do...

...because I'm not much of a tough guy either.

Parents, both fathers and mothers, will willingly give everything they have to help their kids succeed, and they do it out of love. I'm a father, though, and I'll only speak for my own kind. Like kings, fathers who would teach their kids good life-lessons will teach them how to secure their lives with love and faithfulness to that ultimate wise love of God. In a fallen world, troubles will come, and it will sometimes hurt a lot. But the love of God in His son will always suffer, persevere, build character and hope to endure through these things. That is the human nature for which we were destined, not the gaudy thing we desire instead. God knew that; so did Paul; so did my Dad and now so do you and I. Have a good week, my friend.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 12 April 2011

The glory of young men is their strength, gray hair the splendor of the old. Proverbs 20, verse 29

I used to be somebody I liked. Long before the affairs, the booze, the struggles, the giving up of things once held dear, and surrendering to the inevitability of a timed and sinful life, I used to be someone I admired. Years ago, I used to be someone I felt I could look up to, someone I thought other people would want to know. I just wanted to love and be loved, you know. I wish I had felt the glory.

I have never been a physically macho guy; for most of my life, I've either been too skinny or too big to consider myself very desirable to the fairer sex. My strength was in other areas and it was my glory. I could debate, argue, recite the finer points of how the wheel of history turns on a dime, and tell you a thousand other details that may be mundane but they're also important to somebody, somewhere. My strengths may have been hidden, but I always believed they were there if only someone would have looked.

As I've gotten older I now find that age has crept up on me. For me, 40 was a psychological hurricane. I let it tear my world apart. Within a few short years, I had caused or known betrayal, insolvency, dissolution, suicidal tendencies, abandonment, and professional stagnation. As a result, gray hairs popped out all over the place on my scalp and in my beard. The last time I looked in the mirror, a face I no longer recognize looked back at me. I see-saw up and down in my weight, and though I'm far from obese or even overweight, I'm also not in the shape I wish to be (even though I'm in better shape than I was twenty years ago). It isn't a pretty picture.

Knowing that, let me tell you an even uglier story. Once upon a time there was a man who grew from a young to an old man in the space of a few fleeting years. In his prime, he looked around and saw the years of his life flying by and he felt left behind by them. Much of what he'd set out to do hadn't been done, hadn't been accomplished, and when he looked he realized that he wasn't the same man he had been only a few years before. In his younger years, he had been someone he'd been proud of, but as he got older he looked back and saw some of the things he had done. Of his family he was very proud, even when he knew he could give them no more. Of his work he was proud enough, even as he knew he had given too much. Of many other things, he wasn't proud at all; in fact he was ashamed, even as he knew he had reveled in these things. The guilt of it was crushing, and he blamed himself for these things, even for things that weren't his doing. Others blamed him for things that he didn't do, and it just piled on. The more he focused on that shame, the more it weighed him down to the point where, time after time, he didn't want to go on anymore. He wanted to give up, give in, give out. He watched as friends and people passed him by, or walked out of his life. He felt very alone.

Have you ever felt like that? It's pretty bleak, isn't it. I find that, the older I get, the more I struggle with thoughts like these. Here in the Valley of the Sun this week, it's been a tough time with many emotional lows and only a few highs...and it's only Tuesday morning. I find that, the older I get, the tougher it is to deal with these kinds of thoughts. We say and do things to each other that sometimes really hurt. There are days when you question the motives and actions of even the people you love most, days when you feel you just can't take anymore. On those times, I feel I should be remembering the fact that bygone strength should be thankfully celebrated and new-grown gray be welcomed as a sign of aging like a fine wine. Instead, I let myself get all wrapped around feeling bad, feeling that things have gone all wrong and that I must be nearing the end of my rope. Sorry if it gets you down too; sometimes life can be depressing.

I believe that's why we're given the verse like the one for today. If you strip away the obvious message about celebrating youth and age, there's something even better underneath. Underneath the surface you find a message that says "celebrate where you are." Be content with every age, every day, that God gives to you. Each one is a blessing, you know. Be happy with each one and be thankful that He's given even just one day more.

Here on an early weekday in Arizona, that's an encouraging message I needed to hear. It has indeed been a tough week so far, and the tough part isn't over yet. Still, in the middle of that tough time, in the middle of feeling very down, I feel like a man with his head hung low, at the end of his rope. That's when I feel the loving touch of the Savior lifting my chin so I might look into His eyes. In those eyes there is the hurt I feel today, the questions, the abandonment, the hurt, and the

anguish. He knows my predicament, and He meets me where I am today, in the middle of all that hurts so much. And despite that hurt, He says “you are strong and you are to be celebrated too. You’re worth dying for.”

When you feel like you’re slowly dying yourself, that means a lot.

He lifts my chin and helps me to remember that strength isn’t just physical, so it isn’t the glory of only the young man. He reminds me that even when I wasn’t all I could have been, I was still ‘somebody’ to Him and to others as well. He reminds me that time does indeed bring age and those gray hairs, but He reminds me, too, that they are marks of honor for having been blessed to have lived so long (and not even yet half as long as so many others). And He reminds me that every age is full of blessings. Just as every day is filled with challenges which we overcome, every age is full of blessings with which to overcome those challenges. Behind, above, and throughout both the blessings and the challenges, He is there, ageless and eternal, beckoning me to have some faith in Him, try again today, and give myself a break when one is well earned.

These days, when I look in the mirror, I no longer see the boy I was at sixteen, or the man who married at twenty-two, or the man who had his last child at twenty-nine. I’m no longer even the man at forty-four who I was yesterday. I’m a day older now, having lived through both hard and blessed times with the strength of the soul that I didn’t have when I was younger. Today, I have those gray hairs that say “I’ve been there” to anyone who would look my way. In weeks like this one, I have indeed felt alone: alone, powerless, unloved and hopeless. Those are nothing more than a mirage in the Navajo sands. I’m never alone. I’m never alone as long as I have a God beside me who believes in me even when other people don’t. I’m never alone as long as I cling to the hope that any tomorrow He grants to me can be better than what I made His yesterdays. I’m never alone when I remember that people can, out of the blue, come back into your life, even apologize for things that happened, things that hurt but were way stations on the way to your both being better. And I’m never alone as long as I know that the strength of youth and the splendedored gray hairs of advancement pale in comparison to the wise love that He imparts to me every day of my life. In that light, I can be someone to like and love. So can you.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 13 April 2011

Blows and wounds cleanse away evil, and beatings purge the inmost being. Proverbs 20, verse 30.

Fight club, right? The first rule of Fight Club is you never talk about Fight Club, right again? You never talk about Fight Club because Fight Club will save your soul....does this mean that the holy word of the Creator of the universe was a fan of Fight Club? Um...maybe not. After all, that was a gruesomely violent movie about a psychopath...

...however...

...what I think this verse is talking about is actually stern, high standards. It's talking about holding yourself to a very high standard and all the commitment and pain that can be involved in doing that. It's admitting a very hard truth, namely that it often takes a hard fight to purge evil. Talk to the vets from Afghanistan and Iraq (or any war) and they'll quietly tell you that's true. Talk to an addict who has fought the demons of addiction and they'll tell you it's true. Ask someone who has overcome physical, emotional or sexual abuse and they will tell you that, at the end of all the terrible blows, they persevered. Ask someone who has had to overcome great odds to attain a goal and they will tell you that it's the climb and not the goal that really mattered most.

But, you see, it's more than that. I believe the verse is telling us that adversity is a refining thing. It burns away the dross of our lives. Getting hurt can either make us stronger and better or it can defeat us. Me, I lump the determined hurt into the 'defeated' column. In my view, whether they realize it or not, those who allow adversity to make them bitter are defeated by it. They project a false strength that, on the surface, is both attractive and superficially admirable. My hunch, though, is that if you dig deep enough, you'll find someone still hurting.

For most of us, I think a fight teaches us lessons. Struggle, challenges, adversity, fighting and even combat: they all teach us to commit, not sacrifice. They chip away the things that don't matter as much, and strengthen the character traits that have taken root in us. Here I think of my son. I've talked about his dyslexia before, how he's had to fight to adjust to an academic world that simply doesn't function at the pace he does. He fights every day, and he's overcoming, both in now maintaining the standards of the slower-paced world as well as learning to focus his talents in ways he can offer as both profit and service. He does it without becoming bitter. I think about my youngest daughter, who has overcome a lot of mistakes in her eighteen years and had to claw her way back from things that would have destroyed many other kids. Through them, she's turned out to be a wonderful, deep, resilient and loving young woman (even while her erratic behavior positively drives me up the wall). She has done these things without letting anger sink into her bones. And I think of my oldest daughter and her future husband, who fight quite often but are fighting the same battle as millions of other couples: scratching out a life for themselves in a world set against them, working hard to get by and getting by to become more. They have done them without letting envy or greed replace what is more important.

All of them make me a father who stands on the sidelines and cheers them on with tears of pride in his eyes. Through all of it, I see their struggles and I want to step in yet know that it's best that I don't. I see how the struggles they endure refine and make better their inner most beings. My kids may not know it but they're learning to hold themselves to high standards. They're learning to fight hard to meet those standards, learning tough lessons to separate good behavior from the bad. As parents, we hate to see our kids suffer, yet those times are when I remember that my God is their God too, and that He equips them for a life of loving faith as much as He does me or you. Knowing that, I know I can stand back, let them fight and win – and succeed – on their own. It doesn't always work out that way, but as a parent, it's how you know you did the right thing.

And that's also the difference between these fights and Fight Club. Having faith doesn't mean struggle won't be put in your way. When it is, though, we want to talk about it; we want to share what we've learned to make our friends, brothers, and sisters better people too. They can learn from us; we can learn from them. Nietzsche was misguided in his intent, but not his famous statement. So were Brad Pitt and Edward Norton. That which doesn't kill us – or defeat us – can indeed make us stronger and better. Not a bad lesson to remember, and one worth fighting for.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 14 April 2011

The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases. Proverbs 21, verse 1

At work yesterday we got into a discussion about evolution. My current project finds me working with four Indian consultants (from Mumbai, not the reservation). I don't know how we got onto the subject, but my teammates were all talking about Darwinism, about how logical it was, how it fit in with human behavior, and a number of other things that left me with my head shaking. If you've known me for awhile, you'll be proud of me: I didn't immediately argue; in fact, I didn't argue at all. I simply said: I reject all that because you have to have faith in it to believe it's true, and I choose to believe in a faith that can save me instead. I chose to let God speak for Himself by holding my tongue and letting a few words sink in for effect.

People can believe what they want; you can believe what you want. I have yet to see anything in the religion of Darwinism that makes me feel encouraged by it, or want to believe in it. To me, it's implausible and unconvincing. So I reject it. If God can make this world by speaking, and if He can work miracles every day in our lives, is it so unreasonable to think that He made us His special creation instead of using apes to do the job? I know what I believe. You decide.

But when I read this verse, it got me thinking more and more about the discussion. I feel bad for those who don't believe in God; I really do. It's not some moral superiority angle, and it isn't some "I've got a secret" game for Christians to play against other people. That's stupid. No, I feel bad for my co-workers because they are missing out on something wonderful, namely on knowing that the LORD, the king of the universe holds their lives and their hearts in His hand just as surely as He does any world leader. God directs our lives like He controls all of nature, and that is a magnificent thing to comprehend. Think of it: the same God who made storms, oceans, mountains, and all the great and terrible forces of nature also made blades of grass, a gentle breeze, blue bonnets along the road, and water. He also made the peace of a sleeping child, blood to carry living oxygen as well as to seal up wounds, the life force in every living creature, the moments when you appreciate true beauty, the exquisite joy of making love, and the indescribable feeling of love that is His own true self. Same God, everywhere and every thing.

My co-workers are people from a different experience. They are highly educated, very kind and personable, and from a vastly different culture. One is an atheist, one I don't know about, and the other two are Hindu (itself a religion many of whose practices I find interesting. We could learn a lot by emulating them). I respect their opinions and would love to share more of mine. But for the first time in a long time, I think I understand what it means to want to be all things to all people, and to want to win their souls for eternity rather than pump them in an evangelical handshake and drill dogma & doctrine into their foreign heads. Here I think the soft-sell is the best approach, to simply be a good, positive witness for God instead of a mouthy loudspeaker.

That's what the proverb does. It simply states a fact for what it is, and lets the fact – and the Spirit behind it – work for itself. It says that our magnificent God is in control and that He knows what He's doing. In times of great stress, depression and worry, He is in just as much control as those times when things are going swimmingly. He was present at creation, He was present at the first Christmas, He was there on both Good Friday and Easter Sunday, and He has been here every day since. He will be back soon, on a day of His choosing. Until then, He directs each one, and you & I, like a watercourse, wherever it pleases Him to take them yet always for the good.

So I just stood up for what I believe in and left it at that. Perhaps another opportunity will present itself to share more. It isn't up to me to generate that situation; I'll leave that to the Spirit. He knows what He's doing more than I do. He knows what He's doing because the proverb is as true for me as it is my friends from the Sub-Continent. I believe that, whether my friends know it or not, the God of Hosts, the God of Abraham, Issac and Jacob, and the God of and you and me directs their lives and their hearts along with everyone else. He knows them even if they don't know Him. He wants them for His eternity just as much as He wants you, me, our baby children, or billions of other people in this world. He made all of us special, not as some scientific freak show of random coincidences but, instead, as the intended glory of his creation, made of a wise and unfathomable love. Even Charles Darwin. That's what I believe in.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 15 April 2011

All a man's ways seem right to him, but the LORD weighs the heart. Proverbs 21, verse 1.

Not long ago, someone accused me of being rash. Impulsive, impetuous, quick to anger, and above all, rash. In light of such an accusation, but one word describes my condition: guilty. I'm afraid I have been rash. I've been quick to decide on what to do on some things, and not nearly deliberate enough on others. Whether it is how to allocate finances on the first and fifteenth, disciplining over-zealous teenagers, or my personal conduct I could rightly be accused of being rash. I could give you any number of plausible, rational and applicable reasons why this is so but the bottom line is that it is so.

What's more, I've been accused of being self-assured and cocky. This I've confessed here many times before. Of these traits I am also guilty as charged, yet I don't necessarily think they are all negative. Self-assuredness comes from having learned hard lessons; see confession number one for some of the background on that. For some things my cocky demeanor is simply a reflection of knowing that 'I can do it,' that I can use my talents constructively and successfully. The tricky thing has been learning how to manage these things and not be over-convinced that I'm right in all things. That too is no small chore, given that I'm disposed to being argumentative, and that I've had to learn how to not seem so snotty and self-righteous.

There I go again, boasting about myself. But it's true. How about you? Ever been accused of being a know it all, or have you ever been brought down a notch or two because you deserved it? I have. I haven't deserved all the kicks I've been given, but I won't lie to you and say I didn't deserve a good share of them. All my ways seemed right to me, especially when I didn't realize how wrong I really was.

That's when the LORD weighed my heart. Foolish me, I thought I could snow Him too. I thought He wouldn't notice little old me being pretty big for my britches. I thought wrong. He weighed my heart because He's been weighing it all along. What's more, He weighed it and spoke to me through my conscience, through His word, through the scathing counsel of good friends and former friends, and through the colorful prism of His love. He weighed my heart and then showed me the results. It wasn't pretty, you know. It was actually pretty ugly.

Where I wanted to just love and be loved, He reminded me that He did indeed love me along with other people who stood by my side. Where I wanted to succeed, He reminded me that He had made me to make the most of the talents He'd loaned to me, and that through Him I would never taste real, lasting failure. He reminded me that His weights were fair and honest, but that the burden of wearing them around my shoulders was actually very light. He reminded me that I was no different than my brother Job, who had been a better, wiser, wealthier man caught up in his own moments of doubt. And He reminded me that it was a good thing, that good would come of always having my heart weighed so long as I stopped fighting Him and simply let the good happen.

It's a wonderful thing to be forgiven, you know. It's even more wonderful to pass it on to others. They're being weighed too.

Along the way to these reminders I learned a few things. One was to pray before I make decisions. There are times when I do this well and there are times when I forget, but it's been an exercise of spiritual and intellectual discipline to remind myself to pray before making decisions. They don't have to be just the big decisions: God wants to be involved in all of them. He wants to be in the mundane questions about whether to watch CBS or NBC, whether to wear the black or grey socks, and which shampoo to use in the morning. He also wants to be part of the big ones like considering a new job, how to discipline wayward children, and whether to stay or cut and run in your marriage. Whether it's to walk up the steps or to walk out on a bad situation, God wants to be involved in helping me, helping us, make all our decisions. He knows it will draw us closer to Him and that our relationship with Him will come to mean more to us than a Sunday morning ritual or a comforting wish factory. Mind you, I still struggle with remembering it every now and then, but it's a work in progress and the work is good to do. It's a result of having your heart weighed and knowing you need to lighten it on the scales.

And the other thing I've had to learn is one of which I was recently reminded at a group Bible study: Be still and know that I am God. Especially when I'm trying to contemplate, to pro and con a decision, God wants us to open up the root of our feelings and share that with Him, then sit back and watch as He makes His will known. I believe He does it to share His glory with us little by little, knowing that it would completely blow us away if we tried to take it on all at once. I've also come to believe that He does it this way to give us comfort in times of trouble, knowing that it's a good practice to slow down, pause, and simply take a little break to just breathe in and breathe out. In those times, I am learning to be still and I am better able to block out the constant white noise of a hectic world where I have too many irons in the fire. In those times, I am better able to honestly consider what it is that He wants me to do.

In other words, in those times, I am better able to see how the world in which I've made my life is not all about me and how mistaken I can be to think all my ways are right. I'm better able to see how I've measured up on the scales. I've mangled those syllables; I've messed up royally in public; I've come up short and all too often. It's not all bad, though, because by prayerful contemplation I have also been enabled to see where I have been successful and where I can be righteously thankful. It may not be about me, but I'm not all bad either. It simply takes a little humility and the occasional reality check to see that some weight isn't all that bad to lose.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 18 April 2011

To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice. Proverbs 21, verse 3.

If you sacrifice everything you have for your family, do you think it pleases the LORD? Last evening, a friend of mine posted this as her status online: "There is only ONE line into heaven, God doesn't care about your denomination, skin color or social status. God only cares about what's in your heart." God looks into our hearts and looks for what motivates us, what drives us. Is it love? Selflessness? Envy? Pride? Caring or a desire to share? Anger or resentment? God looks into our hearts to see why we sacrifice, not just what we sacrifice. I wonder what God thought of the hearts of the men in the Civil War who hated so much that they made devastating war on each other over questions that, to us in hindsight, appear fairly simple to answer. I wonder what He thought of the Branch Davidian's down in Waco who blindly followed their religious faith before being slaughtered by their government. I wonder what he thinks of the lonely woman who sits in her home wondering why her children never call. I wonder what He thinks of me.

This is the part where I need to be reminded that it's a dangerous thing to pre-suppose any thought the Almighty has. He can do fine on His own. Instead, this is the point where I need to take the verse at face value and simply accept that it's giving a hard truth. God doesn't want our sacrifices. He looks into our hearts and sees what those sacrifices really are worth. Dads, God doesn't want us to give up everything for our families, or retreat into our man-caves of solitude or Sportscenter when things get pretty tough. God doesn't want that 'sacrifice' from you. Ladies, God doesn't want your "I give up everything for my kids and family" martyr sacrifice. It's boring and it's not what He intended for you to do. Men and women, God doesn't want you to pour everything you have into useless past-times that really do only pass the time while passing up on opportunities to do better.

God doesn't want sacrifices. He didn't want thousands of animal sacrifices done by His chosen people of Ancient Israel. He didn't want the bloodshed, and He didn't want the ritual. Even though He commanded His people to perform them...get ready...that's not what He was looking for.

He doesn't want any of those things without the heart. God wanted the heart. He wanted then what He wants now: for us to submit EVERYTHING to Him from our hearts. Not 10% of a tithe, not dressing your kids in the same outfit on Sunday morning so they all look cuter than the other kids, not attending Sundays and Wednesdays, not volunteering in the ladies' groups or attending every Men's Bible study, not helping the little old lady across the street, and not going to Africa to feed the hungry children. Those are all wonderful, well meaning diversions from what God really wants. God wants what is behind the sacrifices. In Israel, He wanted the hearts, motivations and real love and feelings of His people and He wanted all of them. He appointed leaders and priests to perform rituals so that people would reflect on these things and prayerfully, everlastingly bring ALL of their love and concerns and feelings, hopes, and dreams to Him.

Nothing has changed.

And there's more. God doesn't just look into the heart to see why we sacrifice. He looks into our hearts so that WE can see why we do it. He wants us to understand it, and He wants us to turn our hearts in another direction. Yesterday in church, the pastor's sermon was about how we manipulate our feelings and outcomes so that we do things that we think are pleasing to God. It was a fitting message for Palm Sunday. Remember the history of Palm Sunday, when a triumphant Christ entered Jerusalem to become the King of the Jews. The Jews, persecuted for hundreds of years, thought He was coming to be the earthly king in the manner of his ancestor, David. He was finally, fully going to give the oppressors what they deserved and restore glory, wealth and standing before God to a long-suffering race. Five days later, gravely disappointed by their manipulated expectations, they murdered Jesus because He not only failed to meet those expectations: He willingly threatened many things they held dear. He made war on their closest beliefs and challenged them to give all their hearts to God.

He did it to prove He was God, and to take away all the manipulation, 'sacrifice,' and eternal punishment for all time. He did it because God wanted the heart. He wanted His people, ALL of them, not just the Jews, to do from the heart what was right and just. He did it so they could love Him because they wanted to, not because they had to. God saw all our

best intentions and good acts as worth less than the sacrifice of the lowliest animal without a heart behind them that says "I love you more than anything and I want to serve your glory."

Several thousand years later, nothing about that has changed. I still find myself wrapped around the axle of 'doing' every day, hoping that what I do will be appreciated and mean something, that my kids will thankfully, finally see all their father does to suffer for them and thankfully, finally start doing these things on their own. I do it for the recognition, the praise, the spotlight, and the sacrifice, thinking there's something I can do to atone for wrongs done and set things right. That's a foolish lot of Barbra Streisand. Do you do it too?

There's a better way, and He came riding into town on a colt nobody had ever ridden before. He spent the last week of His life pouring out his intellect, heart and wisdom before pouring out the true last full measure of devotion. He did it doing all that was right and just before offering Himself as a sacrifice in a way that we could never do. It may have happened thousands of years ago in a place and time that are foreign to me, but it still means something today, and it still pleases the LORD to tell about it.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 19 April 2011

Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the lamp of the wicked, are sin! Proverbs 21, verse 4.

Is this you? Are you the one with the haughty eyes and the proud heart? I know it's me. It is the Tuesday of Holy Week. On this day, Christ most likely spent time teaching. The words of Matthew 22 through 25 were probably spoken on Tuesday or Wednesday; we don't know for sure. If you study them closely, you see that, even as He knew He was going to die, Jesus didn't equivocate. He appealed to the love and wisdom of His followers as well as confronting and appealing to the same in his opponents. He could have easily given up, given in to the temptations to simply smite His oppressors. He might have even felt haughty and proud to do so. It wouldn't have taken much, only a fleeting thought...but it would have changed all of human history, from the start of time to that which goes beyond it.

So this verse is fitting on this day. It's a realistic reminder that pride not focused on God is sin. I need to remember that pretty much every day. Take yesterday for example. This is the last week of my project here in Phoenix. Our small team of five has done good work together, and I'm honored to have been a part of it. We will be making a recommendation to the client this week, whether or not to upgrade their information systems. My deliverables are done, complete, already delivered to my project manager. I'm here to simply help the team finish strong and make sure the final report is solid.

Said report is in jeopardy. One of the critical recommendations we are considering is whether or not to go with the system I advocate. Common business sense says this is a no-brainer, that staying on their current system will continue a quick march to obsolescence while positioning them poorly to capitalize on a market that is constricting instead of growing. Our team spent much of yesterday, however, discussing the real possibility of recommending the opposite, that is, of recommending that the client expand the use of their current obsolete system instead of letting it ride off into the sunset.

I can't believe they're actually considering this. We have spent four weeks gathering data as to why the client should jettison their old system. One factor – cost – is driving this particular train, and on paper up front, jettisoning said boat anchor would cost a lot of money. That cost, however, is mitigated by other higher business costs, some of which are intangible. Agility, adaptability, quick reaction, user satisfaction and configurability are all real business costs as well that simply don't exist in the legacy system. There will be a price to pay for that if they make this recommendation. My teammates are relatively inexperienced in the field of healthcare IT whereas I have been doing this work for over a decade. Can't they see the sense of it?

So maybe it's time for me to remember that haughty eyes and a proud heart are sin because they are the lamp of the wicked. After a day of incredulity, I need to remember this fact. It's not about me: it's about recommending what is best for the customer, and that may not be what I'm recommending. I need a gut check. I know my business, better than many in fact. I don't make recommendations lightly, and I know what I am talking about. But I don't know it all, and if I press my advantage with this team, I will surely end up looking like a know-it-all without meeting the client's needs. That wouldn't do.

And it wouldn't be following Christ's example, that's for sure. I believe He would teach and instruct, gently rebuke without tearing down. Perhaps if He were in the meetings with us (and He may very well be) He would listen, stick up for his position and advocate from principle instead of just a desire to be right or to win. Perhaps He would lovingly prove the superiority of his position while not destroying the feelings of others, and giving credit where it is due.

Those are things I struggle with. I don't tolerate stupidity very well, and I think that recommending the client update their obsolete system is a stupid waste of resources. But that isn't my choice to make. All I can – and should – do is provide objective information to the decision making process, then advocate for what I believe is best for the customer. That may mean losing, having my position rejected and not getting what I want. It doesn't mean my work would be in vain, just that an alternative had been selected. In a way, if they select an alternative over other proven architecture it means that they must have faith in the strength of that which they chose.

Still, I struggle with it because I am indeed proud and my eyes have indeed been haughty. When I step back from the fight I can see that those words aren't complimentary; they make me sound arrogant and small. So perhaps the best course is to fight the good fight and let the chips fall where they will. Right wins out in the end anyway, even when there are many facets to that right. Or right (and wrong) things about Facets (the program with which I'm working). Like that Tuesday 2000 years ago, I don't know what's going to happen today, but I will try to go into it with a humble heart and open eyes instead of my usual matched set.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 20 April 2011

The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty. Proverbs 21, verse 5.

By and large this verse may be 3000 years old but it's still true. Practically speaking, when we make good plans, they usually succeed. When we seek to undertake big things, the odds of them being successful are greatly increased if our actions are well planned; see yesterday's commentary on why I'm struggling here at work. Of course, it's also true that, in war, plans are perfect until they are actually carried out. As soon as the first bullets fly, things change and the unexpected starts to happen. That's another reason for planning, though: to condition yourself towards different possibilities. More importantly, that's why you practice the plan: so that you're prepared for other eventualities. A trained and equipped fighter is better prepared to handle himself when the plan starts to deviate off course. Plans always do.

I've been taking project management certification courses. As soon as this Arizona project is over, I will probably return to that being my full-time occupation and should complete the certification in a few weeks. The whole purpose of PMI certification is to teach prospective project managers how to plan projects using standard processes. Why? Because methodical planning is a way to reduce risk and (down the line) maximize potential success (and thus profit). D-Day was a big project. So was the Apollo program. So is building a house, helping kids succeed in college, planning for your retirement, re-doing your kitchen, scheduling a getaway at the end of May, and every day of a marriage. Do you think any of those would succeed if, on a whim, you decided to move in a radically different direction without thinking it through? You might get lucky, but I'm betting what the real outcome would be.

Spiritually, when we turn from God we reject all things good and we can succeed at nothing. Perhaps the Pharisees thought of this Proverb on the Wednesday of Holy Week. We don't really know what happened on that day; Scripture is silent. But it's a fitting and ironic comparison, you know. After all, this Jesus guy had not panned out. He was saying things that threatened the status quo but that also threatened THEIR status quo. That just wouldn't do. The people loved him and expected great things from him, so they couldn't just have him taken away. People would notice. No, they had to have something trumped up that would stick and would turn the people. They quickly made good plans, diligent foolproof plans even...

...even though their plans were as bereft of the love of God as they were lush in ethical poverty. Their plans fell apart because they didn't understand the first thing about the kingdom that Jesus character talked about. How would history have differed if they had gotten onboard with Christ instead of murdering Him? Their plans weren't well-thought-through. They didn't count on the fact the God is a god of order who wants us to live our lives in an ordered fashion. He gave us spontaneity as a gift with which to harmonize our lives, not as the instrument by which to always play their melody. If you constantly stick to the plan and aren't open to other options that present themselves when you're executing the plan, you might just miss out on great opportunities that God has put in your way.

One thing I'll give to the Pharisees, thought, is that they didn't succumb to 'analysis paralysis' either, that is, over-thinking options. They simply went through with it and did it. See how that worked out, eh? Plans can fail from too much analysis, never getting beyond the stage of being conceptual into the stage of becoming factual. At some point, the planning needs to conclude and you need to act. That's why you plan first for the tasks, then you assign dates and resources to those tasks. If you spend too much time navel-gazing and 'what if'ing' all the outcomes, you run the risk of never acting.

For the first-century Pharisees, if they really wanted to silence the guy, a little more time of deliberation would have done the trick, right? Instead, in a couple of days they tried to marginalize him, then they hung him up on a tree and killed Him...

...and then everything He said came true. Imagine that.

The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty. In the time of Solomon it was true; in the time of Dave Terry, it's still true. If you want to succeed, make good plans and stick to them. Those Pharisees didn't. Thank God for that.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 21 April 2011

A fortune made by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor and a deadly snare. Proverbs 21, verse 4.

Today is about a few things. It is about manipulation, the Last Supper, and it's about Judas. No, in case you're wondering, it isn't about Lady Gaga and her perverted new shocker. A personal aside: I wish she would just move to Tajikistan or some other place where her only audience was a yak. Today, it's about how lies are a trap, and about how they never work out, even if you get rich off them.

First the manipulation. All lies are manipulative. When we lie, we are trying to manipulate something for our advantage. The truth is too hard to live with, so we make an alternate version of it. The trouble with that is you can't live with a lie. They catch up with you, or they embed themselves into you like a cancer, and cancer left untreated will kill you. All day yesterday I fought with my team, trying to get them to see the futility of the proposal they're making. I failed at it, so I turned over my deliverables in which is contained data objectively proving my point. Late in the afternoon, the project manager started asking me about measurements, furnished by our customer, rating their system (and thus my team's proposed new architecture) as substandard. He was trying to pressure me to falsely increase the ratings and I refused to do it.

I've told enough lies in my life and they only cause ruin. This ruin would be falsification in front of a client to justify an unjustifiable position. I'm not risking my job just so someone else can pad their estimate with false data. Like I said, I've told enough lies in this life, both in and out of work, and they never amount to any good. I regret every one and wish I could take them all back. That's the trouble with a lie, though: once you say it, you've destroyed your credibility and it's done. People get hurt. Not this time. What he did with my data afterwards I don't know, nor do I care. If it comes out that it was 'updated' or padded, the problem won't be mine. I hate taking the stance of having to wash my hands of it, but I won't let someone falsify my work because they can't defend what they're doing in the spotlight.

So what about the Last Supper? Here's where it and the story of Judas (not Lady Gaga) are intertwined. If you don't know it, Christ and his 12 best friends celebrated the Jewish Passover on the last night of His life. A thousand years of ritual and tradition were involved in the meal, and He used it to institute a new sacrament, a new ritual reminder of himself. Today, Christians call it "communion" where we celebrate partaking in His body and blood as reminders of His forgiveness. Christ knew what would happen to Him in the coming 24 hours, knew about the torture, abandonment and murder. He knew that his best friends would all desert him, but He loved them all the same. It happened on the Thursday we commemorate today.

Sitting at the table that night was Judas, the most canny and clever of the twelve. Earlier in the week (maybe even that day) he had traded Jesus' life for thirty pieces of silver. It wasn't a fortune but it was more than just pocket change. He did so based on a lie, both the lies he believed from the Jewish leaders who convinced him to betray, and the lies he told himself that he could get away with it. I think Judas was a confused, greedy and easily manipulated man. He must have thought that he could make a profit off his 30 pieces of silver, that it could be the start of something big.

Oh yes...it was. He's gone down in history as the man who betrayed the man-God, who sold his soul for a pittance. Did Judas get his fortune? He got what he bargained for. In the end, he was crushed with regret to the point that he threw his money back at his manipulators, then committed suicide. Who knows what his last thoughts were as he checked into hell. Perhaps they were about how it had all been a fleeting vapor, a trap of lies and that the 'fortune' hadn't been worth it. It all happened today, and it all started with a lie.

Of course, you or I wouldn't ever betray the Messiah for a lie, would we? We wouldn't ever exchange that eternal love for something more temporal, something more timely. We wouldn't deny God anything, and we wouldn't lie to protect ourselves about anything, or to gain advantage. You or I wouldn't be Judas. We wouldn't try to get a little more silver in exchange for a little less honesty, right? Don't worry: you don't have to answer. But I hope it has you thinking.

The moral of this story is pretty easy to figure out: don't lie. The fortune made from it isn't lucky, it isn't insightful in a good way, and it isn't big. It is expensive, however, and it may just cost you your life. Judas didn't find that out in time. I hope I have. Lady Gaga is still a talentless work in progress.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 22 April 2011, Good Friday

The violence of the wicked will drag them away, for they refuse to do what is right. Proverbs 21, verse 7.

What a Good Friday verse! Every year during holy week I watch "the Passion of the Christ." It's a self-imposed tradition I started a few years ago when I found myself on the road on this day. Yesterday, I was watching it on an airplane and I think the guy next to me became nervous every time I flinched. Watching someone be flogged and crucified is a brutal thing. The movie had me tearing up. Mel Gibson received a great deal of criticism for the excessive violence and gore he insisted be portrayed in the film. If you've never seen the movie, prepare yourself for an emotional experience, then watch it. Personally, I think it was understated because much worse probably happened during the actual crucifixion. I say, "bravo Mel."

You and I deserved it. You may not think so, but you seriously need to think again. We deserve the nails. We deserve the flagellation. We deserve the beatings, the mutilation and the gore. There is no way we could take the spiritual consequences of every sin ever done and take them all on ourselves in one single moment, then couple that with the most brutal, torturous and humiliating form of execution ever designed by evil man. We are not God; we are imperfect and couldn't take it. Our bodies and souls would break apart.

But He did.

He did and in that moment he willingly put off all his Godly vestments, and willingly put aside His spiritually almighty nature and became, fully and completely, just a human being, just like you and me. And to cap it off, He willingly stood through all of it while something happened that had never happened before or since: God the father, the perfect trinity, abandoned someone. God turned away from the sin because He had to. There on that pathetic, painful, pitiful cross, Jesus took it all. He did it without erring, without sin, and without hesitation. He didn't want to have to do it, but He knew He had to because without it, you and I couldn't ever have any promise of living with Him forever. He did it because we deserved it but He knew we couldn't do it ourselves.

And He did it for us, for you, for me, for our friends and neighbors, and for every person since Adam who has suffered the physical, emotional and spiritual torture of sin. He even did it for the Pharisees who murdered Him. He loved them too. He did it because the violence of the wicked will drag them away, for they refuse to do what is right. He knew that his murderers would pay an eternal price for their violence, their lies, their malice, greed, and their refusal to do what is right. I'm a Pharisee. So are you. You can look in the mirror or you can look away from it. You're still what you are. So am I. So is He, and He is no Pharisee.

So I watched "The Passion" yesterday, and again I was brought to tears, realizing what a heroic price had to be paid by someone for all the terrible things I've done. Sins big and small, public and private, confessed and hidden: all of them are mine and alone I can't pay for them. Alone I am damned. He stepped in and took it for me. You could say that my actions had Him murdered. I caused a man to die, and not just any man but God Himself, special and magnificent, here on Earth. I put Him to death. So did the Roman guards and the Pharisees. So did Mel Gibson. So did Torquemada, Mother Theresa, Adolf Hitler, Billy Graham, Barack Hussein Obama, your mother, your best friend, and you. Without Him, our violence and wickedness would drag us away because we refuse to do what is right.

This morning, I watched another movie, this one much shorter. It too had me in tears. I first saw it in church on Good Friday several years ago. "Sunday's Comin." Pastor John Jefferson; if you have a computer, Google that today and watch. If you can't find it, go to my Facebook page and watch; the link is there. A small reminder, it put Mel's movie in perspective. It reminded me why all this matters, and what's coming because of it.

Centuries years before his descendent brought it to completion, King Solomon was the scribe who wrote this proverb that accurately describes why Good Friday, today, is so critical. You don't need a yearly movie tradition or a struggling, sinful

blogger to tell you that. You need Jesus. You need Good Friday. And you need them because you also need to remember that after the terrible passion, Sunday is comin.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 25 April 2011

The way of the guilty is devious, but the conduct of the innocent is upright. Proverbs 21, verse 8.

Happy Easter Monday, when we are all innocent again. In truth, there's a sleight of hand in that statement because, if you believe in Christ, you are innocent every day. Every day is Easter Sunday because every day is a fresh opportunity to rise from death and the day before. It's a new chance to turn from feeling guilty, from being guilty. That first part of the verse is true, you know: when you're guilty, you're devious. It becomes too easy to deviously sneak around, hide your thoughts, mask your intentions, and increase your guilt. When you know you're guilty and you know you've done wrong, if you aren't careful, it becomes too easy to compound those wrongs, adding to them and hardening your conscience. That's why we need Easter; that's why we need the celebration of defeating guilt, sin and death. That's why we need the smiles of joy after the tears of sorrow.

With that in mind, I want to tell you about my bittersweet Easter Weekend. Yesterday was wonderful: wonderful breakfast, wonderful morning with my family, wonderful service (with 350 people rockin the house just at first service), wonderful meal afterwards with wonderful people. Did I mention that it was wonderful? A year to the date after I helped to make my world fall apart, for the first time in a long time I felt together. For the first time in a very long time, I felt like I was part of the blessings, like forgiveness actually was mine. We had a great barbecue dinner here with family and great friends, and got to know people I'd only known in passing before. Blessings really do abound. In the middle of being guilty of things that, to some, are unforgiveable, it's a wonderful blessing to know that we can move beyond un-forgiveness and guilt and into being Easter people every day.

All that came on the heels of the most moving Good Friday I've ever known. You may have read last week that it was an emotional Thursday and Friday, and it certainly was. The project came to an end (with my solution being rejected). I was melancholy and sad, in tears with much on my heart. And I was very tired, exhausted after a five-week stretch of stress and work travel. It was finally Good Friday and I was aware all day long of what that meant, what had happened. Believe it or not, I was looking forward to the slaying nature of the service I would attend that night.

As soon as that service started, everything I had thought before became meaningless and minor. My daughter came in, weeping, and I asked her what was wrong. She said that a good friend of hers (an old flame in fact) had died and she'd just found out. My family and I huddled and we Googled his name to find out that G. (I will call him that) had indeed died that week. The viewing was that evening. All through the service, we cried. We had known G., known him well in fact. Even though he and my daughter had dated years ago and then only for a few months, we had kept up with him through the years. He worked at Market Street (my favorite store) and was planning to enter the military, my 'alma mater' if you will. G. had struggled with drug abuse but I had heard he had gotten on top of it. Last week, the demons closed in and he killed himself.

I spent Friday night and much of Saturday very down. When an apparent suicide happens in your life, you hope and pray for the best. You hope that, before he died, there was a flash of repentance, a moment of forgiveness. You don't want to think that someone with so much promise, such a good young man, had thrown it away and opted for hell. You don't want to think that, just before Easter, he was damned. You don't want to think of those things...but they become unavoidable. I felt so angry about it, like I wanted to go back to last weekend and find him and hold him to say "don't do what you're thinking." He wasn't my son – and we weren't even particularly close, just friendly in passing but on a first-name basis – but he was somebody in my life and I was somebody in his. That relationship is over now. I've been where he was, felt despondent and desperate enough to want to end it, but people and prayer pulled me through. I learned that, if you can get through the hard moments, you can get to the end of the day when there will be rest and a chance to try again when you wake. It's hard to remember but, in those moments of supreme black depression, God is standing beside you, Christ is standing with you with his holed and beaten hand in yours, begging you to hold on and believe through. Those moments of depression come and go in life, and they are very real and very tempting. G. knew that temptation and failed. He couldn't or didn't know these simple things, and I want so much to be able to go back a week and tell him these things, to stop what was coming.

After church, after all the tears, we went to the viewing. We met his parents and expressed our sorrows. I can't imagine the shock they must be in. I hope with all my heart that Easter Sunday was a time of trying again for them, that the timing of it hadn't turned the day of new hope into a remembrance of bitterness. We saw G. in his casket. It didn't even look like him, and the moment felt surreal. Afterwards, we went to get a few groceries for the weekend and home to cry some more. A few hours later came a surrender to sleep, resting and waiting for that chance to try again.

Now, on an Easter Monday, with such a weekend in the past, it's hard to remember that it is indeed 'the past' and keep it there. The temptation is great to let tragedy remind me of sadness and sin, perhaps greater even than it would be on any other day after the Resurrection. This morning, I read a friend's Facebook post that said "On this day, God wants you to know that God is glad that you are you. Sure, we all have things we want to change, to improve about ourselves. But underneath the flesh and bone, you are an immortal and perfect soul." That's how God sees me, and you, and Osama Bin Laden, and Joel Osteen, and everyone else. It's how He saw G. That's why He promised both Good Friday and Easter for so long, then made them come true.

Easter Sunday was G.'s first full day in the ground, where his remains will now stay for the rest of time. By the end of this week, talk of him will subside and the memory of him will recede in the public consciousness. A year from now, except to those who loved him, it will be as if he never existed; a year from now, for those who did love him, it will be as if a long nightmare of a year has flown by. I would give anything to be able to have such a fine young man back, but that giving isn't my choice. He's gone, perhaps of his own choice, his own hand. It makes me sad beyond describing in my inadequate words here. I hope it was all a terrible accident, and I spent a good deal of time praying that God had been merciful to a good, hurting and confused young man. In a way, the grieving on Good Friday made Easter morning all the more beautiful. Isn't that the lesson? Easter is hope from hopelessness, and each day of the rest of my life is a new one, with that hope from hopelessness. I hope G. got a glimpse of that before his life ended. Please pray for the comfort of his family, then rise to celebrate today as your chance to begin anew, innocent again.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 26 April 2011

Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife. Proverbs 21, verse 9.

If you're working to reconcile a relationship, you might want to move on from this verse and come back to it on a full stomach. Been there, done that, you know, what with living with a quarrelsome mate and being one myself. For too many years I spent much of my time unconsciously finding fault, complaining, or finding reasons to be unhappy with my someone else. Things weren't put away; there was never any money left; I felt like a slave; I could never do anything right; what the heck did I ever do wrong; can't you just understand where I'm coming from; try walking around in my shoes for awhile; what about me? Those were common complaints from me for a very, very long time. In return for them I heard similar woes, similar truths even, about my mate's condition and my part in making her life woeful.

Do you notice a trend in all this? Did the subtle vibe scream at you? Hint: it's a very small word. Solomon says it's better to live in a hot shack on your roof than to live in the comfort of your home with a hen-pecker. Amen to that. After years of hearing these kinds of complaints I wondered why I was unhappy. After years of complaining like this, I began to wonder why she hadn't left me in the dust. In time, I gave up and allegorically moved to that corner of the roof. Believe it or not, but when I put down my sleeping bag up there, I put it next to hers. It turns out that she wasn't the only one sucking the oxygen out of our lives. If you had asked her, she would have told you that she'd been sleeping there for months.

I've been in and out of a quarrelsome relationship for many years. I think you see, though, that 'a quarrelsome wife' wasn't the only source of conflict. I would be lying if I said otherwise. If you are in an auto accident in Japan, usually both parties get a ticket because the authorities believe both are liable, that even a small something could have been done by either party to avert disaster. So it is with most relationship problems. Sure, there are cases when one person clearly is the only cause of the problem. Here, there was no abuse or chemical dependence or anything attributable to just one person. All too often, the quarrel was me and I'm responsible for me. What was so ironic about it was that I wanted to keep the peace and would often do anything, including cave, to do so.

Looking back on that, I think that God was trying to tell us something. In this verse, He's giving out marriage advice, which is not a bad thing when you consider that He instituted marriage to be a model of His own relationship to Himself. Three in one make up the triune God; three in one are to forge a marriage, combining three interdependent souls – yours, mine, and God's – into a relationship to be primary above all others except ours with Him. That's the part we usually overlook and fail to comprehend. What we think and feel is to be a shared reflection of what He feels for us. True intimacy, then, can be more than just what we think it is on the surface. It can be deep love from God, fully selfless, and of this life. I've spent too many years being argumentative, tedious, stubborn and combative. Mind you, where principals are threatened, those can be admirable traits; mind you again, if my principals are threatened, those traits will resurface. But as the foundation of a relationship, they stink.

I think of my parents. They were very good friends, perfectly matched as a platonic pair. I never knew them to be physically intimate; my mom was too stodgy and Lutheran for that. But matched they were and they stuck it out through some tough times. Many of those tough times centered around money, which was perennially tight in our house. Neither Mom nor Dad made much money and both had a strong work ethic. Both of them worked in positions where they were over-used and of which they were taken advantage. On the first and fifteenth, they argued. Mom didn't handle stress and always went nuclear. They carried a lot of debt, used credit cards before they were fashionable, and at one time were paying the mortgage on three houses. Those debts caused many quarrels, most of them not initiated by my father. I think I learned resilience from my dad, who 'took it' over and over. Some of the debt was his doing, and their mutual choice, and much of it was unavoidable; the simple cost of living. But mostly they brought it on themselves or because of one of them, and Dad took it on himself to overcome the quarrels with a good but quarrelsome wife. As long as it didn't threaten his principals, he quietly took it, silently deflecting the argumentative bullets shot at him.

So going forward I will try to be less quarrelsome. I can't control anyone else's emotions or reactions, but I can control my own. I would much rather address quarrels by talking through them before they become issues of contention. After years of learning and growing in the faith, I think the better way would be to involve God in deliberations, especially before an argument. I'm learning to ask for His help, to pray before decisions, to talk with Him like a friend and counselor. That way,

He is not only a confidant, but also the filter through which we pass all quarrels. What filters out after the God-sieve would be worth discussing, maybe even fighting over. What's left in the filter might best be left there to deal with differently. It isn't easy, but I hope it is the right thing to do. Besides, it beats sleeping on the roof.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 27 April 2011

The wicked man craves evil; his neighbor gets no mercy from him. Proverbs 21, verse 10.

I think I've said it here before: I haven't really known anybody who I thought was truly evil or wicked. A few have been depraved, and I know people who willingly run away from anything spiritual because they prefer to live here in the moment. I know of good Christian women who diabolically use people to their own ends, and I know good Christian men who also look at their faith as a 'get out of hell free card'. I know some people who are really bad when they're good, and some who are really good when they're bad; no further comment on that. Admit it: you too occasionally veer into the 'wicked' lane. I do, and I'm ashamed to say it's even regularly. In those times, do we crave evil?

Yes, I'd have to say we do, I do.

Think about it: a craving is a hunger, a self-loathing desire, a needing feed. You can't taste evil and not want more. It's like parsing love or liberty: it just doesn't work. It feels cool to steal and get away with it whether you're boosting DVD players off a truck or padding your expense reports. It feels grown-up to curse like a sailor, even if it makes you look immature and stupid. It feels sexy and oh so alive to touch who you shouldn't, to slip off your clothes and get into more than you bargained for. Evil is like hot sauce on your eggs in the morning, or an extra helping of French vanilla. It's Twin Peaks instead of Chili's, and going 75 instead of 70. Once you try those things, you want more of them. We fool ourselves if we think we can just dip our toe into evil and not jump in with both feet. That simply isn't in our nature. If there are people who can do it, I haven't met them yet. Most of us, I believe, are feet first.

That's ironic because we don't want evil done to us. We hate it when other peoples' evil actions affect us, but we don't always think about it when we're evil to them. When was the last time you offered to really help someone out without expecting anything in return? Have you ever offered to drop everything and drive across country to help a friend? Dropped a hundred in the collection plate? Bought a plane ticket for someone to fly home when you just knew they couldn't pay you back? Missed a mortgage payment so your best friend could make theirs? Or maybe it's something a little more mundane, such as holding your tongue when chatter starts at the office. Or not posting your thoughts on Facebook? Maybe listening instead of responding? Here: guilty, guilty, guilty and so forth. Why is it that we do evil to each other without mercy?

You know the answer, even if you don't want to admit it.

I think petty evil deserves much less attention than what we give it. King Solomon thought that too, only he knew better. He said that we give no mercy to our neighbors when we're craving evil because our nature is disposed to that. It hurts to admit he's right, especially when it means that I crave evil every day. I like Tabasco, French vanilla and the need for speed; Twin Peaks is tacky, but I'll go if someone else is buying. I also crave seeing what 'the peeps' are up to online, or what kind of train wreck LiLo has made of her life today. I crave fantasizing about the one that got away, about what I could do with all that extra money I never have, and finding the right words to finally tell off that dirty so and so. Even worse, I crave driving away from the homeless man on the corner, who might actually be a drug-dependent bum...or he might actually be homeless, sacrificing his dignity to beg for help. I crave biting down in the argument instead of backing off to see if the other person has a good point. I crave getting the last word, having things my way, and holding grudges until I'm good and ready to let them go.

But enough moralizing already. You don't do those things, do you? Satisfy any cravings lately? Of course not, and besides, it's too early in the morning to think about such things. You aren't wicked. I'm not either, so why does it feel like it sometimes?

You know the saying: if it feels right it is right. There's a flip side to that too. Or there's that other maxim about it walking like a duck, quacking like a duck, and being a duck. If it looks like evil then perhaps it really is. I DON'T dare you to try to find out. Maybe it's best to leave it well enough alone. Maybe it's best that we leave it alone because maybe there's a point in saying that we do indeed crave more and more evil. Cheating, anger, greed, hatred, killing, cursing, grudges: they

all start in the heart. Whether we like it or not, evil bores and eats its way into our hearts and then it's awful hard to root it out. They're all in there, waiting for the moment of action. By the time words are spoken, the punch is thrown, or when your clothes are on the floor beside the bed, it's too late.

What to do? Where to turn? How do we have mercy on our neighbors for the ways in which we promulgate evil? You know the answer to that too. Come on: Easter was only three days ago. It may seem like a long time, but it was only a moment or so in the past. You know the answer, and while the yoke may look pretty heavy, the burden is actually very light.

No, I don't think I've ever known anyone of whom I could say, at a glance, "that person is pure evil." But I know evil lurks in the world and is constantly trying to get a foothold in my life. It is a battle every day to keep the demons at bay and to let good win out as I know in the end it will. That's the battle of the ages, as old as Eden. Thanks be to the Almighty for that wise love He imparts to all of us as both a shield and a sword with which to lead from the front and take battle to the enemy. Sometimes the battle involves turning back evil and sometimes it's just a matter of fighting the cravings. Either way, it's a fight worth having.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 28 April 2011

When a mocker is punished, the simple gain wisdom; when a wise man is instructed, he gets knowledge. Proverbs 21, verse 11.

Have you ever seen 'the stocks?' When I was a boy, we went to Colonial Williamsburg, where my mother took pictures of my sister and I in the stocks. If you haven't seen them, the stocks were a colonial form of community discipline. Someone was publicly punished for a misdemeanor by being incarcerated in the town square in this contraption that immobilizes your hands and head in wood. The punishment was meted out one day or so at a time, and the person would have to stand there, on display to be ridiculed, shamed, baked in the sun and serve as the lesson for others. Cross the line and you'll end up in the stocks.

I will speak for other parents of teenagers when I say that I sometimes wish we still had the stocks. I love my kids dearly, but I think it would do them some good to spend some time under public ridicule. Speeding ticket? A day in the stocks. Act up in school? An hour in the stocks. Mouth off to an authority: off to the stocks! You get the picture. If the mayor of my town would propose installing a set of stocks in front of city hall, I might just be inclined to support him. It's not that I like public punishment, but I think our society has misplaced a sense of shame, especially where 'mockers' are concerned. I would love to see Stephen Colbert in the stocks, maybe standing next to Lady GaGa while the Attorney General looks on from his own; maybe we could put Michael Savage there too. It isn't a severe, debilitating or physically punishing consequence, just one that would work on the conscience and maybe help said mocker to develop a little needed humility. It would certainly serve as an example, especially for little children whose parents would be able to say, "see what happens when you aren't good?"

There's a problem with snarky opinions like these: they forget ourselves. I belong in the stocks. Ask any of my friends and they will tell you I'm a razor-sharp mocker. My political opinions are far too crass and, well, I can be downright insulting when I feel I've been wronged. If I have indeed been wronged, a fitting reaction may be in order, but if I'm going to be honest with you I need to say I haven't always been right. I'm a highly educated man who should know better than to say or do some of the things I have. I've been wise enough to gain much knowledge, yet foolish enough to squander it. Chief of sinners am I; chief of mockers as well. Perhaps it would do the public some good to see me standing there, immobilized in the stocks, while kids come by and laugh at me, or throw tomatoes at me. Some joker might come by and pull my pants down to my ankles, or the occasional dog would walk by to lift his leg. Pretty humiliating punishment perhaps, but maybe I've done things to deserve it.

But get this: let's kick Holder and Savage out of their stocks because I'd be standing there next to you. We're no angels, you and I, and while I'm thinking your sins aren't like mine, mine also aren't like yours and perhaps we've both crossed the line. We might look stupid standing there, and I'm thinking that after a few hours, our backs and necks would get pretty sore, not to mention baking in a painful North Texas sunburn. Maybe we would learn our lessons. Maybe you've done things to deserve being in the stocks too. Maybe you've been wise at times but have squandered your wisdom too.

So let's flip the verse around and see what happens. What would happen if a mocker was instructed and the wise man punished? One side of that argument immediately breaks down for if the man is wise, he should be wise enough to comport himself that his conduct wouldn't merit punishment; fair enough. Yes, we all make mistakes but the verse is making a supportable generalization. What about that other one? I have faith enough in teaching to naively believe that exposure to instruction will benefit anyone, even a mocker. If those of simple intellect can gain wisdom from observing punishment, how much more could both they and the mocker gain through useful teaching? After all, that's why we send kids to 13 years of school just to call them "graduates." If teaching isn't useful, perhaps it should be replaced with something that is?

Which brings us back to my point about teenagers. Sure, I'd like to see my wonderful rebels stand in the stocks for awhile, but I would also much rather they be taught first to avoid behavior that would land them there. We can only hope they gain enough from the teaching for this to be the case. And that's the reason for the teaching to begin with, isn't it? That's the reason for the verse, right: to warn us of the consequences of miscreant behavior?

Perhaps indeed.

I have been a wise man from time to time; I have three college degrees and rooms full of books that serve as testimonials to what the world calls 'wisdom.' In truth, some of it was a bunch of nothing. Where I haven't always been wise is in other areas: in my conduct, in my heart, in guarding the hearts of others, or in my relations with my brothers and sisters of this world. In the long run, those matter more than the book learning. I think back over forty years to that day when I had my picture taken in the stocks. Back then, I never imagined I'd be writing about it in the twenty-first century. Back then, too, I never imagined that my actions in life would be worthy of ridicule, a scarlet letter, forty lashes with the cat or hanging on a cross. But they are. In that light, maybe a few hours on display in the town square wouldn't be such a bad thing.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 29 April 2011

The Righteous One takes note of the house of the wicked and brings the wicked to ruin. Proverbs 21, verse 12.

Do you ever feel that you aren't good enough? I don't know much about Catholicism but I do know a lot about it's rebellious step-twin, Lutheranism. In case you don't know the story, the long and short of it is that Martin Luther, a devout Catholic, was troubled by practices of the church in the 1500s. He was worried about people 'earning' their way into eternity by having to do things to gain it. Troubled, he wrote 95 questions and challenged the Catholic authorities to address them. That made Luther persona non grata as the church and its followers tried to have him silenced. Not content to simply silence Luther, the church leaders kicked him out of the church, then tried to have him killed. Luther kept it up, though, gaining a louder voice and causing the church to split into Catholic and other sects; it started that thing called the Protestant Reformation. Downstream, that led to other things such as the Enlightenment, the heights of the Renaissance, and, indirectly, this little thing called "the American Revolution."

Both Catholicism and Lutheranism are founded on notions of 'law' and 'gospel.' The law is code, just and sometimes severe, designed to point out where we are wrong, and the things we have done wrong that we might admit them and see how we need God. The gospel, then, is the good news of God, of Himself incarnate with us giving us needed forgiveness. We like to hear about the good news but, just like the witch in "The Wiz" said, "don't nobody bring me no bad news."

In many churches today there is a constant insecurity that they are 'light' on Jesus, showing God to be only the giver of all good. Live well and get Jesus and you'll be walking on easy street. Your children will all be blonde and blue eyed, your troubles few, and you'll be able to spout off righteous Bible verses without effort. Come stand here and sing hymns with us; throw you hands in the air and start blaring out those hallelujahs. Work out your own salvation because JEEEESSUSSS will forgive you everything!

Blech. Anybody have any Tums?

I live in the real world and so do you. Here on the streets, I see the masters of deception walking out of the First Church of Easy Street and I ask myself just what is wrong with them. They have it all wrong in their dressed-up Sunday best. Don't they know that this is a hard old world? The verse for today even says so: God himself is keeping score and He is just waiting to thump us. After all, damn it, we deserve it. We are worms, useless, wearing all our good deeds as little more than filthy rags in the eyes of a righteous and just God who is far better than anything we can imagine. It's impossible for us to be holy and everything we do can't possibly be good enough. Go sit down in the front pew of X Lutheran or St. Whatever Catholic Church and tell me if I'm wrong in insinuating that. God is coming back and He is PISSED. While we're at it, throw in the First, Second, and Seventy First Baptist Churches of Podunk, USA and I bet you'll hear a similar message, you damned and worthless sinner you.

It's enough to make you want to stay out of church, isn't it? After all, we go to church to be instructed and informed AS WELL AS refreshed, refueled and rejuvenated. It truly is a hard world in which we live, as well as a world of beauty. But many places focus just on the beauty and not on its opposite, and people are smart enough to see through a charade. Many places simply shy away from teaching hard truths in a loving manner because they don't want to offend. I think that, in many mainstream churches today, there's a real and persistent insecurity bordering on fear that we are losing sight of the law. It's a good thing to tell people how Christ loves us unconditionally because He does. It's not a good thing to forget why that matters.

Why does the world need love and forgiveness? Is it because we are largely unloving and unforgiving to each other? Is it because we each do things that have grave consequences and for which we can't possibly make amends? Is it because, proud humanists or not, we are fallen and imperfect while He is holy and perfect? Is it because there's no way we can DO anything to earn our way into Heaven because the thing that needed to be 'done' for that happened on Good Friday and Easter?. Here endeth the lesson. Please hold for a moment while I put my catechism back on the shelf. Thank you Dr. Luther.

Brother Martin may have been excommunicated but he understood enough to know that God is not disinterested in our lives and that if we reject Him, He is indeed keeping score. He had lived under death threats for years. He knew that good men of sound faith had used that as a hammer to control others for hundreds of years and, in doing so, had lost sight of the good news of divine, wise salvation as a gift instead of a duty. Brother Martin had seen enough people smacked down in the name of God – as he was himself – to see how the church had become a way in which people were made to feel they weren't good enough to ever gain the favor of God. There's a modicum of truth in that, and Luther saw it, namely that we can't ever do anything to gain God's favor because He's already done all that's needed on His own for us.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 2 May 2011

If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered. Proverbs 21, verse 13.

Mercy: that's what we all need. These days, it's a word I don't think we talk about very much. Do you spend many evenings talking about mercy around the dinner table? Or when was the last time you went to a bar and talked with your best friend about mercy? Around the water cooler or with a stranger in an elevator? No, I didn't think so. Me neither.

This is another Uganda verse. If you want a great picture of what mercy looks like, go to a third world country in Africa. There, whole populations are both at the mercy of others as well as exhibiting mercy that others don't deserve. Reading the verse today, I keyed on the word "poor" and thought about the children we saw in Nakabango and Bufuula. They were living in abject poverty, far poorer than anything I had ever seen...until, of course, we traveled to the next village. The farther away from the city you got, the poorer the conditions became. Why did foreigners have to swoop in and offer help? Why couldn't the inhabitants of their cities do more? Go there for awhile and the answer reveals itself: they too are poor. They too live on the edge of poverty, and often are doing all they can to stay above it (let alone give aid to others in more need than themselves). It's not that men there have shut their ears to the cries of the poor out of malice. Instead, it is more out of necessity. Common sense dictates that there is only so much that one person can do. Where, then, is the mercy for the children of Uganda?

Where, then, is the mercy for the children everywhere?

What about people who have done us wrong? Are those who have wronged us 'the poor?' I think of people who have wronged me in life, and how my life moved in directions I didn't foresee because of that. Do they deserve mercy from me? Should I pray for them? Is it proper, right, and good for me to say prayers for their happiness and security, knowing full well that both of those were obtained at my expense? You know the answer.

What about our enemies? Should we be merciful to our enemies? Today the world got news that Osama is now room temperature (or, more appropriately, ocean temperature). Should we have been merciful to Osama? Yes (in fact, from all reports, we were). Apparently, those who killed him first tried to convince him to surrender. Mercy was offered but spurned. In all his opulent wealth, Osama was the poorest of the dirt poor. Was what happened still the right thing to do? I think you know the answer to that as well.

But perhaps there are poor closer to home. I live in the upper middle class suburbs of north Texas. Here, we complain if milk and gasoline are too expensive, or if the lawn grows too fast, or if satellite reception goes out with the frequent spring rainstorms. Compared to the children of Jinja or Calcutta, my kids live in grand affluence, yet all around us are people living lives of desperate poverty. One can enjoy HBO, great schools, stocked grocery stores, country clubs, and a big SUV yet still be desperately poor. After all, poverty of the spirit is much worse than poverty in one's checkbook. Most of my neighbors don't display any leanings toward any kind of faith (except for the Muslims who used to live next door). Do they cling to God as their hope? Do my friends and neighbors here understand what the love of Christ really means for them? If not, they are desperately poor.

In fact, if any of us fail to understand that, then all the riches of this world can't hide the shame of that inescapable poverty.

This weekend I was at a company meeting held at a beach resort. It was in an affluent seaside community, your typical beach resort town, full of expensive condos, ocean restaurants, and attractions. It was warm there, and we didn't leave the area of the resort (except for dinner, some shopping for tacky beach stuff, and to get a tattoo). I didn't see any of 'the poor' but I'm betting they were there. They might or might not have been homeless people. They might just have been long-time residents who didn't have much income but couldn't afford to go anyplace else even though the cost of living there had far outpaced their resources. They might just be people wondering why crossing the thin line between Saturday night and Sunday morning didn't make them feel happy inside. I wonder what people do when these 'poor' cry out, and I

wonder if their cry is what I expect it would be. I wonder if their cry is the same one that is silently screamed by my friends here where I live.

You don't have to go to Africa to find the poor. They are on the Flathead Indian Reservation in Montana, and in east Philadelphia, Garland, Texas, Temperance, Michigan and Marysville, California. They live in Shoals, Indiana and Muscle Shoals, Alabama; in Warwick, Rhode Island and Alamogordo, New Mexico and Pensacola, Florida. The poor are in Switzerland, Namibia, Mexico, China and Russia. They are young, middle aged, and old. The poor may just be in your family. They may be living behind your front door. When we turn our backs on their poverty, surely we must know that we won't receive mercy for the mercy we deny to others. God is not a god of vengeance: He is a god of love and consequence. He operates in the real world, motivating hearts to share of their physical wealth wherever they can, and to share of His spiritual wealth wherever they go. In doing so, He opens our ears and our eyes to the plight of the poor all around us, then bids us to answer their cries with His vicarious caring and love. In doing so, He gives us His mercy, then asks us to share it with others, giving us something wonderful to talk about with them.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 3 May 2011

A gift given in secret soothes anger, and a bribe concealed in the cloak pacifies great wrath. Proverbs 21, verse 14.

Is Scripture condoning bribery? Remember that a bribe is an inducement to do something wrong.

Think about treaties between nations. They are usually trumpeted in public after being negotiated in secrecy. Is that because, out of the camera's eye, nations can rhetorically duke it out? Possibly. It could also be that exchanges done in secret both shield classified means, and allow for both sides to compromise. I think that's more likely.

Think about Jacob. My concordance references a verse about Jacob. If you don't know his whole story, Jacob was the second son of Isaac. The father preferred his brawny, hunky eldest son, Esau, but God favored Jacob, who was fairer, wise and canny. Jacob posed as Esau in order to gain their father's blessing...and his spiritual and physical inheritance. You can imagine the hard feelings that ensued. The referenced verse talks about Jacob, who is returning to the brother he deceived. He sends gifts ahead to Esau in the practical hope that they will mollify Esau's understandable anger.

Closer to home, think about giving flowers to a woman you love. Or a poem. Or a card, even an e-card. Think about taking a gift to her unexpectedly, without flourish, without posting "look what I did" in neon. Does that bring a coy smile to her face? If you've been fighting, does it smooth over the rough edges? We all appreciate getting gifts, but in my opinion, ladies prefer that they come unannounced and from the heart because that whole unannounced thing is a good indicator that it's from the heart.

Some people use a kind word, while others use gifts and still others use 'a little lovin.' Whatever the vehicle, a gift given in private does indeed soothe anger. Here, this verse is stating a practical truth. It's a natural extension of "you can get more flies with honey than with vinegar" because common sense says that what is sweet is more naturally attractive than what is sour. Knowing that, let's revisit that word 'bribery.' Did Jacob bribe his father? Yes. Did he incur his brother's wrath? Yes. Did he try to bribe his brother later? No. Why? It's all about the motive.

Whether the motive is good or bad, though, the verse is still true: a gift or a bribe given in secret pacifies wrath and anger. I think it's one of those cases where Scripture isn't giving a directive as much as it is making a statement. The only directive I can infer from this verse is one concerning that motive. Why does a secret gift soothe anger? Why does a secret bribe pacify wrath? Simple: because of what they mean, even because of what they could mean. Sure, you could say that giving a gift is like buying off someone's favor, or currying their affection. There could be truth in that, but to discern that truth you have to go back to motive.

What was God's motive in recording this one for posterity? Go ask Him yourself. You may be surprised at how He answers.

I don't read this verse as condoning bribery. I believe it's simply telling us a truth about how we are wired. We like gifts and most of us assume the best about the giver. I think most of us want to believe the best about the people around us. As a man, I want to believe that, especially about the fairer sex. Besides, one of the most precious gifts a man can receive is when she looks at you after you give her the flowers. It's part admiration, part thanks, part surprise, part suspicion, and part coyness. It's that special gleam that only women can master, when they look you in the eye and you see the possibilities of her heart and how God imparted there a taste of the real love that He wants to share with all of us. That, my friends, is no secret gift even when it is a quiet, shared miracle between two people.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 4 May 2011

When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers. Proverbs 21, verse 15.

If you're an American reading this on May 4, 2011, I'm betting three words come to mind: Osama Bin Laden. Since Osama assumed room temperature three days ago, much has been said about how justice has finally been brought to the butcher who ordered September 11th. I'm an emotional patriot, and I agree with that. Our government said it would get Osama, dead or alive, and punish him for what he did. That has happened. If you've seen the videos of crowds in Times Square, West Point and DC, you saw joy. I can't say that the US has been righteous in all the ways we have conducted war since 9/11, but there was, in my opinion, a justified 'right' to be happy in the rejoicing that this menace was finally dead. After all, remember Khartoum, Yemen, the USS Cole, Sudan, Afghanistan, New York, Washington DC, Pennsylvania and a hundred other places where Osama's network of vermin slaughtered innocent people. How proof much do the hand-wringers need before we respond and thump the terrorists but good?

Will this act cause terror to the evildoers? That remains to be seen. From listening to the American media yesterday, there was much more from the hand-wringers over inciting the Muslim world to violence now that their blessed imam has been dispatched. In the immortal words of the current generation: whatever. My own views on addressing the problem of radical Islamic terrorism are, shall we say, 'more stringent.' I hope the verse is right and that the stealthy prowess of a few bad-to-the-bone warriors scares the heebie jeebies out of them. You don't have to like President Bush to agree that those who would be terrorists embody evil. Call them Tim McVeigh, Osama Bin Laden or Carlos the Jackal (all, thankfully, gone to the ever after): terror is terror and must be confronted to be stopped. To give you my opinion, in the words of Stonewall Jackson, "kill them. Kill them all, sir."

And in quoting General Jackson, therein lies the unspoken and grave point that walks hand in hand with this verse. Righteousness demands justice, and justice was done to Osama. Now what? Do we end the war before the job is done? I hope not. Do we use the full power of the United States Government to conduct surgical killings of top terrorist leaders? Perhaps, but at what point do we cross the Rubicon from being dispensers of righteous justice into high tech killers dispensing retribution? Do we capture them and bring them back for trial? Perhaps again, but of course that would depend on the situation and there are consequences involved.

It's too early in the morning to make my head spin with such questions. Perhaps the best advice is "be careful." In celebrating the demise of Osama we should be careful that we don't become Osama. Lord Acton's quote about power corrupting and absolute power corrupting absolutely is very much in play here. That we should be satisfied at using our national might to dispense long-in-coming justice to an enemy combatant is, in my opinion, righteous and good. That we should dance on his grave and rejoice further when we similarly dispatch the rest of Osama's lieutenants troubles me. In war, you kill the enemy, and war is all cruelty. It cannot be refined (so said General Sherman). At what point do we stop that? I'm conflicted by it because, where terrorists are concerned, I very much agree with Generals Jackson and Sherman. I hope God damned Osama's soul, and that is a lonely and terrible thing in which to find hope. The conflict comes around because of this man, Jesus, who also taught a different way. Is there a happy medium between the two? To be spiritually and intellectually honest, the answer must be 'no.' It, then, reinforces that unspoken point and serves as a caution to those of us left behind.

A friend of mine is a minister in Pennsylvania who, I believe, put it best. To paraphrase him, it is an occasion to be somber. I believe we should thankfully recognize the prowess of our military (and the first-time decisiveness of their commander in chief) in removing Osama from both the ranks of oxygen consumers and the list of terrorist threats. We should also be cognizant of the fact that there is no rejoicing in heaven at the loss of any unbelieving life. If Christ died for all, then He died for Osama as much as He died for you or me. That Osama's last thought was likely not of the Savior must cause the Savior sadness. Reminding ourselves of that is, perhaps, the gut check we need when the given the urge to brag and dance on the watery grave of the uncivil dead.

I have friends who lost family on 9/11. I can't speak for them or estimate their loss. But I know myself. Were I in their shoes, I doubt I would feel much joy at this. I suspect I would feel little at all. I think there would be some relief, knowing that someone worse than a criminal has been punished for his wickedness. If we are to preserve human liberty, then there

must be consequences, and thank God for those who would dispense our righteous justice to evildoers living in terror. It won't bring back the family, though.

Perhaps the best thing I could remember in such a situation would be the knowledge that justice was done, and that it is a good and God-pleasing thing, then, to move forward and pursue a life lived in peace. I know that securing that peace means finishing war, both war of arms and war of the spirit. But I remember that the fight goes on. Girded and armored in faith, it's a fight of the soul that never ends as long as we're above the dirt. That's worth remembering any day of the year. Thanks be for those who took out a threat to saving faith and human liberty. Now let's move forward and continue to live in ways worthy of those. Osama didn't. We can.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 5 May 2011

A man who strays from the path of understanding comes to rest in the company of the dead. Proverbs 21, verse 16.

Do you have a guilty conscience? I do. If you've read these long enough, you know that. You know that I have done things that made me guilty. I carried that guilt around for a very long time before letting go of it, letting God take it off my shoulders. I defined myself by it, with it, and I then let other people do the same. Yes, I'll admit it: sometimes it still bothers me, but I try to not let that happen too often now. One of my more sunshiny friends is constantly reminding me that you have to choose to let yourself be happy, and she's very, very right. She's overcome much adversity in life and is a better, stronger and happier person for it. It sometimes needles me when she tersely tells me to 'suck it up and move on,' but there's truth and understanding in her words. Good advice from someone who's 'been there' and survived to become better.

In a way, though, we've all 'been there,' haven't we? Your sins are no better than mine, even if they are different. We could all swap war stories about the things we've done, the sins we've done. We could chat about what fun some of them were, and how destructive they were too. It hurts to remember those things, doesn't it? Still, there are verses in Scripture that percolate up now and then and that's not a bad thing. Verse 16 is one. My concordance refers it forward to Ezekiel 18, verse 24 that spells it out more explicitly: "But if a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked man does, will he live? None of the righteous things he has done will be remembered. Because of the unfaithfulness he is guilty of and because of the sins he has committed, he will die." That's heavy and damning stuff. Whew! Thank God He took away the spiritual guilt.

Off the path of understanding is the company of the dead. Is the verse talking about physical death? As a final result of unbelief, yes. But there's an allegory there, talking about losing one's faith as a consequence of saying and doing things that harden the heart. I think, too, it is talking about keeping company with kindred spirits who reject what is right in favor of the more sensual satisfaction of doing something else. And I think it's alluding to there being consequences for our actions, that 'straying' is an act of choice leading to a consequence that separates us from the natural state of grace for which we were designed.

If you don't believe the verse, think of Richard Nixon. I've often thought of writing a book about Nixon, thinking that it's wrong most of his history has been dictated by Woodward and Bernstein, themselves ax-grinders. Few remember the good things Nixon did (and there were many), only Watergate, his lies and his paranoia. If you don't believe this verse, think of Jim Bakker. Since the Jessica Hahn affair, Bakker did prison time, owed the IRS millions, and then rebuilt a meaningful, impressive ministry in Missouri to touch lives with what he learned. Think of Tiger Woods, or Ted Haggard, or Whitney Houston. If you don't believe this verse, think of Judas.

And if you don't believe this verse, think again of me. I've fallen off the path of understanding more times than I will admit. Marital unfaithfulness (guilty multiple times), lying (guilty multiple times), hatred (constantly guilty), arrogance (ditto hatred), sailor mouth (this admission thing is getting tough), and a host of other sins: all mine and mine alone. I'll say it again: God took away the spiritual guilt of these and all my many transgressions; nobody can make me take it up again, even when they dress up in their Sunday best or flash their best Christian smile. The earthly consequences are different, and they always go on. That's not a bad thing because it is an opportunity for learning, and for God to demonstrate his magnificence as He walks on my journey of living through them, encouraging me to live in His love.

Ditto for you.

Ditto for other people I love. My son is 15. Last week he shaved his head. I don't know why he did it, only that he did and now he looks like a cue ball. My youngest daughter is 18. This week she started (another) unnecessary argument because she wanted to pick a fight (because she wasn't feeling good, that because she wasn't taking her antibiotics because of an infection....because, because, because). My oldest daughter is 20. This week she started an argument with her sister over things that (I think) are beneath her, over simple teenage drama. Perhaps these are trivial things; that's true. I wish my kids would see the importance of them, though. They are little way-stations on the path of

understanding, and they offer clever diversions along our spiritual journey. Whether you acknowledge it or not, you're on one, just like me and just like our friends and family. Just like my kids. If they aren't careful, they could become distracted and fall off the path. That would be sad.

Just like it would be sad if you or I fell aside. Today's verse is another reminder of that. It's another set of white lines to help us steer instead of a shock collar to whack us into compliance. Sometimes, there may be no getting around a guilty conscience, especially when it's backed up by a guilty past. Let the verse, then, remind us that forgiveness is THE map on the path of understanding just as guilt is the guidepost that tries to navigate us along a different road.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 6 May 2011

He who loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich. Proverbs 21, verse 17.

When I was a kid, I looked up to Thomas Jefferson. We spent a month in third grade learning about the sage of Monticello, and the great things he said and did. The Declaration, the Summary of Rights, 2-term president, founded UVA, innovative farmer, remarkable patriot: Mr. Jefferson was his own American Renaissance man. When I grew up, I read many books about him and came to see him in a different light. I'm not talking about all the Sally Hemings conjecture. No, Jefferson was a hedonist. He was a man who devoted much of his life to pursuing pleasure. A complex man, hand in hand with his undeniable brilliance was his undeniable lust to live both a sensuous and sensual life. Jefferson bathed in pleasures of wealth, music, passion, knowledge, agriculture, politics, food, wine, comfort and influence. He died penniless. Up until his death, he lived in deep debt to finance his love of these things, but his estate went bankrupt immediately on his death. It took decades before they were able to pay off his debts, and before his monument to brilliance, his home, was able to be fully restored and enjoyed by others. You can't think of Thomas Jefferson today and not feel a little sorry for him at the way he let himself succumb to being 'owned' by the pleasures he pursued.

Mr. Jefferson wasn't the only hedonist, though. I'm not talking about Hugh Hefner either (who I think is just a Viagra-junky perv). Drunkenness and obesity: I struggle daily with these. I'm not an alcoholic; I don't obsess over alcohol or food, but I LOVE both! Some of my closest friends have seen me revel in them. Though I've done it more times than I can tell you, I don't like getting drunk; I think it's a waste. And I don't like gorging myself on food; I'm constantly working to stay in shape. But there are good people who do. I'm simply not one of them, but I love good wine, good whiskey, and good beer. I love preparing a good meal for people I love, then watching them enjoy it (I learned this from my dad). I love it when fellowship includes all three of those things: wine, food, and company. Throw in dark chocolate and a good cigar and I'm yours. In fact, come to the Bible study at my house next week and you'll find lots of wine, great food and a wonderful group of friends enjoying those things in the warm Texas evening. But let's be honest here: my passion for those things makes me something of a hedonist like Mr. Jefferson. If I'm not careful, I could end up in the poor house because of them.

That's the point of the verse: to remind us to be careful. "The Biggest Loser" is a phenomenon at Chez Terry. I sometimes watch it with my family because they like the show; good on them. It's not for me; I think it's exploitive. But it is amazing to me watching these morbidly obese people struggle through an unreal self-transformation. They get onto the show because their obsession with food has made them poor (in health, spirit and maybe even wealth). I think the whole train wreck aspect of jockeying for position (as well as the "this person has been an inspiration to me" deal before they stab them in the back with a butter knife) is tawdry. There's a good point in it though: be careful. The contestants on the show are publicly learning to shed the consequences of when they weren't, as well as how to be careful to live a better life. They are learning again how to mix pleasure with responsible life. We could all do with being biggest losers in this respect.

Pleasure here is only a taste of pleasure to come. Our minds and hearts here simply can't process what real pleasure will be. Think of the most fulfilling, electric, energetic, full, completing feeling you can have and it's only a foretaste of what heaven will offer. It's no coincidence that Christ's first public miracle was turning water into wine at a wedding feast. There's a lesson in it, and part of that lesson is reminding us to enjoy pleasure here, but be careful with it. Jesus drank wine with both friends and strangers (that is, if someone can be a true stranger to God incarnate). He did it as a matter of course and as a matter of pleasure. Notice, too, that you don't hear stories of the time when Jesus got drunk at Cana and then hung from the rafters upside down. Or that Jesus & Peter tied one on so bad that they couldn't get in the boat the next morning. And you don't hear stories about how Jesus got bad gas when gorged himself on beans and onions (or hummus), or how he had four servings from those five loaves and two fishes. Jesus was careful. We should be too.

We should be careful because any pleasure that turns us away from God's divine loving wisdom becomes pain. Pursuing only pleasure is hedonistic and unproductive, destructive. It's not to say that we shouldn't enjoy life here, or live it only in the long-lived hope of better things to come. Make hay while the sun shines, after all. Enjoy life. Food, wine, and fellowship are gifts from God: enjoy them fully, but responsibly and carefully. There's no need in my life for excess in these areas. Besides, I'm really thinking that there will be good beer and wine in the afterlife.

I have an addictive personality that could easily slide into addiction. In my life, at times it has. I'm afraid those are the times I wish I could re-do, even though some of them make for really good war stories. It's an ongoing battle I choose to fight. I hope I never turn into Hugh Hefner. And I think it's safe to say that I've never done anything on par with what Thomas Jefferson said or did. Hundreds of years from now, people probably won't be talking about Dave Terry. Personally, I'm okay with that. To simply provide for those I love while carefully enjoying the life I've been given will be more than enough memorial. That's a gift of faith, and it's a pleasure unlike any other I know.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 9 May 2011

The wicked become a ransom for the righteous, and the unfaithful for the upright. Proverbs 21, verse 18.

Have you ever paid a ransom? I haven't either. Nobody that I know has ever been kidnapped, and I don't know anyone who has ever had to pay money someone back. The word 'ransom' brings to mind nefarious doings, shady dealings in dark parking lots with cash drops and being watched. When I think of ransom, I think of that Mel Gibson movie (where he basically tells his child's kidnappers to stuff it). I think of Patty Hearst, and of sadness, worry and death.

Perhaps those are things that the verse wants us to think of. Mr. Webster defines 'ransom' as "the redeeming of a captive by paying money or complying with demands" or "the price paid or demanded for this" or "to obtain the release of a captive by paying the price demanded. Huh? Those are all similar thoughts yet they're distinct enough to confuse me, sort of like sorting out the nuances in an algebra problem. Or maybe the tax code (which reinforces my belief that the tax code is nefarious and shady).

Let's unpack it a bit more using only one of those definitions. Maybe it would be easier to understand if we thought of ransom as a price paid. In this light, the wicked become the price paid for the righteous. The unfaithful become the price paid for the upright. In this way, the verse becomes the essence of Christianity. You and I are the wicked and unfaithful. The triune God is the righteous and upright. We can't meet Him on His level, and He can't compromise His holiness to meet us on ours. So He becomes man and meets us half way, becoming our ransom, our price paid that was demanded for our wrongs. He becomes wicked and unfaithful for us, to assume all our penalties and debts, to pay off the way we've let ourselves be kidnapped or held hostage by the world, by Satan's deeds. God Himself redeems us, buys us back, and complies with His holy demand to live a perfect life but offer perfect atonement for all the wrongs we do.

But you say, "it's Monday and yesterday was Mother's Day. Can't we just let up a little bit?" Sorry, no deal, my friends. This is a 24/7 war we're in, with an enemy more insidious than Osama ever was (even in his pathetic little 'mansion'). You and I need a ransom to be paid for us. We were designed to live a life of peace and harmony as the crown jewel of all God's creation. We were designed "very good" and to be in concert with ultimate perfection. We weren't meant for hurt, pain, anguish, worry or death. The plan was different.

Sin foiled that plan. Our ancestors let it happen, chose to make it so. We let it happen, and we make it so every day. You, me, our kids, even our mothers (yes, even on Mother's Day). To paraphrase Jimmy Buffett (who we're seeing in concert next week), "come on people, it's not that tough." Sin made us hostages, kidnapped us from the original plan, seized us from God's presence. We are being held for ransom, for payment, for evil profit. The king of all sin does this.

Here's the real kicker: it's what we chose, what we choose. We went along with the kidnapping; we do every day. We can turn from it, but we don't. Sure, it's tough, perhaps the toughest thing we'll ever do. But it's what we were designed for: to choose better, to embrace what is righteous. Yet we don't. None of us. Thus, we're left as hostages, held for ransom by an evil doer, waiting for the righteous One to pay us out and rescue us from our predicament.

At the start of a new week, that's not a bad thing to remember, especially after Mother's Day. Most moms I know nurture and love their kids, bringing them into this world of and for love. They use the gift of life God gave to them and pass it on to each of us. Mothers don't bring children into the world to chain them to anguish. Ideally, children are made of love, of the act of love, in love by parents with a mother whose heart is tender and good. She's God's vessel of creation, representing His gift to each of us. Mothers give birth to us not to ransom us to death but to nurture us to life. That's what God did too. That's a good Monday thought after all. You're brought into this world in love, and bought back from this world in love. A ransom has been paid for you. Blessings on your week.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 10 May 2011

In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has. Proverbs 21, verse 20.

Who knows what the seven deadly sins are? The fraud of that statement is that all sins are deadly, not just seven of them. All sin is cardinal sin. All sin is mortal sin, even if it isn't wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy or gluttony. Today, let's hone in on that last one.

I'm one of those people who over eats if he gets bored. Even if I keep healthy snacks around, I eat them when I have little else to do. Since Christmas 09, I'm down 40 pounds. The dirty secret of it, though, is that since autumn 10, I'm up ten for a net loss of 30. If I'm not careful, I'll gain back the rest. I like food, and I like it too much. When I get down, it becomes easier to migrate to the refrigerator. The sticky part of it is that I like to cook, and I really enjoy cooking for others. "Never trust a skinny brewer" read a beer ad I once saw. Never trust a skinny cook is my motto. I'm a glutton.

And yet, gluttony, you know, is more than food. If you drink too much and revel in it, you're a glutton. If you watch TV all day long and do little else, you're a glutton. If you are into soccer at the exclusion of other good things, you're a glutton. If you take ANYTHING to excess and make it your obsession, you're a glutton. I love a good meal; in fact, I love ANY meal, not just the choice meat or oil. But I love other things too: whiskey, tobacco (always a constant battle for the last year), conversation, (American) football, validation, and words. I ingest them as much as I ingest a good steak (or a bad one).

I think gluttony is a subtle form of idolatry. It makes a thing your focus, your god. Sure, it's easy to do, especially if you're down. But I bet you can see how it goes beyond food. It's because the foolish man devours all he has. If you've ever struggled with money, you know what I'm talking about. The urge to spend, to always have more, to always need more: there's never enough money to satisfy the craving. That's been a destructive pattern in my life, in my home. It's an easy craving to fall under because we all need money in this world. If you let it, it doesn't take much for that craving to overtake a lot of good things in your life until it pushes them out entirely. Money, sex, power, attention, exercise, fun, success, control, even family: all can be made to be our idols. All can be that 'meal' which we crave.

But let's not stay so negative, ok? Let's give it a WHOOP and turn the thing upside down? "Keep on the sunny side" is what the song says. How about we become a glutton for something else? How about we partake richly of kindness, happiness, care, devotion or selflessness? How about we do this because in-taking breeds them in our hearts? Instead of craving to eat them up, how about we turn that craving around and crave giving them out? That's what God does. We can too. I'm sure a dietician would tell you that replacing the cravings and urges with constructive responses is a healthy coping mechanism for overcoming weight problems. Deal. I'm talking about something a little bit more.

Part of that more is responsibility. Part of it is storing up good things in our lives, socking them away for when we'll need to use them. We're given gifts in life, even during lean times. It's our privilege to use them responsibly, to store some bounty away for responsible use. After all, in the house of the wise are choice food and oil. That doesn't happen by chance, you know.

When the cravings come, it's time to remember that there is ALWAYS something better to do. My family always deserves more time than I really give them. The bathroom and the hall could use paint. My garage needs a cleaning. There's that novel (or two, or three) in progress, or giving the dog a bath, that list of honey-do's, or even a nap. Make hay while the sun shines. Scripture pines for me to spend time in it. Some quiet time in prayer would do me good. There is always God walking beside me, constantly desiring to have a chat and a bigger place in my life. There is always something better to do than keeping focused on my 'woe is me' old self. I can lose the old habits, and I can lose the next twenty pounds. I can because it would bring glory to my Maker, because it's would make me a better man, and because, for the first time in a long time, I want to for the right reasons.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 11 May 2011

He who pursues righteousness and love finds life, prosperity and honor. Proverbs 21, verse 21.

This morning, I'm writing this from the brand new In N Out Burger in Frisco, Texas. I stood in line here for an hour or so with a bunch of ex-Californians to get a fresh hamburger from the new joint on the day it opened. To be honest, it's just a hamburger, and by the time I get it, it'll probably be a cold hamburger. But it's a happening, and while I'm not usually one for 'happenings,' this was one close to home and relatively inexpensive.

It and the verse got me thinking: is an In N Out burger righteous? Hardly. But being here in the gaggle of over-eager food junkies gives you a short insight into what some people pursue. Some (like me) were dodging an hour of work. Some wanted to be part of a bigger event. Some are here to relive memories, and some are here to make new memories. Some are actually hungry and want to see what all the hullabaloo is about. Some are just along for the ride. But is our long wait for something relatively insignificant a righteous thing? No, not really.

How much happier would we be if we pursued righteousness? Notice that the verse talks about pursuing righteousness, not 'being' righteous. As Miss Miley sang, "it's the climb." There are benefits to the pursuit. Paul told the Romans that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, and character produces hope which never disappoints because of what Christ did. To me, this fulfills the verse's observation that the pursuit has a happy ending, namely life, prosperity and honor. Those aren't just physical gifts. They mean more. On our own, we can't be righteous; we have to be declared or made righteous. Only God can do that because God is without sin or error. What happened on Easter Sunday made us righteous. Thus, we can't become righteous by anything we do, but the pursuit is worthwhile anyway because in it we find those three gifts (and, I would submit, the things Paul mentioned, as well as others not mentioned here).

Ditto happiness. We don't achieve happiness, but we can pursue it. Happiness is like life, prosperity and honor. I can't honestly tell you that I've always been happy, or even that I always am now. But like the Declaration of Independence says, the "pursuit of happiness" (an allusion to acquiring property) is my right. As long as I live, I will pursue happiness, believing that it can be mine when I'm not looking for it. I don't think it's a goal of itself, namely, I don't think you can get up today and say "today I will be happy" and expect that it will be our goal. Things happen and things get us down. Still, I do believe we can determine to have a happier outlook and that this, in turn, helps foster happiness. As someone pointed out to me, a happy outlook is indeed a conscious decision. It's that whole put-your-best-foot-forward thing. In the least, it improves the way we deal with other people.

One last note: remember that the love that's being talked about here isn't erotic. It's agape, maybe phileo, love. Erotic 'love' without the love of selflessness or friendship is merely physical. And eroticism without love is a sure way to ruin a good friendship. It is nothing more than a short term gratification that falls short of the other kinds of love. Sex is a gift meant for sharing only with one person within the willing confines of commitment. To do so lightly or just to get laid is a misuse of that gift. And it isn't love. If this sounds prudish or preachy, so be it. It's the same thing I tell my teenagers about struggling with promiscuity. I'm a dad: I don't want them to suffer through some of the things I did. All this shouldn't be for nothing. And it isn't. Someone is listening. Given that they're teenagers, they're far too cool to tell me so, but I know they are soaking up some of what's said.

It also isn't because my waiting paid off. I got my Double Double (with animal fries) and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I even got on local TV, filmed as I was standing in line. The hamburger wasn't the best one I've ever had, but it was pretty darn good. In fact, it was worth the hour-plus wait in the north Texas humidity. No, it wasn't righteous, but I met a few new people, and I got some time to decompress and relax, and that burger. I ended up being the 92nd customer in the 45 minutes they were open before I got to the register. A burger and fries is hardly love, prosperity or honor, but it was a good early lunch. Perhaps that's enough.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 12 May 2011

A wise man attacks the city of the mighty and pulls down the stronghold in which they trust. Proverbs 21, verse 22.

Right out of the gate I'll make an admission: I needed help figuring out this one. After all, who in his right mind would attack a strong city? The vision came to mind of a stone fort on top of a hill, with cannons and boiling oil facing down all sides. Who could take that fort? It's too strong! Isn't that why we were afraid of the Soviets for so many years: because we thought they were impregnable and too strong? Isn't that why so many politicians are reluctant to run against entrenched incumbents? Isn't that why schoolyard bullies get away with so much? Isn't that why the loudmouth in the room usually carries the conversation? They're all just too strong, intimidating and impressive.

Really?

If that's the case, why did the Soviets fall apart so quickly? If it's the case, why did George Bush lose in 1992 (after winning 3 wars in 3 years)? If it's the case, what about what happens when you stand up to a bully and they fold like a cheap suit? If that's the case, why does the loudmouth get skewered with soft, quiet words?

When I didn't know what else to think, I remembered my namesake. You know, the kid with the rocks in his pouch; the one who used one of those stones to kill the giant. He wasn't afraid of the odds. My namesake went on to live a pretty successful, storied life. He raised a son who mostly took after him who, by the way, wrote this verse. Neither of them were afraid of the odds, and there's a reason for that.

I think the commonality in all these situations is wisdom. It's loving, kind, God-based wisdom. It's the kind of thing on which King David relied; the kind of thing for which Solomon asked. My concordance says that the verse may be a way of saying that wisdom is more powerful than strength. Though I sometimes misplace it, I believe that. It's the reason why brains triumph over brawn. It's the reason why love always wins out over hate, and why good wins over evil. It's the reason why it's pre-destined that God will triumph over Satan at the end of time.

We shouldn't put our faith in things of this world. You and I have put our faith in things that won't last, and it's an unwise thing to do. Houses, money, vacations, college degrees, even relationships: none of those are inherently bad things. But they're temporal, only here. Nothing contained in this world carries over into the next; nothing contained in this world qualifies us to be in the next. Whether or not we're standing next to Paris Hilton on the other side of the Pearly Gates isn't up to us, and the saying about "you can't take it with you" is true. Don't forget, though, that the verse doesn't say "don't enjoy life." If that's the message you get, better go re-read it. Things are here to draw us closer in love and to enjoy. Things also shouldn't take the place of that ultimate love. So without my becoming any more preachy, shall we agree that putting our faith in possessions or earthly things is a waste of time? It's like attacking a strong city, putting trust in worldly strength instead of divine promise. David and Solomon knew that, and so did their descendant from Galilee.

And it's the reason why we should put our faith in God, in good triumphing at the end. Doing so makes the fight worthwhile. Doing so means that the odds don't matter. No matter how impressive something may look, it can be overcome. You're denying all of history if you think otherwise. After all, the British really should have beaten the rebellious Americans, but this man named Washington had other plans. After all, the Triple Crown is a difficult thing to win...but eleven horses have done it. After all, the Soviets said they would bury us, but they were brought down by the triumph of freedom over socialist slavery. After all, there was this outcast, criminal group of miscreants who defied the government of their time and created this thing called "the Christian church" that has lasted two thousand years and changed human history forever.

Knowing these things, maybe it isn't so hard to figure out after all, and believe me: it's something I'm happy to finally realize. Knowing them, that city doesn't look so daunting after all.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 13 May 2011

He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity. Proverbs 21, verse 23.

The 'fun' reading at my bedside is Ron Chernow's new book about George Washington. I've read quite a few books about the Father of Our Country and this is one of the better ones. The author paints a personal picture of Washington, using decades of his personal letters with friends to give insights into the real man behind the great man.

Washington was famous for keeping his tongue, and the book explains much of the reason why that is. Reticence is one of the things I admire about General Washington. It's an ability which I sometimes seem to lack. I'm more like Donkey than Shrek (Said the ogre: "Donkey, you HAVE the right to remain silent. What you lack is the capacity."). I'm certainly not much like George Washington.

That's a shame because the verse means something and it slays me when I read and re-read it. If I could just keep my stupid mouth shut and learn to be more judicious about what I say & write, perhaps less calamity would befall my life. We've read here numerous verses about how the mouth takes into the heart and lets out from the heart. Here, the focus is how those things bring calamity on us. It's not just indicative of evil in and out of our hearts, but also the consequences of it. Bad things can happen because of what we say. Feelings can be hurt, plots hatched, revenge exacted. That's no coincidence: it's how we're wired.

And don't forget that this verse comes right after the one talking about how a wise man can attack strength without fear. Part of that wisdom is the Kenny Rogers axiom: you got to know when to hold em and know when to fold em. To be confident, you need to know when to hold your tongue. It's not a matter of withholding truth. Instead, it's a matter of knowing how to best use and share information.

Perhaps my free tongue is one reason I've lacked confidence. Perhaps it's also a reason why kids today seem to suffer from a lack of confidence. I know it's a generalization but I think kids today lack much of the self-confidence that their ancestors had. Remember, arrogance isn't confidence. Some of that comes from the things they say. I love my kids, but I never would have had the terrible, profane vocabulary they have. It wasn't acceptable 'back then' (which surely must make me sound old), even as it was also commonplace. Painting for you a picture of the rosy days of old would be a lie; it simply wasn't that way. But I hear things from my kids' mouths that make even me blush. In part, I think it's the Jersey Shore impact, as well as the vomit spewed out as so much popular music; now I do sound old. We try to remind our kids, gently but firmly, that such vulgarity & profanity isn't allowed at your workplace, and that you can't drop the F Bomb around little kids and then expect them to not drop it themselves. We ask them if they could say those things to their teachers, or to strangers and not expect a fight. You can guess the result: in one ear and out the other. All I can hope is that it sinks in because I see now how such things gradually chip away at one's integrity and erode one's self confidence.

It makes me sad because I'm the same son of a son of a sailor, who himself spent many months at sea with the salty language of the sea flowing freely from his lips. I was once chided by my supervisor for letting my language be recorded on the soundtrack of mission tape we cut. My language may not have been to the extreme that I regularly hear from kids today, but you know they had to learn it someplace. I'd be lying if I said one of those places isn't my home. Back then, when my supervisor upbraided me, I was taken aback by it. Back then I was a stupid kid. These days, even as my language still is far from perfect, I'm ashamed of the way I talked. I wish I could go back and tell my younger self to clam up, to clean up, and to contemplate before engaging my yap.

Words are precious things. The more I write, the more I am learning to cherish them, to preserve them for good use. I imagine Christ was a reticent man. What words of His we have are succinct, brief and powerful. He didn't waste them. That's a behavior I am slowly learning to model. Unfortunately, if you hang out with me long enough, you'd question how well I'm learning. It would be a valid question, and it's one with which I struggle daily, especially when living in the fishbowl with those teenagers. There's more than a small degree of hypocrisy in my even writing these things; I'm ashamed of that too, yet write them I must. Jesus wouldn't have taught His disciples tell the Pharisees 'to go F themselves,' and I can't picture George Washington screaming at his soldiers to 'get the F with it.' There's a reason for that, and it's a good reason

to remember. These men, some of my heroes, knew that words are precious things, and words mean things. Guarding them saves calamity from falling on one's self. Guarding them is a smart, wise way to live one's life. It's a good thing to remember on a springtime Friday. Have a good weekend.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 16 May 2011

A wicked man puts up a bold front, but an upright man gives thought to his ways. Proverbs 21, verse 29.

Boldness can be a front, and a front is both a facade and a movement. Boldness can also be wicked. It can be the product of much aforethought, many long hours of contemplating, and not all of that is necessarily good. But don't forget, too, that boldness can be a good thing. If we're acting in an upright way, it can be a healthy thing.

No surprise here: I've been accused of being a bold man. I've been rightfully accused of being bold in both sinful and helpful ways. This weekend I did something that I've been contemplating for a long time. What I had been doing had been both bold and helpful, but it had also been tinged with sin as well. In truth, it isn't huge but, like Alan Jackson sang: "it aint no big thing but it's a gold star for me."

I signed off Facebook.

I like using social networking. I have hundreds of friends online and, for the first time in my life, friends from all the cities and states where I've lived and worked are all in one place. And I have met people whose hearts have come to be very dear to me. For a long time, I played the online games, and I posted many, many provocative discussions about (mainly) politics and religion (those two subjects we're all supposed to avoid). I enjoy sharing photos, and keeping up on what people are doing. The banter and debate are enjoyable, as well as the photos of people just living their lives. There is a handful of people who I regularly talked with, and I very much enjoyed and looked forward to seeing what they are doing. But...

...But a few months ago I found that I was putting up bold fronts and that it was becoming too much for me when it really shouldn't be about me. Nothing should be about 'me.' More and more I found it tempting to post smart aleck comments; I regularly, enthusiastically succumbed to the temptation. I would only post and say and show what I wanted people to see, or to think. You don't realize it but networking sites like Facebook let you show to the world only what you want the world to see. Me, I was bold in exercising that freedom.

It left me feeling rather hollow.

Last week, I took a good hard look at the things I had been posting and saying and I didn't like what I saw. I want the world to think I'm an upright man, to see me as I want to be, as I am trying hard to become. We all like to think we are upright and that we all are thoughtful and contemplative. That isn't the picture I was painting. I looked haughty, arrogant, and snarky. When one of the people closest to me posted that Carly Simon song, "You're So Vain," I took it to mean she was posting it about me. That got me thinking that perhaps she had a good point.

I had been praying and thinking about it for a few months and decided that it would be good for me to back away and decide what I wanted to do with myself. Do I want to post a real image of me or just a real image that I want people to see? Does every political story need my two cents worth of commentary? Or do I want to share these proverbial columns online and walk the walk & talk the talk on what they really mean? It isn't an easy thing to do: if you're an information junkie like me, you don't realize how much you come to depend on meaningful input and communication from people who matter to you. But if it wasn't serving God's overall purpose in life, then it isn't something worth doing.

When I realized that, I deactivated my account. I know that, for now, God put it on my heart to move in this direction. I think He did it so that I could see how a wicked man puts up a bold front, but an upright man gives thought to his ways. Over the last few months, many people have given me kind and wonderful feedback on these writings we share together. For the first time in a long time, I want to be worthy of their compliments. Even more than that, I want what I say and do to match, and to be a decent servant of the Word I've come to cherish.

To be honest, I don't know yet if it will be a temporary or permanent thing. I don't miss the Facebook online games; I haven't played them in a year. So, perhaps in time, I won't miss Facebook itself. I already miss interacting with my friends, but friendships can be durable things and be even more enriched by absence and good work. In just a few days, I felt a little relief from some of the drama, some of the pressure to interject. But it hasn't been easy, and where I had hoped for some support in doing this, I haven't really yet received it. Perhaps in time that will happen. I will likely get back on for a few hours to retrieve a few email addresses, but then I'll deactivate it again and stay off. I love my friends there; many have become true friends indeed. I love them still, but will now love in a different way. That's what an upright man should do and it can be a boldly good and caring thing.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 17 May 2011

There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the LORD. Proverbs 21, verse 30.

My youngest daughter, Samantha, graduates from high school in a little less than three weeks. In thirteen years she has attended 5 schools in three states: Salem Lutheran, Woodmen Hills, Central School, Wester Middle School and, finally, Centennial High School. This past Sunday, her family sat at Stonebriar Community Church here in Frisco, attending her baccalaureate service. Many schools today don't even do a baccalaureate; it's a religious service that ceremonially signifies how our students have grown up and are now prepared to enter the world as adults, but still children, of God. During the ceremony, local tradition has each student carry a rose that's connected to a continuous ribbon. On stage, in front of those gathered, they cut the ribbon, signifying their cutting the bonds to childhood. It's a unique gesture that I haven't seen anyplace else, and it was moving.

During the service, I broke down and had to leave. I was taking pictures and, when the opportunity presented itself, I quietly ducked out to release some private tears. It was bittersweet, and they were tears of pride, happiness and sadness. Sam is our headstrong kid, the one who always pushes the rules, always has to go a little bit beyond the edge and who consistently frustrates and makes me proud all at the same time. Watching her process down the aisle, rose and ribbon in hand, welled up the tears to where I simply couldn't hold them back any longer.

While I was in a small room, weeping, I thought about what I wanted Sam to know as she goes out into the world. I love all my kids, but one should be in the spotlight right now. She's earned her time there, and it's a right and fitting time to let it shine on her alone. I stood there, dabbing away my cry, and thought about all she's gone through, especially in the last two years. Struggles, brushes with the law, relationships, breakups and reconciliation (then breakup and reconciliation again), losing friends, finding friends, changing jobs, fear of the future and overcoming her fears of today: all this and so much more my young girl has endured, persevered and overcome. It's so easy to get wrapped around the axle and think that these problems will define this young woman as she starts out of high school. Doing so would miss the point of both the ceremony and the graduation season it began.

It would miss the point because I landed on the thought that's encapsulated in this verse: there is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the LORD. Sam earned her place on the stage, earned the right to cut the ribbon and fly, and she does so because of He who placed her on this world. She is here for a purpose, for a reason, and to be part of a Divine plan that is sometimes tough, sometimes harsh, but always good. Standing on the graduation stage means basking in the spotlight of achievement. It means taking a few minutes of our precious time to properly recognize a job well done and having what it takes to become someone of meaning in a world where meaning is always in need.

I want her to know that her meaning will be found in God. Nothing she does will succeed without Him. That's not a caution or a negative: it's actually a powerful blessing. The verse doesn't say that the LORD is set against us. Instead, the verse talks about some of what's best about humanity, namely our ability to intellectually prepare, to gather age-old knowledge, and to use those to advance in a world set against us. It reveres those things as gifts by saying that they are valuable but small compared to He who gave them. The LORD is not only in the world around us: He is the glue that holds it together, the potter who forms the clay, and the artist who painted the skies. God is the life-giver of the life-force that beats in every entity of this world, from the lowliest insect to the brilliant physicist who considers God to be a fairy tale concoction. Nothing we can do in this world can outwit or outdo God and what He has already done through His Son. No, it isn't a negative thing at all: it is an empowering thing that means all her preparations in school, life, love and family are but the foundation on which she is free to build a happy and wonderful life.

The Mexicans have a proverb of their own: if you want to hear God laugh, tell Him your plans. I think that's another way of stating this verse. It doesn't mean God mocks us but, instead, testifies to the eternal magnificence of He who spoke all things into being. We have meaning. We are sentient and soul-filled beings, created for love by a God who is all love and wants us to experience that in the magnificent world He created for us. Christ said "apart from me you can do nothing." That too is another cousin of this same verse, saying that all things we think, say or do in this world can only succeed by involving Him in them. He wants us to succeed, and He wants us to flourish, to use our abilities to be His people in a world for our taking. Standing there, relishing my tears, I realized that these are some of the things I want my girl to remember.

In just a few days, Sammie will walk across another stage and this part of her journey will be complete. As soon as she exits the stage, the next part will begin. She'll always be my youngest daughter, and part of me will always see her as the fascinating little girl with mischief sparkling in her eyes. On that day, though, she'll also stand on her own as a young woman ready to play that mischief – and succeed through the LORD – in a big, bright world she's now prepared to enter. She may have cut the ribbon and then won her diploma, but we will always be connected through the love we have shared and the future we can make as family and as peers now together. The world can indeed be a scary, intimidating place, but she isn't in it alone, and never will be. She's already succeeded through those three states and five schools. For her, I believe the best is yet to come.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 18 May 2011

The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the LORD. Proverbs 21, verse 31.

Every day is a day of battle. Last week, in a men's group, my friend, Patrick, spoke repeatedly about this concept. He mentioned that many people have expectations that, when you have faith in your life, things get easy. Many people look at faith as a 'get out of jail free' card that will solve all your guilt and take away the consequences for the things they've done.

Horse hockey. More to the point: horse fresh from battle hockey.

That was the conclusion Patrick presented and it's the conclusion I support. Having faith means the exact opposite. It means that we choose, embrace and pursue battle. We deliberately choose the hard path. Faith is a highly illogical thing. In the terms of the world, it is unreasonable, the antithesis of reason (instead of the foundation which it really is). Since the start of time, people have railed against it, railing against divine wisdom and love, railing against God. If you don't believe me, search all through human history and you'll find war, pestilence, hatred, anger, poverty and inhumanity to others. Those are the fruits of turning from God.

You and I are no different. We do battle every day. The battle is in everything we do, in struggling against that which pulls us away from God and what He has in store for us. The battle is in how we fight against the wrongs, the sins, that plague us. Some temptations are slight and have small consequences, some are small with large consequences; some are large with small consequences, and some are large with thermonuclear emotional consequences. What tempts you may not tempt me, but we both struggle against the things we've done in error, in sin, and we both engage in battle.

On the other hand, the victory is eternal. Life is the fruit of embracing God, even embracing the battle in which He leads as both fighter and general. It's not a matter of our 'doing' anything, meaning that it's not even what we do in the battle that matters most. It's the heart with which we do these things that matters. It is belief in the Savior that drives the fight and gives us the share in His victory that is eternal life. When we finally lay down our arms and take off the armor that shields us from spiritual harm, we have rest and peace to look forward to. In that reward, there will be no more war.

Nice. What about now, though? What about victory now? When do we get something for something here? A great many of my friends who aren't quite down with the whole faith-in-God business ask this question. The answer is peace. We get some inner peace, understanding and contentment while we're here. We can grasp the understanding of forgiveness that's been given to us so that we can give it to others. We can also understand how relieving it feels to be forgiven. There's real peace in that here and now. Peace breeds attitude, and attitude counts for a lot. After all, would you rather deal with a bunch of people who live in peace and understanding than a bunch of folks living with buried angst and worry?

But the bigger payoff is still yet to come. We all know people who have passed on, people who have died. In my life, the most recent was my friend, Pauline. She is the mother of an old friend of mine from Indiana, who passed into eternity three days ago. I hadn't seen Pauline in 20 years, since the day my daughter was born when Pauline worked at the hospital where Pook entered this world. After not seeing her for several years before that, we chatted about her family, her own daughter (who had been my closest friend), and about life in and around the town. On a stressful day of life-change, she made it pleasant and comforting, and I've always cherished those moments we shared. It dawned on me then that she was one of the most decent, caring and down to earth people I'd ever met. I never saw her again, and my heart, condolences, prayers and thoughts go out to her surviving daughters today and through these words.

It's only a temporary separation though. Pauline passed from this life on Sunday after suffering a series of strokes over the preceding weeks. Coincidentally, she died sixteen years to the day after her husband also passed (and he too was one of the neatest people I've ever known). When my own time to die comes, I'll pass from this life through the miracle portal of death and see other people waiting there beyond. I expect to see Pauline and Buss, and we'll have the rest of what passes for time there to catch up on what's happened here and matters of wonder that we can't even begin to comprehend.

All these are benefits of faith, and they are the victory of faith that rests with the LORD. He created us in love, for love, from His wonderful love. Despite how we corrupted that through the destruction of sin, He redeemed it back and guards that victory as a precious reward for us both in the contentment of peace here, and in the peaceful wonder of His eternal victory when we leave here. Believing doesn't mean the battle will decrease or even that there will be an end to it this side of the grave. As my friend, Patrick said, we are warriors for a reason. Personally, I'd much rather struggle and war on the side of the God of peace, than fight for the right to have it all about me here, then go down to a grave where there is neither rest nor peaceful victory.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 19 May 2011

A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold. Proverbs 22, verse 1.

In so many ways this is probably the toughest one of these to live out. The maxim is true that, once you've lost a good name, it's hard to get it back. If you've read enough of these, you know that. If you lie, cheat on your spouse, deceive, plot selfishly, or fail the people around you, you realize that the esteem in which they held you was one of the most valuable gifts they could ever give. Whether it's a spouse, a friend, a co-worker or a member of your family, losing the good name you had earned with them brings shame and disgrace from which it's difficult to ever escape. Think Tiger Woods, or Aaaaanold, or Charlie Sheen just to name a few who, like me, have seen the silver and gold value of their good names evaporate in the sunlight of their misdeeds.

From time to time, these things bubble up. When you're working to repair a relationship, you have up's and down's, and occasionally the down's percolate up until they burst in front of you. We had an argument recently about work, time as a family and togetherness. As with most arguments, this one started small and got louder as the underlying issues of frustration and resentment bared themselves. The deceiver is always looking for ways to prick our conscience, and he did so to me. A jab here and there is enough to well up the old guilt that still holds true, effective enough for me to realize that the old name you'd built for yourself through all the blessings you squander is now gone forever. You see that there will constantly be issues to work through, that there always have been, and that the road ahead is rocky and steep; it's that battle I mentioned yesterday. As long as you let the hurt rule, you never get to spike the ball to celebrate. At the weary end of it, you feel like the Gambler: the best that you can hope for is to die in your sleep.

Additionally, every now and then even good intentions backfire. I added an old friend onto the list of recipients for these messages, someone who had been receiving them before but who asked to stop receiving them awhile back. We had been friends for years and I knew they had suffered a loss, so I took the chance of adding them back on. That didn't work out as I'd hoped because they shamelessly rebuked me, and in doing so said things that were neither kind nor true. They didn't and don't know my whole story, but then again, they're also suffering through grief. Still, the jab hit me knowing that my name is forever mud with a former friend who I don't believe would ever relegate the past to history. They're a sinner just like me, with different sins but hurting more. I removed them from my email list once again, and the best I can do is pray for them that they'll be encouraged in other ways.

In times like the ones I mention, you realize that this verse is talking about you, how you're your actions ruined your good name, and you will work doubly-hard to build a one. Sure, you can polish up the old name, maybe chip off the scale to reveal the shine underneath. But you'll always know the tarnish and crust were there because they leave behind marks. People see that. What was before is no more, and what could be ahead is not yet written. One can't truly live in the land of regret without realizing you're in limbo, not moving forward while still being haunted by the past. That's no way to live.

But the breach can be healed. It is through broken, hurting and imperfect people that God works His miracles. The only sinless human is He who redeemed us. The rest of us, well, our misdeeds make us stink on ice. As mentioned, in my house we are trying hard to work through our issues and move forward. It isn't easy, and ninety-nine percent of our efforts happen out of the spotlight; that's the right thing to do. We talk, we bring up issues we can work with constructively, we avoid personal attacks, and we pray. We pray a lot. There's comfort in working through faith to let God heal what you've wrecked. Some people insist this is hiding behind your Bible, that it's hiding behind faith to put on a false face. There's only a half-truth in that because those people don't see the whole picture. I don't know how it can be hiding if I'm exposing these things in public here, watching them fail the acid test of Scripture when I measure my sins against it. If someone else can learn and benefit from my experiences, then all the hurt won't have been dedicated to selfish vanity. In the process, there is good healing that takes place all around. Besides, the people who accuse us are working through their own issues, too.

Just as the attacks can come from out of the blue, so also can come help in ways you don't expect. A friend of mine recently gave me a hug and told me that they were sorry for things said last year. Tears welling up, I responded that they shouldn't feel sorry, that there's nothing to forgive because I had been the SOB they accused me of being. We were both emotional about it, but their words meant more to me than anything else said to me in a year. My friend, Serah from

Kenya, also recently said that “real friends are God’s way of being with us.” That’s something I hadn’t considered before, but she’s right, and it’s a faithful insight that I’ll always treasure in the hard days that are always ahead.

Every day is indeed a battle, and the tactics of guilt and regret are familiar moves constantly used against us. When the sin isn’t admitted, these can be constructive weapons used to good purpose. When it is admitted, however, they’re just designed to hurt, to draw us away from God. When good lessons of His forgiveness, humility and repentance are boldly proclaimed, we begin to let healing rule again and build on the rubble of what we tore apart. In doing so, God gives us the strength to lace up our boots and get back in the fight. We may not realize it, but He’s also polishing up our good name, watching us go back into battle for Him saying, “that one is special to me.” I’d rather have that than silver or gold any day.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 20 May 2011

Rich and poor have this in common: the LORD is the Maker of them all. Proverbs 22, verse 2.

You can't take it with you. That's the name of the movie that won best picture of 1938. To me, it's also a corollary about this verse. God made everything, including us. He created everything we know simply by speaking, then created human beings by molding us from his creation like an artist molds clay into fine pottery. He deliberately breathed life into us, then blessed us by calling us 'very good.' Then, after the word "no" entered the human vocabulary, he allowed the consequences of death to end our time in His creation while immediately sharing with us His plans for redeeming us from that death. Through it, we get to remember that when we pass, we take nothing tangible of this world with us. When we die, we meet the Maker who started it all. You can't take it with you. Remember that.

Some items from recent news seem to bring me back to that statement. Have you followed the dust-up about Stephen Hawking's latest remarks? Dr. Hawking said last week that he thinks Heaven (and thus God) is a fairy tale. Using the mutually exclusive 'proof' of science to disprove eternity, he says it is all a made up fantasy. Soon after, a little boy who says he's been to heaven and back came out swinging to youthfully parry Dr. Hawking's atheistic jabs. I feel bad for Stephen Hawking. I really do. What he takes with him when he goes might just be sadly surprising.

Or what about all the flooding in Louisiana? Some of the poorest farmland in the nation was devastated when the Federal government opened floodgates along the Mississippi. The floodgates haven't been opened in forty years and, to be sure, this is a hundred-year flood. Once again, the poor (farmers) are seemingly disadvantaged so the rich (or richer urban dwellers) of Baton Rouge and New Orleans aren't flooded out. Did God make all this?

Then there's the (former) head of the IMF, accused of raping a hotel maid in New York before trying to slink off to Europe first class. Apparently, it isn't the first time this predator has struck in this way. How ironic is it that he represented the consortium of money managers who monitor worldwide currencies, buying and selling them to maintain economic equilibrium? I guess money can't buy you happiness anymore than it grows on trees. It certainly didn't help this dirtbag.

Finally, have you heard that the world is ending tomorrow? Yes, that's right. Someone has mathematically calculated that tomorrow is the end of the world, based on some Louis Farrakhan-type of numerology that definitively points to Saturday, May 21st as being THE day for the end of the world. I seem to remember phrases from Scripture that say we don't know when this will happen, but somehow said calculator has rendered them moot. It's a shame because I have tickets to see Jimmy Buffett tomorrow night. If the guy is right, I hope it happens after the show.

What's the moral of the story? I think one moral is the verse, namely that the LORD God made it all. From the heaven-sent 8 year old to the heaven-bound prognosticator, and from the super-wealthy moneychanger to the poorest sharecropper in the American South, God made it all. In His eyes, we're all equals. In His eyes, we are all the same because He made us all to be very good even as we don't act that way. Michael Jackson was on to something: if you're thinkin' about my brother it don't matter if you're black or white.

Knowing that, then it isn't up to me to convince you whether or not these verses are true. It certainly isn't my place to hammer you on whatever you believe (or don't believe), or to slam you with my own preferences disguised as religious morality. The Word speaks for itself and it doesn't need my embellishment (even though I freely and enjoyably comment on it). If you get good meaning out of reading verses like today's, then it isn't anything I've said that's conveying that meaning. It's God's Spirit working on your heart. Maybe that hasn't happened to you before, or maybe you've forgotten what it feels like. If that's the case, then a good place to start the healing is by remembering that we're all made by the LORD Himself, and in His eyes we're all very good and equal. You mean something and you are who you are and where you are for a reason. You aren't some organized blob of DNA and complex proteins: you are a magnificent creation whether you're black or white, rich or poor.

That's good to remember when every week is tough, especially with teenagers in your life. Maybe it's because I'm looking forward to that concert but the weekend just can't seem to get here quick enough. The week in-between a good time last week and an anticipated good one this weekend has been very rough, with losing life-long friends, fighting, arguing, breakups, and massive stress at Chez Terry. On days like today, I find this verse waiting for me like an old friend in the rain, beckoning me to come up on the front porch to get dry, sit down, enjoy a cup of hot coffee, and remind me that all things work for the good of Him who made them.

Sp despite his brilliance that I will never know, poor Stephen Hawking hasn't figured that out yet. He's not alone, you know. On the way home from the gym this morning, the radio host was interviewing an atheist who sells pet insurance. For a small fee, said atheist will take care of your pets for 10 years if or when the Rapture ever occurs (no comment on said Rapture other than saying it isn't mentioned in Scripture). It's a humorous lesson in opportunistic capitalism, and the man says his business has been way up these last few weeks. God will come back and declare 'game over' in His good time. I'm not worried about the when or where of it; I'm ready right now even as there are so many things in life I would still like to do. I'm ready because I'm comfortable knowing that there's someone who thinks I'm special and very good because He made me that way, and that He doesn't care whether I'm rich or poor. He doesn't care about the fact you can't take it with you. The love we do get to take back to Him makes everything else worthless.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 23 May 2011

A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it. Proverbs 22, verse 3.

As I write this, I hear thunder. A look at an online weather map shows storms northwest of my house and they're likely headed in my direction. There is also a tornado watch. Even though it's the end of May, I'm not surprised at that because we get them almost every month of the year in North Texas. If a tornado warning is declared, the sirens all around town start blaring. There are two interior safe rooms in my house, so if the worst happens, we have a place in which to seek refuge. We are prepared.

Danger signs: it's a wise thing to heed them. When you see the storm clouds coming, it's wise to seek cover. If the economy starts to tank and you're able, it's wise to research alternative, safer investments. If you know war is coming, it's wise to prepare. Danger signs aren't hard to detect; they are all around us. With 24/7 media, you see them all the time. To be fair and balanced, I think that much of what we see in the media is overblown. Things are obviously more newsworthy if they're sensational, and I join you & so many others in saying I'm really pretty sick of it. Especially given the whole 'cry wolf' aspect of modern 'news' reporting.

As I write this, I also write it as a survivor of this weekend's end of the world scare. As you read it, you read it as a survivor, too. Jimmy Buffett had a heyday with the whole thing at the concert Saturday night. Thinking about it, it was pretty absurd, especially given the fact that Scripture's lessons about the end of the world really come down to just two words: be ready. We don't know when it will happen but it's promised. Just because it's been thousands of years since the promise doesn't mean it won't happen. Scientists say it has been thousands of years since a giant meteor crashed into the planet but that it's a certainty that it will happen again one day. If we can believe that, we can surely put belief in God's promise that what began will one day end.

But there's a lesson in the whole May 21st thing: a prudent man sees danger and takes refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it. Since Scripture tells of the end of the world, then the lesson is to be ready whenever it happens. Be ready by having the saving grace of God as yours. It really isn't any tougher than that. It's a prudent thing to do because the end of time means danger for those without that faith. Just as it would be prudent to fasten down loose objects in a storm or shield your investments during a market correction, so it would be prudent to seek out God and let Him save you. The hard part is already done for us.

That was the lesson in church yesterday; I'd be plagiarizing if I didn't give my friend, Patrick, credit for the message. We are both natural and supernatural, and it isn't a difficult thing to understand. Faith & redemption are the easy part: living with them in our world of spiritual warfare is what's hard. If you don't think so, ask 'the simple.' It may seem easy to forego faith, to push off worship, or go it alone, but what do you do when matters of spirituality cross your path? We aren't just all physical, you know. We're emotional, spiritual, physical, intellectual creatures, and to ignore one part of our makeup imperils the others. When those who ignore their spiritual side are faced with danger for which they aren't prepared, is it surprising that suffering so often results? It isn't something God does to us, but it is something for which our unpreparedness renders us vulnerable.

In my book, it only follows that it's a matter of common sense to address the spiritual nature of our lives. You have that side and so do I. If you can prepare for a test by studying or prepare for a race by training, we can prepare our spirit to face danger. Prayer time, humility, forgiveness, confession, personal Scripture time, self-reflection, and transforming our attitude by assuming the posture of "how can I help you" are all easy, common-sense ways to put faith into action. If you haven't done these things, give them a whirl. Besides, what do you really have to lose except a life of suffering?

Thunder is still rumbling outside, though I think the storm may be moving off to the east; at least we got some needed rain out of it. The patio umbrella was brought inside, the fence shut, and the chairs on the front patio are stacked so they're weighted down more in the wind. I asked my daughter to get off the cell phone and come inside, and I shut the garage door. Danger may be passing north of us, but we were prepared. Chances are, unless the world ends today (seeing as how it didn't on Saturday) tomorrow will start safely. We saw the danger signs and prepared.

It's a good thing, too, because the rest of today will be full of its own dangers. There will likely be other storms, and the work-week will have stresses and challenges. In the world, there will be the temptations to gossip, to flirt, to contemplate stepping over the line (whatever 'the line' may be for you). I'm prepared for that too, knowing that I'm armed and ready to do my part in battle. What say you?

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 24 May 2011

Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honor and life. Proverbs 22, verse 4.

Read through this verse a few times and you might find it is un-American. That's right: I think this verse is distinctly un-American. Words mean things, so please take note that I didn't say it is ANTI-American; it isn't against us (US) as a country, people, or entity. But the content of it is very, very un-American indeed.

I say that because we, as Americans, are not raised to be humble. We're more like the Mac Davis version of that word, namely, "oh Lord it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way." We are culturally raised to be independent, brash, assertive, proud and unafraid. It's in our national DNA, and it's the birthright of everyone blessed enough to wear the label "American" next to their name. The heroes from our history bought and paid for that namesake. There are patriot graves inhabited by men and women who gave all they had so we could live in freedom. They are people of whom we should be proud, just as we should proudly demonstrate those qualities they bequeathed to a world very much in need of them.

Except...

...Except that it isn't independence, brashness, assertiveness, pride and boldness that brings real wealth, honor and life. If we want to be wealthy in the ways that really matter, we will model God's example and be humble. If we want to wear the true badge of honor, that of the honorable spirit, we will be respectful. And if we want to live, we will live our lives in both humility and respectful fear of God that he may enrich us with His true wealth and honor.

Sure, the Constitution that protects us from government seizing our freedoms enables a system of democratic capitalism to flourish that we may 'pursue happiness' in ways that provide for ourselves. Yes, our founding documents (and the men who wrote them) enshrine human liberty as the highest yearning of the human spirit. Despite the skepticism of a cowardly left and an overeager right, our nation still is a nation of laws that protect our liberties that we might be privileged to pass them on to our children.

Those are uniquely American traditions, but that isn't what the verse is talking about, is it?

No, the verse goes deeper than just what we see here. It comes from God and speaks of God's wisdom to more than just a declaration or a bill of rights. This verse reinforces that terrestrial freedom and liberty are indeed God-given rights, ones that need no human government to allow or bestow them (as if one could). Humility and service are the ways to spread human freedom, modeling for people in bondage everywhere the true path to freedom of the soul. Respect for God's love and dignified reverence of Him are the methods by which real, free pride can take root. The fruit of these simple things is freedom of the spirit from want, hatred and eternal punishment. In this life we become free to truly and constructively use our American liberties that we might improve our lot in this world. In the next life, we live forever in a place where real freedom, real love, will demonstrate what it really means to live in an eternity free of sin, pain and guilt. And we do it by humility and fear of the LORD. Segueing off the theme from yesterday (and Sunday), the easy part has already been done for us.

So read the verse again and see if you don't agree with me now: it really is un-American. At the end of it, you know, that really isn't such a bad thing. God's word is meant for people of every nationality, race, and location. It transcends nationality and is the divinely given birthright of every human being. Freedom, love and life are gifts He gives to all of us, not just to those of us in North America. The way to best advance and ensure them is to do what He does, and live them in proudly quiet humility and respect.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 25 May 2011

In the paths of the wicked lie thorns and snares, but he who guards his soul stays far from them. Proverbs 22, verse 5.

This week I'm taking a project management boot camp. It's an intense, four-day class designed to prepare you to take the project management professional (PMP) certification test. I've studied and prepared for this class for awhile now, but I'm finding that all my preparations haven't quite readied me for the intensity of the class. Each day, we sit through 9 hours of rapid-fire instruction and several tests throughout the day: tests that get progressively more difficult as the days go on. If it works out well, I should be prepared to take the PMP test Friday afternoon.

In reading the verse, I see a small parallel to this week in my life. In the paths of the wicked lie thorns and snares, but he who guards his soul stays far from them. In the context of this PMP course, in the paths of the student lie challenges and adversity, but he who prepares his knowledge stays far from them. Yes, I know that this is like grasping at straws but there's a point to be made.

If you want something bad enough, it won't be easy to get it. Don't confuse this statement my friend Patrick's message about salvation being an easy thing for us. It is: it's been freely given and freely redeemed. All you have to do is admit "I believe;" easy. But if you want to live a life reflecting that belief, well, my friend it's going to be a tough road ahead. We are all full of wrongs we've done, full of inherent sin and that means we are all wicked. For us, our paths are full of thorns and snares. Evil waits for us wherever we go. The verse doesn't say "have faith and it will all be easy." If anything, it says the opposite. The verse says there WILL be difficulties for us. The way to avoid those difficulties is to stay away from them. Just like the way to avoid failing my class (and failing the test) is to study and prepare, so the way to avoid evil is to learn about God in faith and to flee from the evil we see in our road ahead.

I also read it to mean that staying away from evil is a benefit of guarding our souls. In class, passing is a benefit of preparation and study. In 'real life,' a safe soul is the benefit of taking actions that protect us from the snares and traps. Implied in that statement is that those actions were probably difficult because (I'll say it again) evil is waiting for us wherever we turn.

I've taken courses for graduate work that weren't as rigorous as the course I'm taking this week. At the end of it, the payoff will be a certification worth thousands of dollars, a prestigious identifier for my resume, and hopefully some expanded job possibilities. In between that and today, however, remain two more days of difficult classwork. Those difficulties are the snares in my week and I can't avoid them if I want to pass the class. The pitfalls of failure contained in those difficulties, however, can be avoided by study, reading, good notes, and participation. I'm finding learning isn't as easy in your forties as it was in your twenties, but it's all good. I can do this. I just need to 'keep on keepin on.'

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 26 May 2011

Train a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not turn from it. Proverbs 22, verse 6.

We're up to one of the most common sense verses in all of Scripture, so common sense that even the most adamant atheist would have a hard time discounting it. It's hanging in my mind that I saw this verse inscribed in the wall of one of the secular elementary schools I attended when I was a boy. Then again, they were ancient school buildings, and back in the early 1970s such things weren't yet politically incorrect. It's a shame that our PC world has short-circuited good, solid wisdom because it might be afraid that the words could speak for themselves and, danger of dangers, speak from God to our consciences. It's a tragedy not just for the obvious religious argument, but also for the fact that we rob our kids of the intellectual wonders that come from understanding different beliefs and the sources of wisdom.

But I digress.

Still, it really is a shame because this verse is the most plain spoken justification for education that I've ever read (or probably ever will). You can read it as plainly as I can. If we get good, solid teaching when we're young, we learn lessons we will carry with us all life-long. The PM class I'm taking this week is the most rigorous instruction I've undertaken in a decade. I keep thinking that it would have been much easier to learn if I had taken the course ten or twenty years ago. Then again, back then I didn't have the other qualifications which are necessary for certification. Back then, I was still learning things that this week's class is bringing to full fruition. Yes, I think I might have had less difficulty picking up the concepts if I was in my twenties, but what I learned before is what I'm re-learning to use now that I'm older. Isn't that the point of the verse?

Isn't it also ironic that the verse is a common sense truth, imparted divinely by God, that doesn't mention a word about Him? God's wisdom makes so much sense that He doesn't even need to mention Himself. Further, isn't it even more richly ironic that, when both right and left argue over the content of public education, they are arguing based on wisdom first recorded by Solomon in the Bible? It's no coincidence that the verse is part of Holy Scripture. I mean, the instruction to which Solomon is obviously referring is instruction in divine wisdom. Teach a young person about God's love at an early age and they will use and remember it all through their lives. That's the same justification that the Communists used for their inculcating their misguided philosophy from even very young ages. Even the atheists in Soviet Moscow knew the truth of this wisdom at the same time they denied it.

A phrase from this morning's devotional really struck me and complements this verse: wisdom is the correct application of knowledge, resulting in good decisions. Any parent knows that, the younger your kids are, the more impressionable they are, and the more impressionable they are the greater is your opportunity to teach them. It's how governments indoctrinate and why they do so at younger and younger ages. It's why we teach kids kindergarten starting at age 5 or 6, and it's why people will pay thousands of dollars to get their kids into excellent pre-schools that lay a good foundation. And it's why our Maker wants us to teach our kids about Him. Parents want their kids to know about this wisdom, about this Divine wisdom, because they love their kids and want them to make good decisions. I've long said that the greatest compliment a child can give to a parent is being able to live successfully and happily on their own. That only happens when they live wisely, and the best insurance to ensure a wise life is solid instruction starting at a young age.

Recently, I've expanded my email list of Proverbial recipients, doubling it in the space of a few weeks; I intend to double it even more. Before sending out the writings, I contact each new recipient and ask them for their permission to do so. I deliberately included people who I knew were un-believers and atheists, giving them the choice of opting out. Consistently, I received "please delete me from your list" messages back from these people, and I respect that. They were immediately deleted because it's their right. Faith is a touchy thing because it's supposed to be. It is supposed to hit us where we live and it does, even when it comes in the form of a common sense phrase that could just as easily be a secular maxim as a nugget of God's grace. But it isn't secular in nature. Like all of Scripture, it is a gift from God and a means of that grace. The older I get, the more thankful I am to be the recipient of such gifts, and to be able to share them. I'm especially thankful that people told me these things when I was younger because they took root and I haven't turned from them. Here's to hoping the same is true for you and yours because it makes such good common sense that even a college graduate or an atheist can understand it.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 27 May 2011

The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender. Proverbs 22, verse 7.

One of the skills I re-learned this week was how to de-construct sentences. The instructor in the PM class repeatedly stressed this as a key to understanding questions on the very thorough PMI cert test. It's not that the questions are trick questions but, instead, that they are written so as to get you to hone in on important content to discern the correct answer. When you look at questions on a test, especially one that is repeatedly vetted and analyzed, you need to remember that the correct answer is right in front of you.

So it is with the Proverbs, and so it is with this one in particular. The obvious subject is money; read it again and money screams at you. Rich, poor, borrower, lender: all terms about money. Is there something else though?

Define "rich." Is it how fat your checkbook is or how full your heart is? Is someone rich if they are wise or knowledgeable; is somebody poor if they aren't? And is someone a borrower if you owe a favor, or if you cry on someone's shoulder, or if you get a ride home from school? Does accepting help from someone make you indebted to them?

Hard & short answer: yes. Does a money lender lend out of the goodness of their heart? Sometimes, but let's be fair and say that usually isn't the primary motive. I think you know me enough, though, to know that I'm naïve in such things and that I want to look for the best in peoples' motives, even from a lender. Deep down, we all do. I like to believe that people lend, even on behalf of others, because it's something they want to do. And the other side of that is true too, namely that we borrow because we want to. We have a goal, we have something we need or want, so we ask for help.

If that's true, then what about that whole rich versus poor thing? Are people poor because they want to be? Maybe, but I'm guessing few people aspire to live in some kind of poverty, whether it's poverty of the wallet or poverty of the soul. But it's undeniable that those who are rich in spirit have an advantage that those who are poor in spirit do not. It isn't some "I've got a secret" deal: it's simply a fact. They have a wisdom that others haven't acquired. You and I could react by saying "that's not fair" (and it isn't) or "so what" (which is little more than self-denial). Perhaps, though, the better way to act on it is to ask what it is we're missing out on, then search for it. After all, this is a free country, and we're free to choose many things. For such things it's a privilege to be in debt. The rich-in-spirit people who rule over me in life are the people whose lives I aspire to model. God is richest of all, and while there is so much in this life that I want to do, I gladly anticipate the moment when He welcomes me home. The richest part of all is that while I'm indebted to him and I can't possibly pay back that spiritual debt, He tells me that I don't have to, that it's already paid in full as a gift of His heart.

Few things of this world are black and white, you know. Perhaps everything is a trick question. Perhaps in everything we do, we need to look to see if there is another message, another meaning that we are meant to discern, then act accordingly on it. Knowing that, next week I'll let you know how I did on the test. It's this afternoon and the stakes are high. I'm studying a bit off and on this morning, then walking away from it to relax awhile. Doing that, I believe, will help me to deconstruct the test questions as I walk through them. I'm prepared and I know I can do this. That's a rich feeling indeed.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 31 May 2011

A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor. Proverbs 22, verse 9.

Welcome to the end of May after a long Memorial Day holiday. I was away with my family over the weekend, so I took Monday off from writing these, only to come back to reading this verse and discovering that I think it's a great verse to describe Memorial Day.

You see, storing up food for emergencies is a wise and prudent thing to do. That's obviously what the verse is talking about. It is generous necessity (and necessary generosity) to share what you have when disaster strikes, when poverty reigns, or when others are in need; ask the people hit by tornados this month about generosity and blessings. The people who help others in crisis exemplify what practical faith is and why it is such a beautiful thing. Yet yesterday was a day to remember something far more generous. On Decoration Day we should remember how a generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his life with his countrymen. Forgive me if I take a liberty with the verse because I think it's a good thing to remember our fallen war dead by doing so.

I did my time in uniform and finished my term intact; most people do. I haven't known many families who lost members or friends in war, but I have known a few. I used to date a girl whose uncle died a quarter century before she was even born, dying over Germany in World War II. I knew people in high school whose brothers and fathers died in Vietnam. My dad didn't die in war, but he did die because of one. It's a tragic honor to lose family in service to country, and if I could have my way, I'd gladly go back in time to prevent the circumstances that exposed my father to Saddam's poisons from which one day he would die. If you ask anyone who has lost family in war, my guess is that they would say something similar. We can't change those circumstances, though. Life is what it is, choices are what they are, and God is still in and around both of those.

After those choices, we turn back to God and see that He blesses us through the people who selflessly give up their own lives so others might live. It is easy to see such people are heroes. It's not always so easy to remember that they are common people, not super-heroes. They aren't Thor, the Green Lantern or Superman: they are you, me, and our friends and family. One day per year to recognize their sacrifice isn't much to ask. It upsets me that, especially in war time, we as a society have turned away from remembering the heroes who died for us. I'm pretty jingoistic when it comes to all things military, especially during war time. Personally, I think the best our nation – any nation – has to offer the world are the men and women who volunteer to protect and defend in the armed forces, giving themselves as the first line of defense in a cruel world. When we as a country forget what they did, we will lose part of our soul.

Especially since they died to protect liberty so that other heroes could go on and help others in need. So that others could be blessed and they could be a blessing to strangers. The Red Cross workers, the church workers, the neighbors, and the family members who pitch in and share when others are in need all wear a different badge of heroism than a fallen soldier, but it is heroism and goodness all the same. Their sacrifice is different but just as crucial if we as a society are to endure.

Now that the summer is officially underway, I'm rested, sunburned, and ready to get back to work. If you have a loved one who has perished in service, thank you for what you've given so that we as a nation can go on. Thank you so much, and please know how blessed we all are for what they did. Please know that a grateful people do remember and they will not have gone on in vain. You live with the knowledge of what they did; we all live because of what they did. Thus, for all of us, every day is Memorial Day.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 1 June 2011

Drive out the mocker, and out goes strife; quarrels and insults are ended. Proverbs 22, verse 10.

For the next three days, I'm going to dispense fatherly wisdom to my youngest daughter. A few weeks ago, you might have read my pining that she's graduating soon. That was then. Now the week has come and the day is nearly on us. Family members are already traveling from way back east, the house is being cleaned, and we are preparing for a celebration. On that occasion, there are some things I want to say, to telegraph (if you will), to my daughter via these writings you and I share. I wasn't able to do this when her sister graduated; now I'll make amends.

The days of being a child are at an end. You're scared and you're nervous about what's up ahead, but don't worry too much about it. It's ok to be nervous; it means that something is important to you. Our minister said that to your mom and I in the days before we were married. Those words are as true now as they were then. The world is the apple of your God's eye, and He really does know what He's doing. The universe unfolds as it does, as it should, and you're part of it. You're prepared and you're ready to make your start in whatever you do (please include college in that "whatever you do" category). Good and bad, what has happened in your life has gotten you to this point and today is indeed the sum of all your yesterdays. I'm proud of you. I hope you're proud of yourself too because you've done so much to take healthy pride in!

Life is about love. It's about sharing with others the Divine love given to you. Nothing else matters as much as this. It can wash away the gray unhappiness of discontent. When you remember this, you drive out the mocker of love and, in doing so, you drive out the strife. Before you know it, cynicism and sarcasm become jokes, a parody of what can be good in life. Before you know it again, quarrels and insults are ended. Love generously because you have a strong, big, and wonderful heart.

That isn't to say that troubles won't come again. They will; it's part of being in this fallen world. There will still be people who will be oil to your water; there will still be people who you just rub the wrong way. This side of the dirt, there's no getting around that. You will still find things that will cause argument, fights, strife and discord. Some of those will actually be worth fighting over. But what is good still and always will win out in the end. The secret lies in how we deal with what happens.

To deal with it, I refer back to that paragraph about love, real and honest love. It's worthwhile. It would be so easy (and it is always so tempting) to let life embitter you. That happens to too many people, including people you and I know and love. Resist that temptation, and when it gets hard to resist, ask for help. Ask for help from God, from your family, and from your friends; ask in that order. We are wired to strive for independence and to use our gift of free will to succeed; we are also hard-wired to need others when things get tough. If you want to drive the mockers from your life, ask for help.

Finally, through all the struggles, don't forget that people will still mock you, especially if you take a principled stand or do the hard thing and just say 'no' when you're on the razor edge of temptation. I believe that people who are the first to mock are also some of the unhappiest people you'll find. You've gone through more struggles than most teenagers I know, and there will always be people who find fault in you because of that. As you grow older, the mockers and gossipers will always find something to prattle on about; they aren't worth your time, your treasure or your tears...but they will try very hard to suck all three of those out of you. The best fall back plan is, once again, the love in your heart. Hold fast to that, share it with gusto, and you'll go a long way towards driving them back and minimizing the stress and quarrels in your life.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 2 June 2011

He who loves with a pure heart and whose speech is gracious will have the king for a friend. Proverbs 22, verse 11.

And now we come to Part II of Dad's pre-graduation notes to his eighteen year old sage. If you are feeling nervous and worried about graduating (and what lies beyond), remember this: you're worth it. For most people in the world, finishing high school (let alone going to college) is only a dream. You're doing both. It's a time to walk across the stage and be thankful and proud that you're where you are because of what you've done. Family, teachers, friends, and hundreds of other people you may never know have worked to make this moment possible for you. When you're standing on the stage, I hope this thought is one you consider.

On Sunday, you start the first day of your adult life where you're responsible for all you become. You're worth that too. You're worth it because God made you into someone wonderful who has wonderful things to offer the world. I hope you offer them remembering that if you love with a pure heart and speak graciously, you will have the king for a friend. Good flocks to good, and doors will open to you when you are kind, upright, and honest. Other doors open for the opposite of those traits; be careful how you approach those them. They may be bright and shiny, but that may just be good polish on a dull stone.

Friends will come and go but it's ok. Saturday will be the last time your entire class ever gathers together as one. By the time of your first reunion, you all will not be as you once were. Some may already be gone. In your life, God will lead you where He will, and along that way, people will come into and out of your life. One of my favorite people always tells me 'there are people in your life for a reason and people in your life for a season.' That's a wise thing to remember because there's good in both. Some of the people you know will be your 'forever people' and some will teach you things you'll know forever. Remember them both, and love both with a pure and gracious heart.

Don't get caught up in fashions or other shallow things. Real power isn't in the hands of the king or the famous. Manners always matter. Don't let yourself be caught up in the trivial pursuits of looking good only for the here and now. Comport yourself well and you'll be a person of substance. Things that are godly are always right but are rarely easy. But like those manners, they always matter. You know the difference between right and wrong. Now you get to keep putting that into practice. What you see, like, and do now will, one day, seem trivial to you. Some look back on high school as the ultimate experience; for a very few, it is. Your best days are always ahead and you'll always be in style if you stay in step with the love that matters most in this world and the next.

Believe it or not but most people want to be good and work to be good. Some people you should help, some you should just pray for. Like me, you have a tendency to want to help and fix. Just be careful who you do that with. People aren't projects: like you and I, they're fallen, imperfect, and struggling. It can be a loving thing to simply listen; it can be a loving thing to walk away. Whatever you do, do it in love because, again, she who loves with a pure heart and whose speech is gracious will have the king for a friend.

Finally, remember to have fun. I don't have to tell you about this one. Another of my favorite people always says "I bring my own fun with me." You're like that too. Even in a tough, old world full of hard times, struggles, disingenuous people, and trials, there's always sunshine somewhere. Remember to bask in it and to let yourself have fun. Admit to yourself what it is that you really enjoy doing and then, unless it's destructive, find a way to do it. Make something enjoyable out of your career and your life. Don't forget too, that old saying about how nobody ever wanted to put "she worked a lot" on their tombstone. Life can be good if you let it be or make it so. Wanna guess what the first step is: she who loves with a pure heart and whose speech is gracious will have the king for a friend.

All this advice boils down to that proverb. The Proverbs are full of great practical advice on how to live our lives. For a soon-to-be graduate, I think this one is especially good. The point of it isn't to make friends in high places; remember that 'the king' may not just be one of this world. Sure, it doesn't hurt to know powerful people, and you will. But to be rich, famous, and powerful is an elusive goal. It's a mirage. You're better than that. Now is your chance to prove it to the world.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 3 June 2011

The eyes of the LORD keep watch over knowledge, but he frustrates the words of the unfaithful. Proverbs 22, verse 12.

A couple of days ago (in the first of these graduation messages), I wrote that I hoped my daughter wouldn't worry too much. This verse is the reason why. If you read the verse a few times, I think you'll agree that it's a good verse to capstone a student's educational career. The first part of it reminds us that God is in control of all we learn. He gives us knowledge, then keeps in tune with what we learn and know. God is an active participant, not a disinterested tutor. He doesn't do it just for the years we're in school: the proverb infers that learning is an always thing, a lifelong pursuit. It also promises constant, loving justice. Notice that it doesn't say "He thoroughly annihilates everyone who hurts Him." It could because He could, but that wouldn't be in His nature. Instead, He 'frustrates the words' of the unfaithful. And make no mistake about it: we are all unfaithful in our own ways. He uses His option as God to mess up the intentions of people who live contrary to what He wants for us. That's done as a just follow-through to His watch over knowledge. He does it to teach us about His love and the good He wants for us. It's yet another loving second chance when we don't deserve it. Knowing all that (in watched-over knowledge), here are the last things I want to telegraph to my girl before she walks across the stage.

First, remember justice. God is just to us; be just to others. "Fair" really is a four-letter word, but there is truth to it and always remember that. Be fair to others, and be fair to yourself too. Always be tough on yourself; aspire to high standards and gauge your words and actions by the Word, by what's right, and by your own internal barometer. In all that, remember to be just. Be tough on yourself, but be fair to yourself and others.

Next, keep learning. That's a big point from this proverb. You're past the point of learning things you HAVE TO learn. From now on, whether you acknowledge it or not, you learn what you want to. The learning starts every day when you open your eyes. Don't close off your mind to it. Accept everything that happens at face value but be shrewd and learn to be discerning without becoming cynical.

Don't wait. I like that Kenny Chesney song that says "don't blink." Now when I hear it, I'll think of you. I can't believe how fast 18 years have gone, and I can't wait for your next 18 because wonderful things will happen. When those have passed, you'll be in your late 30s and me in my mid-60s. Much will happen to mold, redefine and shape you. Seek those moments and love in them. Don't wait for them. Live now, live well, live lovingly and enjoy them. Cherish every single moment.

Forgive. Life isn't full of second chances: it is full of unlimited opportunities. Our God is a god of unlimited chances when we genuinely turn from our wrongs. He lived among us as a man whose purpose was to love in forgiveness. That's THE great, practical example for you to follow. Forgive as He forgave. Live and learn (because He is watching over your knowledge). Whatever happens in life, accept it, forgive, learn, and don't forget. Forgive with gusto and justice.

Love generously. Need I say it again? Love wisely but fully. Don't hold back.

Finally, just like Lynyrd Skynyrd said, "don't forget there is someone up above." Don't forget your Savior. He is smiling and celebrating with you here and now; He is part of your life whether you remember Him or not. It's ok and good to 'go Jesus.' Indeed, the strange people are the ones who deny something so obvious and wonderful just for the right to say "my way." Involve Him in your life, in your decisions, in your fears, in your tears, and in your joy. He won't ever let you down and when it's all done, we're gonna have a big party in what lies beyond. He will be the party.

My friend, Vern, posted these words today that, I believe, segue perfectly off the proverb and are a good prayer for a new adult to remember as she goes forth to build her career: "Lord God, when it seems that the very foundations are being destroyed, and that it is beyond me to do anything about it, and all I want to do is flee like a bird to a mountain refuge, let me remember that your justice flows from your heavenly throne, and that if I look for you, I will see your face, your

presence in the world." They are paraphrased from Psalm 11. His presence has been in every moment of your education, and in every moment of your life. That only gets better now that the easy part is complete.

For awhile, we were helicopter parents, your mother and I. For awhile, we both obsessed in our own ways about your grades, your responsibilities, and your actions. In spite of that, you've been exposed to much that more sheltered kids never see. These days, it's a triumph if you can raise a child to graduation in the US and not go through crime, jail, drugs, addiction, pregnancy, divorce, trauma, or suicide. It's my regret that you lived through some of those things, but in spite of them (not because of them) you stand today as a success. At the end, it's all good and is all done in love as parents who love you more than themselves. It's my pleasure and my joy to share these small words as I do, but it pales against the pleasure and joy of being the dad to a great young woman who is on the verge of even greater things to come. I know they are yet to come because the eyes of the LORD keep watch over knowledge, but he frustrates the words of the unfaithful. Let that be a great comfort to you. Congratulations, Samantha Morgan. I'm proud of you, I love you, and I believe in you. Now go out and get em.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 6 June 2011

The sluggard says, "There is a lion outside!" or, "I will be murdered in the streets!" Proverbs 22, verse 13.

This is a fitting D-Day verse, you know.

It stinks to be fearless. I've only met one Medal of Honor winner in my life. My friend and I were in an elevator and in walks a Vietnam War MOH recipient. He and his wife were in town for a Medal convention, and he wore the light blue ribbon with the five white stars. If you've never been impressed by such things, go stand beside one of the men who have won the Medal and ask yourself if you could do what they did. To get the medal, you earn it by proving you've done something selfless, something you didn't even think of and something so heroic that it exemplifies what is best about human character. If you talk with people who have received the medal, I bet you would find humble people who would tell you 'it's no big deal.' They're ordinary men who did extraordinary things in fearless ways. I'm in awe of such heroes.

It also stinks to do things we feel compelled to do. That was the subject of the sermon in church yesterday. My good friend, Bill, announced that he has quit his job and is becoming a ministerial trainee, a church planter. Bill is one of the more fearless men I know; the job he did in law enforcement testifies to that. I can't speak for Bill but something like that would give me a lot of pause. I'm not sure I have what it takes to give everything up and follow a compelling call. I know what I want to do in life but I find it difficult getting to that point. I want to write for a living, yet feel encumbered by my responsibilities and the fear of failing. Hence, I work a 'primary' job while my heart is in the words. What's more, I feel more drawn to the words that share faith than many of the words that tell stories I conceive. I'm no Blue Max winner, and I'm not my friend, Bill, who is overcoming his trepidation of the same things I fear in order to follow where God is leading him.

Maybe God is trying to tell us both something.

Maybe He is trying to tell us something because I never want to be one of the cowardly slugs who cry wolf or lion. For many years, I lived in fear of what others could do to me. Unhappy, I finally reflected on what it was I was afraid of: others, what others could do, or being close to others. Guess which one of those was the real culprit? Cowardice is disgraceful, even more disgraceful than anything else I can think of. I think that we all have moments of great fear, and there are indeed some things of this world which it is good to respect in fear. When you predicate the rest of your life on that fear, though, you become a coward. When that happens, you become the person who screams, "there is a lion in outside!" or, "I will be murdered in the streets!" I don't want that.

Even in my personal life, I lived in fear of failing my responsibilities and of failing the people I loved. I held onto my heart for so long, not giving myself over to who God intended me to be. When I did that, it drove wedges into my relationships; is that a surprise? I was afraid of the lion of real feelings, afraid of being slain in the streets by them. It takes an extraordinary heart and an extraordinary God to overcome fears like that, teaching a meager man like me how to love again. It's an even more extraordinary lesson to learn that you have to be willing to risk everything for them, to be selflessly willing to give whatever you have to in order to have that kind of love in your life. Only God can teach you that, but He does it through the mystery of His word and the good hearts of good people. I'm not the man I was not very long ago. In many ways, I am much better, even after all it has cost.

And yet I'm still not heroic or fearless, and I still struggle with the call. I know what I want to do with my writing, yet that hasn't come through yet. I believe in myself and I believe it can happen, but it hasn't happened yet. Until that time, I keep trying, keep working, and keep doing my best. That's all anyone can do. And I'll never win the Blue Max but I will always admire the people who do. They are the kind of people after God's own heart.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 7 June 2011

The mouth of an adulteress is a deep pit; he who is under the LORD's wrath will fall into it. Proverbs 22, verse 14.

There it is again: God using His word to hammer me. Just when I have a great weekend, I read something that reminds me of my sins of the past and all of a sudden the bloom is off the rose. He just can't let me get away from the things I've done. No matter what I do, the past never seems to leave me and the guilt of things creeps up to sneak attack my grasp on happiness. No wonder so many people are turned off by this whole faith thing...

...Except...

...Except that whole "ess" suffix in the adultery word. That implies femininity. I'm not a woman, and I'm not an adulteress. I guess that, yet again, I got carried away before fully considering what it is God is telling me. Maybe I'm over-reacting. Maybe there's something more. Maybe the verse is talking about more than just the all too common sin of cheating on your spouse.

I think that could be the case because if you take out the word "adulteress" and put in "liar," then the proverb works just as well. Try it with murderer, thief, hater, bigot, racist, Mafioso or Chicago politician and I think it works just fine. Try it with "male murderer" or "male thief" and it works just as well as if you had included "female" instead. I think that God is trying to tell us that anything we do that falls short of the perfection for which He designed us is subject to the LORD's wrath. He's saying that any of our sins can be a deep pit into which we could fall if we aren't careful.

But that's not all. Read for content and you see it's not just the doing of the sin that could trip us up: it's the thought of it. There's a line in one of my favorite songs that says "my heart won't tell my mind to tell my mouth what it should say." That's how it is with both love and its opposite. It comes out of the heart. Either something is rooted in love or it isn't. It's a love-or-not proposition, and it comes from the heart. It's not just our actions that are the deep pit: it's what we say about things. And where do the words come from? According to Zac Brown, they're from the heart by way to the gray matter in between our ears. It is what's spoken, what is told, that is the trap. Consummating the action may be the actual indiscretion, but before that ever happens there are words. Before that, something came from the heart. See why we need to be so careful?

You may not have shared your affections with someone who isn't your spouse (like I've done), but you may be just as susceptible to falling into the pit of your sins if you don't do something about that. If you've told someone you hated them, you're on the edge of your own pit. If you've reveled in dishing the dirt on your friends, you're standing there. If you've hit your wife, tempted your lover, padded your expense report, exceeded the speed limit, drank just to get drunk, told a white lie, rejected faith, or spanked your kids in anger, you're standing on the precipice of a deep pit. If you are found to be under the LORD's wrath, I'm sorry to tell you but you don't have much to hope for. It's not me saying that: it's the proverb. Truth is truth no matter who says it, especially since the words speak for themselves.

So what are you prepared to do about that? Have you considered what's already been done on your behalf? If you haven't wrestled with that in awhile, now is a good time for it. To wrestle with matters of the heart, especially spiritual ones, is a healthy thing; I believe it tells us what we really are when it all gets down to brass tacks. Besides, if we don't, then the guilt of things we've each done will indeed creep up at its own opportune time to plague us and steal our joy. There is a verse in the New Testament book of Hebrews that lovingly observes how, "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." Again, the words speak for themselves. It isn't overreacting, but it is God trying to nudge us back to realizing how we need Him before the hammer of his dreadful and just wrath enters our lives. It starts in the heart and exits through our words. So I ask you again: what are you prepared to do?

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 8 June 2011

Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him. Proverbs 22, verse 15

We expect children to be full of folly. In our country today, we coddle our kids so much that we should expect ONLY folly from them. Even on the field of sports, we've made learning self-discipline so difficult that it amazes me our kids can ever develop any. All the parental helicoptering, scheduling and stress don't do much to push aside folly and replace it with something useful in adulthood.

Knowing all that, would someone please define discipline? When I read this verse, I immediately get my hackles up because our post-modern America of Century 21 reads "the rod of discipline" to immediately mean something negative. I read it to mean punishment. Immediately I have this vision of some strict 19th century father whipping the backside of his son with a switch, angrily trying to instill 'discipline' into the boy. Immediately, I think that it's more loving to coddle a child in folly than to be stern or austere in relating to little Johnny. Immediately, I get it wrong.

I get it wrong because the verse doesn't appear to be talking about a punishing kind of discipline. I read the verse to mean 'the rod' to be bracing, like a rod in one's back keeping your posture straight. It means being upright, self-controlled, self-respectful. Such self-controlling discipline does indeed drive out folly. It replaces that folly with virtue, recklessness with resolve. Sure, you could try to beat that kind of thing into someone but that never works. That kind of abuse and punishment just build resentment and anger. If you want to drive out folly, you don't do it with abuse.

Instead, if you want to drive out folly, you do it with self-discipline, achievement and love. Left without those things, folly turns to danger. Without the check of self-control, folly takes bigger and bigger risks of foolishness until it finally crosses the line into serious transgressions. Affairs are foolish things done by adults seeking childlike affection. They always turn dangerous in some way. Theft is a foolish thing that leads to dangerous consequences. Cheating on a test at school is a foolish thing to do that leads to failure. Doing anything that makes you feel guilty leads to consequences.

So, again, if you want to drive out folly, do so with self-discipline. Teach others, maybe yourself, about self-control. For me, it's a lesson in progress. It's about learning who you can help and who you should simply pray for; it's about learning how to truly love. If you want to drive out folly, achieve and overcome. Set a goal and work to attain it. Build real self-esteem by trusting in God to help you use your talents to the utmost. If you want to drive out folly, love. Listen when others are hurting; be a shoulder to cry on; care when it's hard; choose to love anyway. Love to dare, and dare to love. Do it to drive out the foolish demons of apathy and anger.

Last night, I slept in my old room for the first time in over 30 years. I went to my mom's house to do some work, and I stayed in my old room. I sat on the bed, looking around at the walls that used to be filled with ship models, posters, and the bric a brac of adolescence. Earlier in the day, I went to Lowes where I saw someone with whom I attended school. I recognized her but I'm sure she didn't recognize me (hello LuAnn). I think back on the years I spent here and see there was much folly in my life. I was a kid back then; who could expect any different? They were years of growing up and becoming who I would be. And yet, I know many kids who are more advanced in their thinking than I ever was, and I know many adults who don't move beyond the level of adolescence in their thoughts. We expect our kids to be full of folly, and we expect our adults to put that all aside. In this place, I was learning those lessons, and the learning still goes on. Thank God for that.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 9 June 2011

He who oppresses the poor to increase his wealth and he who gives gifts to the rich – both come to poverty. Proverbs 22, verse 16.

I like to people-watch. At the gym the other day, I watched a familiar couple exit the facility and walk out to their car. She is a workout maniac; he's in good shape but doesn't seem to have his heart in it. BUT, he always walks ahead of her, never gets the door for her, talks down to her in conversation and appears to be, in general, a typical example of what I consider to be a male chauvinist. She follows him like a puppy. I watched them leave and asked myself 'what does someone like her see in someone like him' and 'why do women let themselves be treated that way?'

It seemed like he was oppressing the poor, she being poor of esteem. Mind you, this is all pretty superficial and I know nothing more of their relationship. I only see this couple at the gym and don't even know their names. 90% of our communication is non-verbal, however, and if that's the case, then non-verbally they were projecting a lot of oppression. He had her number and he knew it. She let him control her. Crazy.

What about real oppression? I've spent years of my life living paycheck to paycheck; it's one of the reasons there has been such trouble in my life. For someone with a great job and many, many blessings, I have been debt-poor. I've felt very oppressed by bad choices, and I've felt the boot of the system set against people who make them; it's the way of things. But, again, that's just the results of bad choices, many of them mine. What about that real oppression? It's a Uganda answer, where both the system and the power structure are set against a poverty-stricken population that can't seem to rise out of it on its own. It's a China answer, where the vast majority of Chinese support the urban and manufacturing minority that holds all the wealth: insured by Communist Mafioso dictators in Beijing dipping their beaks into the 'wealth' of the people who literally slave for them. In time, they will both come to their own poverty. If you're a Communist, you're already spiritually bankrupt anyway.

I also have little time for 'suck-up's.' You've seen them. They're the people who flatter their way through things, or try to put on airs, or try to be part of the in-crowd. Such things earn a big 'whatever' from me. Throughout my life, I have never been glamorous, attractive or elegant; neither have I been trashy, slovenly, nor inelegant. I simply didn't (and don't) care what the glitterati think of me. If 'the beautiful people' enjoy themselves, good for them. I'm beautiful in my own way and really don't need the validation of anyone else to tell me that. To cite Max Lucado, I'm Punchinello, and it doesn't matter if people like to pick on my spots or not. What the Maker thinks of me is what matters.

And that's the point of the proverb, isn't it? It all goes back to what the Maker thinks of us. He will justly level the field against those who oppress and those who flatter because He loves both sides. He loves the poor and He loves the rich. He loves the oppressor and the oppressed. He loathes the sinful way we treat each other; hate the sin but love the sinner. I believe the Proverb is yet another reminder that God is just and fair, that He isn't disinterested in our lives, and (indirectly) that He really does have the whole world in His hands because He really does love us in spite of ourselves.

Sometimes I think we set low expectations for our relationships. We think, "this is as good as it's ever going to be." Or "this is what I deserve." Maybe that's what's behind the gym couple I saw. That's a deceptive form of subtle oppression. It keeps us from having the kind of fulfilling, really enriching relationship that God wants for us and wants to have with us. I've never been much of one for the bar scene. I really enjoy going out with friends and having a few drinks to talk, be social, and relax. But it's something I can easily live without. Just not my scene; no offense if it's something you enjoy. I'll say this, though: like the gym, a bar is a good place to people watch. You get to see all kinds of dynamics in play. For me, though, I prefer to do things with a special someone that bring us closer together, build memories I'm proud of. That includes involving Him in them because I want the most from this life. Let me be less so He can be more. Let Him be more in my life to drive away the oppressors and avoid the poverty of the soul that comes with punishing debt, low expectations, tough choices, and spiritual loneliness.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 10 June 2011

Pay attention and listen to the sayings of the wise; apply your heart to what I teach, for it is pleasing when you keep them in your heart and have all of them ready on your lips. So that your trust may be in the LORD, I teach you today, even you. Proverbs 22, verses 17 – 19.

These verses mark a transition in the book of Proverbs away from things quoted by Solomon and into other sayings that, while still inspired by God, don't necessarily come from Solomon. These three verses may indeed be from Solomon – from my research, I found several sources that attributed them to him – but in all truth we don't know. Not knowing, I suppose, isn't really critical in this. Whoever the scribe was, he was recording things that the Almighty wanted us to remember.

That hit home today because it segued off this morning's devotion. It talked about how love lives through Scripture, about how Scripture is a living and vital thing in our lives. The devotion mentioned that every other religion was founded by a dead person, yet God is alive today, teaching today. Mohammed? Dead. Buddha? Dead. Joseph Smith? Dead. Get the picture? Those who subscribe to such beliefs are left to play their own Supreme Court, trying to discern what the original founder and writer meant in order to apply it today. In the case of Islam, wear Kevlar when offering your analysis.

Not so faith in God. He imparts teaching individually to each of us from His true standard. If you don't understand Scripture, talk with God about it. If you read verses in the Bible and have knowledge and enrichment from them, it is God's Spirit working in your heart. If they teach you hard lessons, it is that same Spirit lovingly telling you things you need to hear. If you are lonely, it provides inner strength to endure and persevere. And if you want to love, God's Scriptures are really just a colorful love letter to the human race, telling us how He demonstrated his love in caring, sacrificial and, yes, sometimes harsh ways throughout thousands of years of our history. Appreciation of Scripture is a matter between you and God. You don't need the pastor or priest to translate it for you, although their help and encouragement is sometimes critical. It's God talking with YOU. If you don't believe me, try it out.

The verses today back this up, namely that God's teachings are current and vital. They happen now, not in the past. "And listen to the sayings of the wise" implies active listening in the present. "What I teach" implies something ongoing. And "I teach you today, even you" says that God teaches us today, every day, where we are in the condition in which we find ourselves. It's proof, yet again, that He is an active participant in our lives...if only we let Him be so. The words mean things and are alive now, not understandable only in 7th century Arabic or in 19th century New England dialect. They are universal for everyone here in the 21st century no matter your language, skin color or background. True, they are translated down from original texts in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. However, as I understand it, if you compare what ancient texts we have (especially of Isaiah, the Psalms and the letters of the New Testament), you find only variations accounting for the language of the day. The original meaning and definition is preserved. Thus, what you read today in most Bible translations is what believers read thousands of years ago. Can you say that about much else of this world?

You can't even say that about what the Supreme Court does. So why would you try? Yes, it is belief and not 'fact' to put one's faith in all this. Is that not so with anything we learn? We accept facts as being true and verifiable because we put our faith in those concepts and attach it to things. Why not also with the word of God, especially when doing so can be personally enriching in ways that mean much more than just the here and now. After all, just because something is ancient doesn't mean it is untrue.

Is it a coincidence that this was our devotion today and then the proverb presented itself? I don't think so. The more I dive into the fuel of the Word, the less I believe in random coincidences. I think there's a reason why these things happen, a reason that's more than just a psychological panacea for the woes of this life. The more I learn of these things, the more I'm convinced they are God's real, living truth presented to each of us as a gift of Himself. He teaches us because He wants to be involved in our lives, and He wants us to be involved in His forever. These are lessons handed down to us by Him from antiquity, lessons that still hold universal meaning wherever we are today. Like the book itself, as we transition in our lives, it's encouraging, pleasing and comforting to know that someone has my back even in the toughest times. Teachings such as His are tools for us to use, words to live by, and beauty to share with all our brothers and sisters.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 13 June 2011

Have I not written thirty sayings for you, sayings of counsel and knowledge, teaching you true and reliable words, so that you can give sound answers to him who sent you. Proverbs 22, verses 20 and 21.

Faith is a hard thing to talk about, isn't it? I love to write; you obviously know this or you'd be doing something other than reading these. The longer I write, the easier it becomes to string my thoughts together in cogent streams. It is getting easier to pry out my real feelings and true intentions, then put them onto paper or form them into stories.

It wasn't always this way, though. When I started writing in earnest, it was difficult to admit my real feelings. You wouldn't think that it would be so. I mean, you would think writing would be just a matter of recording what you're thinking, but it isn't that way. Very often, even with these words, I write and re-write them until they are arranged in just the way I think says what I want to say. I do that because they very rarely come out in that order, especially when I'm using them to opine on something I hold dear. Those words are tough to record. It's even tougher to say things well in very few words. It then becomes even tougher to say them in public. For many reasons, it's a close-to-the-heart matter, and I think it's wholly understandable why so many consider it personal, even off-limits, in conversation. It's a struggle to live boldly in a sinful world, and it's a struggle to admit to ourselves and to a sometimes fearful God that we mess up, especially when we're forming new relationships and we want to put our best foot forward.

He cares about that, and He sent the remedy. You know this. What's more, He sent us reliable teaching from his ancient words so that we can live our lives by His code of conduct, admit when we've erred, and receive His unending forgiveness. Doing that, living by those words, changes the heart; a changed heart leads to changing the way we live our lives. He does it so that we can give sound answers back to him. He wants us to live our lives fully, earnestly, and honestly in a world where it's hard to do that on our own. If this can happen with partying, smoking, new hobbies, a moment in time, puppies, or the love of family, is it not also logical and likely that it can happen with this most personal faith?

But it isn't easy. My friend Patrick's theme in worship yesterday was "what are you in love with." His words were persuasive that, to be happy, fueled, and meaningful in life, we should be in love with Christ. We love families, each other, pets, jobs, even the Dallas Mavericks (today); Patrick's list of loves. But the love of our life should be the giver of our lives. I'm in love with many things, and a number of people. And there is much in life I do indeed love: morning coffee, catching big fish, music that hits just the chord to match my mood, red wine and a medium rare steak, sunrise over the ocean, and more than a few life-changing memories. All of these should pale compared to being in love with Jesus. When I've been in love with someone, I find it hard to contain it. I want to scream in joy from the rooftops and the steep hills of the city. With Christ, I'm in love but sometimes I find it hard to scream that same joy.

That's weird, very weird indeed. What's even weirder is telling people about it. Most of us are conditioned to keep such matters of faith private and quiet outside the walls of a church building or our homes. Yet, as they end every Sunday at my church, "true worship begins now," out of the stinkin' building and in the world, in what we do and say. True worship is our lives. What's even weirder than this is that He already taught us how to do it, how to talk and worship. He knows our inhibitions and He understands that we bottle things up, hide them, and don't want them exposed to daylight. He understands that it's difficult for us to say things about these matters and about Him, but He wants us to do it anyway. He wants us to do it and provides the way, namely our words and actions.

I doubt you'll ever find me standing on a street corner, wearing a breadboard, and yelling "repent!" I also doubt you'll ever find me asking strangers in the mall, "do you know Jesus?" That just isn't me; I'm not wired that way and find those things to be a turn-off. But if you get to know me (or keep reading these) you'll find that it becomes easier for you and I to talk with each other about these matters of the heart. Come over to my place and we can pull each others' ears for hours. Meet me over at the Londoner (English pub in my town) and I'll gladly tell you my story about His story. Then I'll want to hear yours. We might even not be embarrassed by it. It may not be easy to do, but we are all spiritual people with supernatural needs that can't be met by things, places, or even sometimes each other. That's what God is for.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 14 June 2011

Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court, for the LORD will take up their case and will plunder those who plunder them. Proverbs 22, verses 22 and 23.

Yes we have been here before. You know the drill by now: we are all the poor. We are all the needy. We all greatly in need of wise and competent counsel who will take up our case and plunder our oppressors. This is the point where Dave says "but there's something else, right?" Right?

Not today.

No, instead, let's look at it literally and legally. My opinion of the legal system is, like most, jaded by the media and by my limited exposure to it. 95% of most legal work isn't "Law and Order" and chances are I will never even set foot in the Supreme Court for anything other than a tourist visit. I know a few attorneys, though, and they're generally good people. At one point in my life, I even courted the idea of going to law school but then someone told me the joke about 'why do you bury lawyers 12 feet down instead of 6?' ('Because deep down they're good people.' Substitute officers, bosses, texting Congressmen, or whatever title you want for 'lawyers.'). I just don't have it in me to do what an attorney does.

But thank God we have them, you know? Thank God there are people who can intercede for us when we get in trouble with authority. Thank God there are people who are competent, have 'made the grade' and can stand toe to toe with the justice system and plead on our behalf. Thank God that there are people who translate justice to us and make it usable in our lives.

Thank God for Jesus, eh? Hold that thought and see where it takes us.

Let's think of ourselves as a defendant. I don't have a lot of money, so if I ever got sued or had to go to court for something, it could easily break me. If I were the plaintiff in a case, I would pay dearly for good (or even bad) legal representation. Through it, though, this proverb says that God would be with me, on my side. When I am seeking support and legal absolution, I need help. I need someone to stand beside me and translate legal terms to me, someone to argue my case fairly and competently. I can argue and debate, but I'm not qualified to do so in a courtroom setting. I would need someone to help me do what I couldn't do myself. I would need someone to look at the facts of my life and plead to keep me out of punishment.

I need God, see?

Or what if you're the plaintiff? What if I'm the person who is wronged? I have no interest in persecuting the poor; I'm poor enough in my own ways. Occasionally, though, I may need help pursuing justice against someone who has wronged me. Just as if I were a defendant, I'm not qualified to argue the matter myself. I can research the points of law, maybe even the precedents, procedures and such to inform myself, but I'm still not qualified to go it on my own. I need someone who can represent me to the judge and plead my case to right a wrong.

Again, I need God, see? God Himself, as His only Son, did this. It really isn't very hard to understand nor is it wrapped in archaic legal terminology. There is no fine print or legal disclaimer. He intercedes for me and you, pleading our case before a Father whose holiness needs righteous justice. That same Father wants us to be holy and to always share in His goodness, but He saw how our wrongs came in-between us and Him. He put off His holiness and came here to make things right and to do what we couldn't. Then He returned home to stand as my counsel, your counsel, constantly arguing our case. His pure innocence plunders the impure wickedness in which we revel, and He is constantly waiting to stand on our side.

I like looking at the Proverbs from different angles because, as I hope you've seen too, I see them applying in so many ways other than just the obvious. Here, though, I think it helps to look at it literally and think of Christ as our interceder, our counsel and attorney. When God the Father, the ultimate judge, looks at me He looks through the interceding counsel of Christ and doesn't see the ugly, unjust, terrible things I've done. He looks at me and sees His creation remade through His loving self. Instead of penance or punishment, he justifies me and slams down His gavel saying "not guilty." On my own, I'm not qualified to argue that. I'm guilty. I'm not even a lawyer, officer, boss or sexting Congressman: deep down, without my sins absolved, I'm not a good person. That's why I need God Himself to argue my case every day and in every situation. The best thing is that He doesn't charge me \$300 per hour to listen. Instead, He even paid my bill Himself. How cool is that!

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 15 June 2011

Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared. Proverbs 22, verses 24 and 25.

If you're a long-time reader of these messages, you've probably noticed two things: one, that the subjects of the Proverbs repeat themselves, covering topics multiple times but in slightly different ways. The second thing is that, repeatedly, I say that I think they describe me, today especially. I'm a hot-tempered man. It's taken a lot of effort for me to learn but I'm learning to not sweat the small stuff. When caffeinated – which is every day – I can be high-strung. Mix that high-wired demeanor with anger and it could be volatile.

Years ago, I used to be like that. I've never been a fighter but I have had a fighter's trash-talking mouth. I used to get angry over small things: toys left out, bills being higher than I thought they should be, one minute late after curfew, Chris Matthews' show, you name it. Any number of relatively insignificant things would fuel my anger. I wasn't volcanic, have never been abusive, and I wasn't a thrower or a dish-breaker. No, I wasn't those things, but I was a petulant grown up boy. Boys can afford to be like that; they're maturing. I had no excuse: I was just immature. That can be equally destructive, you know.

I got what I deserved and my kids didn't: I instilled that hot nature into them, especially in my son. He's a teenager, and teenagers are always a bit petulant (aka "hormonal"), but my son especially has had to learn anger management. He used to throw Guinness record tantrums, and even now he internalizes anger, letting it fuel occasionally volcanic outbursts. It's not right that he should have been burdened with such behavior because he learned a lot of it from me. Every time we argue, I regret it all over again. The irony of it is that you will never find a more loving, deeper and more devoted young man than this one. He is consistently underestimated by people who don't look past what is superficial, and thus miss the caring and talented young man before them. I helped put that in place. When he was younger, he was associated with one easily angered, then he learned his ways and got himself ensnared.

If I could have a do-over in life, controlling my immature and emotionally destructive temper is what I would choose. Thank God for do-over's, you know?

I might not be able to take back what's done, but I can learn from it and change. This I am doing, and it hasn't been easy. But the son is still at home for another few years, and there's still time to impress on him, during his most emotionally formative time, that there are better ways to handle stress in life. I pray more, and I breathe deeper. I try to put myself in the other person's shoes before responding. I exercise often. I pray...didn't I already say that? Well, it's worth doing again and again because I do. All these things are good things to do because they're the right way to handle that stress.

In other words, I put into practice some of what God wants us to do. He wants us to be collected in our responses, cool in temper, and judicious in how we think, speak and act. When your initial inclination is to react instead of pro-act, that isn't easy. It's a hard thing to re-train yourself to only raise your voice when there is a genuine threat to safety or things that are truly important. It's harder still to do so consistently in front of your kids, showing them the right way to respond instead of what you've done so many times in the past. Please know I'm not fishing for credit here, but I am hoping you understand where I'm coming from. It's not easy to change life-patterns but it can be done. It can be done when you have the life-changing encouragement from the Almighty teaching you how to do it.

It's a fool's game to live on wishes; it can even be dangerous. I try to avoid doing this, but sometimes I mess up and wish I could make things different. There are many things I wish I could change in my life, some large, some small. One thing I consistently wish for, though, is to unscrew the way I screwed up so bad by being rash and temperamental when my kids were younger. Yes, I'm better now, much calmer and more controlled than I ever have been before. Still, I wish I could take what I know now and have a chat with the me of twenty years ago, telling him to lighten up a little, to let the small things slide and realize that God does know what He's doing. I would tell my kids to avoid men like me who let show their tempers over things that don't matter. I wish I could tell them these things because they're things God told me in His

words dozens of times but I was too bull-headed to listen. Thankfully, even without second chances, He's always giving a way to do better.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 16 June 2011

Do not be a man who strikes hands in pledge or puts up security for debts; if you lack the means to pay, your very bed will be snatched from under you. Proverbs 22, verses 26 and 27.

I think public schools should teach more practical economics. Like so many others, I'm an educational armchair quarterback. I'll gladly tell the schools what they should teach...because I'm not the one doing it; ain't it always the way? But this is one that I think is really needed. With credit so readily available, and with prices rising, it's critical that young people especially learn how to lend, take, and manage money constructively. That means learning the basics of economics and how to practically apply those basics.

Read the verses closely and I think you might see that my comments agree with them. The verses are extolling common sense, practical economics. Don't lend foolishly. Don't borrow foolishly. Don't overextend yourself financially, either in buying or lending. These are common-sense ideas that just happen to be wisdom from God himself. It is as advice as old as human-community itself concerning one of the things we use most in commerce and interaction. We need that advice because, as Prince said, "dearly beloved, we are gathered today to get through this thing called life."

This summer, we're launching another child into the world. Yes, I'm a mean dad for doing this, for making my kids go out and work their way through college. Heck, I wish I had the money to pay for their entire ride, but I just don't. I think there's a lesson in that, though, namely that we do best when we are forced to rely on just two people: God and ourselves. Anybody else could mess up the mix, and not to sound too pessimistic but those two people are really the only ones we can count on 100% of the time. You're always you, there with you. God is always God, always there with, around, and in you. Others come and go, most to love and build us up, but some to tear us down. Count on God and the person in the mirror first in all things.

Besides, there is nothing like old fashioned need to teach self-reliance. Young adult number two is smart, canny and resourceful. She's also ready to tackle the world on her own. It would be a disservice to both her and I to coddle her. Neither will I let her starve (though living for a week or two on mac & cheese wouldn't hurt). I simply think that it's best to empower our kids early by insisting they take control of their lives, including economically. When she moves out in a few weeks, I want her to save, scrimp, and stock away what she can. I worry about her letting her apartment become a place where friends can show up, eat all her food, drink a bunch of booze, and then leave disaster in the wake. Good people do not-so-good things, you know. I worry about it but still think the best lesson is to let her learn it. That means trusting she knows enough to do so, including the good oarts. Watch your money, and don't let your friends kill you with your kindness. If you do, knowingly or not, they will snatch your bed out from under you.

That's not to say we shouldn't be charitable & selfless, or that we should be Mr. Scrooge with our resources. On the contrary, we should always be willing to give anything we have to those in need. That word, need, is the filter, though. Is it really a need or is it just someone feeling needy? Shrewdness and scruples are in order here. I think those are implied by the verses as well.

It's so easy to get wrapped around the axle worrying about money, but some responsibility for it is in order for all of us. Whether we learn it in school or learn it on our own, we each have to pony up to our debts and be responsible with our treasures. It's a Godly thing to do and it makes sense. Most people really aren't out to get us but there are enough who are that we need to be on our guard about who we invest with. EF Hutton may have listened, but God listens and then does something about it.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 17 June 2011

Do not move an ancient boundary stone set up by your forefathers. Proverbs 22, verse 28.

Good fences make good neighbors, or so the saying goes. I've only built one new house from scratch (ok, Richmond Homes built it...), but I remember one of the first things I wanted to do when I moved in was build a fence. I knew and liked my neighbors, but I couldn't wait to build a fence around my postage stamp sized piece of Colorado by fencing them out (and me in). Maybe it was to put limits and protection around what was mine; maybe it was selfishness; maybe it was definition: only a short time passed before six foot cedar pickets separated my sandy dirt from the sandy dirt owned by my neighbors.

There's nothing new in that, you know. For Godly purposes, boundaries are ancient. When the Israelites were camped at Sinai, one of the things God commanded Moses to have them do was erect piles of boundary stones at the foot of the mountain. God had his reasons for it. He wanted His people to learn respect and self-discipline. He wanted them to be self-controlled. He wanted them to be separate and distinct from the people they would conquer to take possession of Canaan. A few years ago, I read a book where the author claimed to have discovered those boundary stones just off Mount Sinai in Midian. If his story is true, even thousands of years later the markers are still in place. Just goes to prove that you shouldn't mess with a good thing.

Did you know that one of George Washington's early jobs was as working as a surveyor? In a new land, such a job was important, identifying to settlers where the boundaries of lands began and ended, providing reference, direction, and structure to society. Even today, most of 300 years later, some of those township, county, and property line boundaries are still in use: evidence that ancient boundaries still matter in a so-called modern world. Again, it proves you shouldn't mess with a good thing.

What's the point in all this? Whether it is lines surveyed by the father of our country or boundary stones built by Moses, the markers serve as reminders to us. They are limits on our property, our freedom, and our abilities. We have to have boundaries. We need them. Humans need definition; humans need limits, if for no other reason than to define how far we can go. We need to know how far we can push before we are over the line; we need to learn the tolerance of others; we have to understand where the white lines are and what the consequences are if we cross them.

But if you take it a bit farther, precedents and discoveries are kinds of boundaries, aren't they? New knowledge expands the limits of what humanity understands. New discoveries extend the boundaries of what we knew before. They don't necessarily invalidate the boundaries laid down by our fathers, but they push them, usually in constructive ways. Windows 3.1 is an operating system that's nearly 20 years old; Commodore 64s are even older, but you can still (slowly) run a computer on them if you're willing to understand their limits. Not only that, but the super-fast Windows versions that Mr. Gates sold to us were built on the structure and lessons from those great-grandfather operating systems. ENIAC and Watson computers may be different in speed and complexity, but they're both still computers, and you couldn't have the latter if the former hadn't been built when it was.

So is the verse contradicting this? It's saying "do not move" the boundary. I don't think it's contradictory at all. In the context of a legal boundary, it's establishing the precedent that we should leave in place what is good and right from our forefathers. It's not saying we shouldn't challenge it, but that we shouldn't overturn it. They are historical benchmarks. In terms of knowledge, I read the verse to mean that we shouldn't disregard the teachings of the past just because we learn new things. I think every generation thinks its knowledge is brand new; that, generally, our appreciation for history goes only as far back as the day we were born. That's pretty short-sighted. After all, good teaching never goes out of style. What is old isn't necessarily bad just because it is old. I read this verse to mean just that.

If you go to Asia, Africa, or Europe (or, for that matter, New England), you can travel down roads that have been in existence for hundreds of years; travel to Jerusalem and you can bump that clock back by thousands. You can run your hands along walls built hundreds or thousands of years ago by men whose names are long lost to history. The walls are

still standing even if they bodies of the craftsmen are long gone to dust. The boundaries, the roads and walls are still solid today. There's a good reason for that: it's because God ordained it to be so.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 20 June 2011

Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men. Proverbs 22, verse 29.

Here I am, on a Monday morning, sitting at an airport gate (specifically gate C12 at DFW). I'm waiting to fly back to Minnesota where I will work this week on another healthcare project. I don't know how many dozens of flights I've now taken in my career, and I've lost count of what number project this is. It's a good job, pays well, with travel perks that many people envy. It also comes at a cost, specifically being away from my home and the people there who need me more than the people at the HMO in Minneapolis need me. It's the career I know and the one my choices have built. I'm thankful for it, and judging from my client set this time around, I think I can reasonably say that I'm skilled at it.

We are born to work. Have you ever thought of that as a blessing? It's Monday morning and, to be sure, it is tough waking up when the weekend was so busy. On a Monday, have you ever thought "I get to go to be blessed in my job today" and then gone in with a smile? Me neither.

What's more, have you ever thought that your work could be noticed by a king? Ever thought that you'd be doing your job one day – around the house, in your cube, at your station, making your rounds, wherever – when Will and Kate show up just to see you? Or maybe your CEO will drop by and say, "I've been watching you and you're doing a great job!" Me neither again. Personally, I'm very OK if my CEO never comes by my desk. May the Good Lord bless and keep him...far away from me.

Awhile back in these proverbs, we talked about how vocation is a blessing, how we are made to work and that this is a good thing. That's a periodic subject of discussion at my church; briefly, it was again yesterday. Where one of the lead pastors has a men's ministry calling, it's an important one as well, especially on this day after Father's Day. Men truly are validated by our vocations, and that's a very good thing. While it's so important for both sexes to be satisfied in their work, I've read a number of books (with which I agree) that say men especially are defined and validated by what we do for others. Call it the need to provide, instinct, or primal competitiveness: we men are assured by what we do, and success at what we do helps define how we relate in every other area in our lives.

I think that's the single biggest reason why so many men, myself included, are driven to work, driven to do our most and best at work. We are internally spurred on to prove to our peers, our families, our friends, our God and ourselves (pretty much in that order) that we can succeed and provide. We are emotionally driven to prove that we can make the grade and that we can do whatever it takes to put food on the table and satisfaction in our hearts. A home, status, clothes, food, kids safe in their beds and a satisfied mate in ours are just some of the fruits of our labor.

If you read up on your Scripture, you find it's how we're wired. We do what we do because God made us to work. He blessed us to labor, even before the fall from grace. After all, Adam and Even were blessed to work the Garden and make it fruitful...two young people working naked in the sunshine; no further comment needed here. But you see where I'm going, don't you? We were made to work and work was given to us to be a blessing in our lives. The frustration of rebellion is what made it a drudgery, not the work itself and certainly not the God who instituted it.

What's more, when we do well in our jobs, we have the attention of our superiors. By and large, I think most managers and bosses notice when you do a good job; by and large, I think most good work is rewarded. Sometimes the reward is a bonus, or a verbal attaboy, or a promotion. Sure, you sometimes work in positions that aren't well-managed; ask me about why I left several companies. And, sure, sometimes we work in jobs that we really don't like but we do so for good reasons, usually to provide or serve others; by Wednesday, when I'm homesick and pining again for the one I love, remind me of my own words. Through all that, I believe that those above me will notice when I've done well and that just rewards are usually the outcome; 'timely' is a different story.

Either way, "God is watching us from a distance;" thank you Bette Midler. In whatever we do for a living, God is not disinterested. He constantly presents us with skills, opportunities, challenges, and chances to excel whether the job is menial or high-profile. He does that so we have the opportunity to talk with others about Him in our lives, so that we can continue our mission in all ways at all times. That's not a bad job to have.

And it was a good job to remember here at the airport this morning. I had been up since 3:45, and now that it's nearly 8:45 PM I'm starting to get sleepy. I've already had 7 cups of coffee and I'm 10 days off tobacco, so my batteries are running low. But I should get an opportunity to rest on the plane for a few minutes before powering up the laptop again to review the presentation we're giving to client executives at noon today. Tonight, I'll be in yet another hotel room with a book to study, phone calls to make, some words to write for tomorrow's column, and the chance to look forward to doing it again. This may not be the career I set out to make for myself 30 years ago; to be honest, it's not even the one I dream of doing for the rest of my life. But it is what I have made for myself today, and it's the product of countless blessings that I can't even begin to thank God for let alone justify in my oh so unworthy life. I'm thankful for them, and for the daily, forgiving opportunity He gives me to sharpen my skills and serve in new and interesting ways. At the start of a new work-week, it's my prayer for you that you can say the same.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 21 June 2011

When you sit to dine with a ruler, note well what is before you, and put a knife to your throat if you are given to gluttony. Do not crave his delicacies, for that food is deceptive. Proverbs 23, verses 1 – 3.

Some authority makes me nervous. There, I said it. I'm not intimidated, but being around authority makes me nervous. I've worked hard enough for my qualifications and status that I'm not intimidated by people with equal or greater status. All the college degrees, all the projects, all the years of experience and all the cool things that I missed out on in life because I wasn't in the Woodstock generation still won't get you a cup of coffee at Dunkin Donuts unless you have \$1.95. Cocky in how I sometimes comport myself, I'm probably one of the more publicly self-assured people you could meet (even though I'm a mess when I'm off the stage).

And yet, I'm nervous around authority. I don't like that any one person can have authority over me, or by their actions can control my fate. Even if it's sometimes fooling myself, I like to think I am in control of my destiny. President Obama, Warren Buffet, Bill O'Reilly, and Donald Trump and the head of the TSA have zero influence over me. They all can say or do things that affect me, but none of them control me. Somewhere, I think God is having a good laugh. Me in control of my destiny? I have free will but I bet He's chuckling, thinking "Dave, listen to that Mexican proverb on this one." That's what it comes down to, you see: the only person I want having control over me is God. Anyone else is just blood and guts.

So I think it's natural to remember that, when you sit down with authority, be wise and wary. Don't be a show-off and don't be a pig. If they buy dinner and drinks, enjoy. Enjoy yourself with gusto, but don't let yourself be seen as enjoying too much because you're never really off duty, you know. You and I don't know everything that it took for "the man" to get to where he is. Perhaps that's a good thing. After all, billionaires don't become billionaires just by being nice guys. Let your boss, manager, director, SVP or authority see you for who you are...but remember they are playing poker and so should you. Keep your cards close to your chest. It would be better to not play at all than to play foolishly or unwisely in the presence of someone who can do damage to your livelihood. When I get the attention of my leaders, I want it to be for something good I've done, not for acting like an idiot or making foolish mistakes.

But in all these wary dealings, remember a basic fact: God really is good and he really does know what He's doing. Anyone else really is human, the same as you or I. Background and training become a moot point. College makes you a better person, not better than somebody else. Experience means you've been around the block, but you haven't been around my block and I haven't been around yours, and we're both on the same journey. Gluttony is always vice but hunger isn't always a virtue. In all these, God is the glue that still holds the world together. Why not let's put our trust in Him instead of kings, managers, or vice presidents?

For the next few weeks, I'm being mentored by a high-ranking member of my company. He and I are doing some remediation work in Minnesota, and I'm learning first-hand from him the process that he designed for our company to do this work. It's logical, sequential, and common-sense. In truth, I admire the work he's done and am very thankful to be here working under him. But I won't be fawning at his desk letting him know how great it is. And I am watching my Ps and Qs and everything I say around him. I'm a big believer in developing a rock star persona as a facet of one's professional image...but I think I'll keep that under wraps for now. There is much I can learn from him, but I'm keeping my familiarity with him at arm's length, remembering that he is both senior and influential in my career with this company. It makes me a little nervous, but that's not really a bad thing. I think it just means that it's a prudent and maybe even a Godly thing to keep my radar on.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 22 June 2011

Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint. Proverbs 23, verse 4.

Do you want to be rich? What is rich? Oh no, here comes the risk that this discussion will descend into some kitschy “love is rich” pablum. Love is indeed wealth enough; that’s the lesson of both human history and Scripture. I get it and it’s right. After all, love means never having to say you’re sorry...Ali McGraw...anybody hear Marvin Hamlisch? I’m getting nauseous.

We aren’t talking about that. We’re talking about striving after something that really isn’t worth much. I mean, what do John Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, J. Paul Getty, all the Rothschilds, the Roosevelts and the Astors have in common? Answer: they’re all dead. They all pursued wealth, getting extremely rich, and they are all dust. What good did it do them? Yes, those robber barons gave away millions but not before ravenously acquiring them. At the end, just like everyone else, they stood before God with only their souls. Their earthly riches were meaningless.

Is ‘rich’ the end or the means? Is it the goal or the journey? Here comes Miley again: it’s the climb. I think ‘rich’ is both the means and the end. We are enriched by our journey, by the people we meet and love and by the things we do and learn along the way. When we finally get where we’re going, ‘rich’ is what we become. It is a state of being, an attribute, not a noun. It’s the climb, not the mountain.

Notice the proverb doesn’t say “don’t try” or “don’t bother.” It says “do not wear yourself out.” When God blessed his servants, he made them wealthy. Abraham, Issac and Jacob became wealthy. King David became wealthy. King Solomon became even wealthier. Their wealth wasn’t a function of their class or status: it was a function of their humility before God and their willingness to work hard at living the kind of lives He wanted them to live. They still ‘tried’ but found their comfort and rest in Him. In trying hard, even they still made big mistakes. I think you could say that physical wealth was even a by-product of spiritual wealth.

Yet in all things, moderation. He knew those men I mentioned better and He knows us better. He knows us the way he created us. God knew we would be driven and knew we would work, strive, aspire, struggle and endeavor. He also knew that we are easily capable of taking those to extremes. When we do so, it becomes too easy to wear ourselves down, getting all wrapped around the axle over the riches instead of being focused on how He guides us along the path. God knows that the key to success lies in moderating how we attain it.

That’s where He comes in. The better way is to avoid gluttony in striving, to avoid making fools of ourselves. Yes, work to be successful and work hard at it, but I need to keep my head about myself while I’m doing it. The better way is to take the advice of the proverb and have the wisdom to show restraint in how we strive to attain wealth and status. Even more, the better way is to use our abilities and talents to the best and most of our ability yet as we learn to use them, to exercise self-control in not making the love of money our god. The best way of all is to do all this while letting Him guide us through this crazy journey called life.

Wealth and riches are gifts from God and can be huge blessings. Just don’t let them go to our heads. I’m like you: I want to be rich. I fantasize about comforts and having the ability to do things I’ve always wanted to do. I’ll continue to work hard to earn more, but here’s to hoping that I do so never losing sight of the fact that God is my wealth. He is the beginning and end of my striving, and I want Him all along the way as well. When I repent, I am forgiven. When I didn’t deserve it, He loved and blessed me anyway. Love means always being willing to say you’re sorry. Ali McGraw had it wrong.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 23 June 2011

Cast but a glance at riches and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle.
Proverbs 23, verse 5.

Yesterday I was talking about attaining wealth; today let's talk about it passing away. Be advised: this could be rather glum, but there's a light at the end of the tunnel, and it isn't a train. Yesterday was a tough, depressing, rainy day here in the upper Midwest. My mood is very down for a number of reasons and I'm not feeling very wealthy in any way right now. We all have those kinds of days, I suppose, but this one was especially hard. At times like these, you realize your spirit is under attack, that it's difficult to resist the temptation to want to give up.

On a day like that it is easy to see that wealth doesn't last. I worked for years in military systems to keep the world safe from those evil Soviet hordes. It was what was needed at the time, but the systems I worked with are long gone to the junkyard. Kind of depressing to know my hard work, my mission, is no longer needed. These days, I work in healthcare IT. Latest & greatest technology right? Um, not in American health insurance, which is my specialty. One thing I learned early on is that you are constantly working towards implementing software that is immediately obsolete. That's depressing too. You work feverishly in an area where complexity and "turf" are highly meaningful only to have your hard work become desirably replaceable once you finally get it done right.

The common denominator in those somber facts is that they're expensive. When the money is spent, the riches fly away. It's easy to watch it happen, especially if it's someone else's money. How many of us lost our retirement savings in the last few years? Cast a glance at it because it flew away.

Friendships fly away too. I think I've lost my best friend. For years she's been my best friend and more. She kept me alive, made me want to live, inspired and comforted me. Lately we've been arguing; now we're not talking at all, and I am heartbroken by it. Devastated actually. I feel like part of me has died and I'm having a hard time going on. For some men it wouldn't be this hard, but that's just not the case for me. There are very few people to whom I pour out my entire being, but she was one and now she's gone from my life. Where do you go from that? My life has been made rich by having her in it, priceless even. But the riches feel like they are gone, flown away like an eagle. Glancing at them as they fly away makes me cry. I honestly don't know what I'm going to do now because the days just hurt and I am having a hard time knowing where to turn now.

Homes, cars, possessions; jobs, positions, money; bank accounts, retirement accounts, credit accounts: cast but a glance at these things and they are gone. Of far more value are the people we love. Fathers, mothers, wives and husbands, children, friends and best friends: they are worth so much more than some stupid dollar signs. Cast a glance and they could be gone too.

Through it all, God never changes. Real love is His love; we can glance at it all day long and it will never be gone. It never sprouts wings to fly away like an eagle. His love is the riches and is the wings, sky and eagle. It is in all those things, around them, of and through them and for Him, for us. In the dark days like those this week, He is still there, like the captain of a ship in a storm. In the happy days, He celebrates with us. He is consistent in both of those things, never changing, never glancing, never leaving. If you read the Psalms closely, you read of the torment an ancient David felt and how he desperately sought comfort for his aching and tortured soul. He sought his comfort in God, proclaiming how He was his sure stronghold and defense even as those troubles never seemed to cease. Whoever wrote today's verse understood that as well, understanding how things of this world go away but His love and His words never go away. That thought came into completion hundreds of years later; check out Matthew 24.

I take great comfort in knowing this. King David did too, yet even in doing so, I'm betting many of the days of his life were hard to face, even knowing that God 'had his six.' That's where I am today, but what else can you do but try to go on? Today I'll get going and make the best of it. I will give my best at work, fly home and see my family, and hopefully get some much needed rest. There's happiness there if only I'll let myself be part of it. I'll work to remember these things while I'm on the job, cycling through the airport, and riding the jet home. I'll pray for the best friend anyone could have, sending

His love and mine out to her wherever she is and wherever she's going. I hope she too finds good comfort in knowing that.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 24 June 2011

Do not eat the food of a begrudging host, do not crave his delicacies; for he is the kind of person who is always thinking about the cost. "Eat and drink," he says to you, but his heart is not with you. You will vomit up the little you have eaten and will have wasted your compliments. Proverbs 23, verses 6-8.

Gee that's a ray of sunshine, isn't it?

My grandparents were good hosts. Even if he didn't care for the company, my grandfather was usually polite, gracious in opening his home to family and friends. My mom tells stories of the Depression, when hobos would ride the rails (which weren't far from the house) and how they would show up asking for food in exchange for work. She would have them sweep the stairs or do some small chore, then feed them a meal. From what I remember, I never saw my grandparents be unkind to people in their home. They weren't begrudging hosts.

I can't say the same thing for myself. After all, I live in the twenty-first century, home of modern man who is suspicious of everyone around him. I'm afraid to open up my home to others; maybe they won't like it or, heaven forbid, maybe they will and want more. Maybe I will have to actually open my heart to them. It's like Benjamin Franklin wrote the theme: fish and guests stink after 3 days.

We all know people who are miserly and stingy, the kind of person whose house you go to and they want you to take off your shoes, not use the bathroom because they just cleaned it, use only certain towels, give you only one glass of tap water (if that), and things like that. It's rude isn't it? You go to their place and you feel irked when you leave, like you're sorry you went. I wouldn't want to do that to someone even if they did it to me; would you? It's not how my grandparents would have treated their visitors.

That's when I remember that I'm a modern, twenty-first century man and I do it all the time in more ways than just when people show up at my door.

This is the point where comes to mind the New Testament story of Christ telling the sometimes-confused disciples about the person who is rewarded for their kindness even though they didn't recognize Him in the guise of a stranger. It's in Matthew 25, verses 35 through 45. "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me." When they didn't understand, Jesus said what it meant: "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

Kind of sums up what it means to be a good host, doesn't it? More than that, it kind of sums up what the heart of a hosting attitude will be. Boil it down and I believe "serve" is the key. He came to serve, not be served. So should we. We should do it in everything we do, not just in hosting others. If I died and went to heaven right now, God wouldn't be a begrudging eternal host. He promised paradise and that is in all things. Why wait for heaven? How about we put that into play here and now?

I hate to say it (I really do) but you and I act begrudging towards God every day. We are stingy hosts, as in hosting Him in our lives. We hold back from him; we hold out on Him in our hearts. We only share with Him what we think He needs to know, not fully giving our thoughts, dreams, loves and dislikes, and everything else to Him. He doesn't do that to us, though. When His Spirit moves in our lives, it does so fully. He wants us to do that same for Him by doing it for others. That heart of service, giving of myself without thinking "what about" is a hard thing to work on. I know it is for me and I'm guessing it may be for you too. How about we work on it together? That is a real ray of warm sunshine. We'll be doing our God and our grandparents proud.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 27 June 2011

Do not speak for a fool, for he will scorn the wisdom of your words. Proverbs 23, verse 9.

This weekend I read an online article by Chuck Colson. For those of you who don't know about him, Colson was a Nixon insider who went to prison for crimes he committed during Watergate. In prison, he had a genuine conversion, went into ministry, and has spent the last thirty years ministering Christ to people. In that mission, he's been far more effective and helpful than he ever was as advisor to the paranoid president.

The subject of Colson's article was forgiveness, namely the challenges of forgiveness in a society that has become inured to the power contained in such a simple thing. He cites examples of people whose lives are transformed by forgiveness, not just stories from the Bible, but living people he has experienced during his mission. Colson's dearest calling is ministering to other men in prison, bringing hope to hopelessness.

What place is more full of fools than prison? Everyone is innocent there; just ask them. Just ask Colson, because he spent part of his life incarcerated, believing he had been done an injustice while serving at the behest of the president. Only through the healing power of forgiveness did he see the wisdom of this verse, realizing that he had been a fool in all his political success: a fool who let himself slip into committing high crimes for petty gain. Colson realized that the fool is the man who turns his back on faith, and that the love of God contains the most ultimate wisdom in the universe. To scorn that love is both damning and rebellious foolishness.

Do you do that too? I do. More often than not, I am the fool, scorning the simple wisdom of my mission in life, namely to talk about Christ by just living my life. I'm a struggling, heartbroken, hurting sinner who has done some of the worst things a man can do. They haunt me all my days and nights, trying to drag me down and steal my joy. Some days I find it hard to live with myself; some days the unhappiness is overwhelming. "One of these days I'm gonna love me, then at last I'll find some peace." That's from a Tim McGraw song. I don't particularly care for Mr. McGraw's music, but that lyric stuck with me. It's where I am. I'm the fool who turns his back on simple forgiveness every time I let the unhappiness of my past deeds anchor me down in a life that can promise change if only I will just let go. Is it any wonder that there are people who refuse to speak for me? They have seen me live as the fool.

But that's not what God does. Instead, He pours, covers and even smothers my soul with His forgiveness. He longs for me to see myself as He sees me: forgiven and beloved. He wants happiness for you, me, Tim McGraw, Chuck Colson and even the murderers who are Colson's ministry behind bars. Christ wants us to know we are forgiven, and to share that with each other. He speaks for all of us fools that we might accept the undeniable wisdom of His love.

Believe me, though: it can be work to remember this. This week, the book you'll find on my nightstand is called "the Monday Morning Church." It's about how the church isn't some stupid building with programs, things to do, coffee and donuts, and hands in the air on Sunday. "The church" is you and I, living our lives en Christo in the world on Monday morning. 'The church' is our act of worship in talking, eating, breathing, shopping, listening, working, struggling, crying and laughing in a world where most of the population thinks that those actions are the best that can happen. We are fools in a world of fools, struggling imperfect people who scorn forgiveness and let petty evil keep holding us back. We are the church, not the squeaky clean congregation wearing their Sunday best. We are the church by living our lives, letting God transform us into better people who work to let Him show through the muck and the mire. That's a truly radical way of thinking; it can set you apart and make your life different (thank you Pastor Mark for your words yesterday saying just that), and it all starts with the simple action of embracing forgiveness. God doesn't promise that will be easy, but He always guarantees it is successful. Chuck Colson found that within the walls of a penitentiary. What's stopping you and I from finding it here on the outside?

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 28 June 2011

Do not move an ancient boundary stone or encroach on the fields of the fatherless, for their Defender is strong; he will take up their case against you. Proverbs 23, verses 10 and 11.

We covered the whole “ancient boundary stone” awhile back, talking about how good fences made good neighbors, and about how we need boundaries to define what we do. Today, let’s hone in on the second part of these verses.

I hate bullying. I really do. I have often thought that much of what the school systems do today is overblown and unnecessary, capitulating on teaching important things while teaching things that aren’t of equal importance. Not so bullying. Schools today take a tough line on bullying, and I think it’s long overdue. Culture has finally caught up with reality. For me, it’s personal because I was bullied a lot when I was a kid. I was picked on in five different schools by kids who got their kicks picking on the new kid in town. Now that I’m a father, it’s even more personal, watching my son go through the same. He’s a much bigger and better kid than I ever was, full of as just as much BS and bravado as I was at 15 but with the muscle to back it up.

And yet, there are bullies who still push him around. There are older kids who know he has a learning disability (that he has overcome) who still use it against him. There are wimpy peers of his who think it is fun and cool to score points off the kid who struggles, who is quiet in crowds and nervous around strangers. He gets psychologically bullied, emotionally bullied, physically bullied. It hurts him, and he may not see how much it hurts me too.

All sins are forgivable. They are, even the ones that offend our most personal sensibilities. But I’m a father and a man, and this one comes as close to unforgiveable in my eyes as anything on this earth. Anyone messes with my kid and they will have me to contend with. If ever I’ve yearned for vengeance, it is a yearning to do justice to the people who hurt my son. I hate bullying, and I hate those who do it.

I’m a bold and sinful man, not fit to stand beside the Defender of the weak who is the Master of the Universe, but stand beside Him I do on this one. He hates bullying too. He even says so in this verse, talking about how the Defender of the weak, the fatherless, will stand up against oppressors and take up their case. Our God hates all sin yet loves the sinner, even the bullies. And yet, He stands against those who would persecute. In this, I think of my God as a street brawler, one who rises up with the bullied and beaten, takes up his weapon, and stands against the thug punks who want to rumble. In this one, I think of God standing beside me, both as general and soldier, manning our trench against the oncoming enemy. In this verse, I think of Him as the manager who stands up his boxer to fight one more round, to stick and jab again and not give up the fight to a man of lesser character.

And more than this, I think of Him as a father, as a man who takes a fatherless son under His arm, and holds him while he cries, mentors him to try again, and encourages him to stand tall. When I think of my Defender of the fatherless and weak, I think of a dad, not just a warrior or fighter, but as a dad. Scripture contains many references of Christ referring to His Father not just as Father but also as ‘abba’ which, loosely translated, means ‘daddy.’ Someone very familiar. He’s Jesus’ Father, and ours too. He’s also Dad. Dads stand against the dark night to keep away the monsters. Dads give all they can to provide something for the people they love. Dad’s love and dads are strong. Dads are these things because we model Him who is a father not unlike us, watching His son go into dire battle, crying tears of pride, and encouraging Him in love to persevere. That’s what the Defender of the fatherless does. That’s what my father, and my Father, did for me. For you too.

It’s what I hope I do for my son.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 29 June 2011

Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death. Proverbs 23, verses 13 and 14.

Warning to any would-be physical abusers: this verse isn't your carte blanche to ply your favorite activity. Here's where I get to spout off a few opinions. People who abuse their kids are vermin. Boyfriends who abuse their girlfriends are despicable. Husbands who abuse their wives and children are, in my opinion, using up our oxygen. Abusers become the targets in what the military calls a "target rich environment." Get in my way, Mr. Abuser, and you won't be getting anywhere soon. I'm as mild mannered a man as they come...except where abuse is involved. In this, I've proven I tolerate none of it (and even in doing that my responses have been comparatively mild). I look forward to stopping the hurt. My ideal for tolerance in such situations is Jack Bauer. Or "Taken."

Enough said.

So what is the proverb really saying? Isn't it saying "when your kid is out of line, give him the belt?" No. Or how about "keep that switch at the ready." No again. Fists and physicality to teach them a lesson? Definitely no, not ever. We've talked about this before: it is discipline that God wants parents to instill in their children. He is love and wants love to imbue all our actions. He wants us to be disciplined that we may become self-disciplined, using His guiding love to rule all our actions. Since that's the case, how can anyone in their right mind equate love with abuse?

This isn't that hard. "The rod" signifies any kind of discipline, any kind of punishment grounded in love that is designed to correct. Why is that so important?

If your child were kicked out of school, would you want to punish them? If they got picked up by the police for a crime, would you want them punished? If they took your car, stole your money, lied to you repeatedly, or broke things and then hid them, would you want to mete out punishment? Me too. Yes, there's an element of anger there; it should be righteous anger, but it's anger all the same. It's okay to feel angry at being wronged, insulted or offended. It's even okay to want to administer punishment to those who have done the wrong.

The response, however, should be in love. If it isn't, then what is it? You know the answer; it isn't that difficult.

Extreme? Not really. Abuse is an extreme thing. Just punishment isn't abuse. Just punishment, administered in love, is correction designed to teach a valuable moral lesson. When that becomes incessant emotional haranguing, physical beating, manipulation or anything sexual, it's no longer correct or loving. Scripture NEVER advises abuse of any kind, but always points to a way of love. It does so that people may see the error of their deeds and do better. It does so because that's what God does for all our misdeeds, all our transgressions. He corrects us to save our souls, and He does it in loving ways.

Several times in my life I have stopped abuse, and the times when I've passed by the opportunity to do so I have immediately regretted it. In my opinion, there is no room in this world for people who get their kicks out of kicking other people. There's also no room for people who bastardize Scripture to justify their sick abandonment of self control. Or for those who insist their abuse is constructive punishment and good for the abused. No sin is unforgiveable, even that of the abuser. I think that, in the long run, forgiving such abusers is a critical part of the abused living a healthy life. That doesn't mean putting up with it, though. God doesn't ask us to suffer at the hands of an abuser, but He does ask us to trust Him. That may involve His sending help when it's needed. If you're being abused, flee. Don't sweat the small stuff or the possessions. Just get out. And if you need help, call me anytime.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 30 June 2011

My son, if your heart is wise, then my heart will be glad indeed; my inmost being will rejoice when your lips speak what is right. Proverbs 23, verses 15 and 16.

Years ago, my parents taught me that the greatest compliment a child can render to a parent is to live successfully and independently. I left home at 18 and, except for a month-long stint last year, I haven't returned to live with my mom in the 26 years since. It's not that I don't love my parents; my mom is one of the few people who knows me through & through. I can and usually do tell her everything, and I revere her and her place in my life. But I took her saying to heart, and have come to agree that the best compliment I can give her is to use what she and Dad taught me all those years ago to make the most of myself in a hard world.

This verse is the reason why it is true.

It's true because it's an observation, a challenge, and a loving boast all wrapped up in 26 words. It's an observation of something that's true. I'm glad when my kids make good decisions; every parent is. It makes me feel glad to see them using good instruction, that of their parents and others, in doing their best. A year ago I blogged about my son's confirmation witness; a year hence I still am impressed at how candid, mature, and bluntly honest he was. Every now and then he reveals some of his inner self, letting show the same strong young man who gave that testimony without holding back any punches. I'm proud of his sisters for making the calls, paying the bills, and working the jobs to build places for themselves in the world, especially when they do so with honor. Would you believe there is something good to be learned at Hooters? Really! There is! Both of my girls have worked there now, and both figured out that it is tacky but profitable. I can't say it's an honorable place, but it's a game and they both figured out how to play it well for good compensation without unjustly compromising on better ideals. Some day I will remind them of these days, especially when they have rebellious teenage girls of their own. For now, I'm proud when they live in a hard world while using the knowledge stored in a wise heart.

It is also a challenge to live life wisely. In the world of Jersey Shore, instant multi-media, readily available marijuana, and, yes, Hooters, it isn't easy to make moral decisions, or to stick with them once you make them. In fact, I think it's very hard to stick to any kind of principles today. I am sure every generation has said the same thing, that it's tougher now morally than it's ever been. Until this time, however, no other generation has ever dealt with the fallout of the destructive 1960s while living through the birth of the age of instant information and all the social change it is fomenting. There are unique spiritual and emotional challenges to this time, so when people make good decisions, it helps to remember that we're doing so in the middle of fighting constantly uphill battles.

Finally, it is a loving boast. I'm proud of my kids. Every parent worth a darn should say that, and even I proudly do. I read the verse to be a proud, loving boast celebrating kids who 'get it.' Such kids understand that what is right builds up, supports, corrects, and stands for something. They understand that saying what is right is tough, especially when they start having to live out what they say. They understand that it doesn't always look cool to stand up for what you believe, especially when you slip and fall away from it often and easily. They do it anyway. Most of all, they understand that God is good to them and wants something good both for and from them. I lovingly boast these things about my own kids. I hope most parents do.

In this age of wanting it all and of helicopter parents who don't know when to let go and let their kids fly, I still cling to that lesson my parents taught me. I've spent the last few weeks working in Minneapolis, where I was born, so my parents and long-ago childhood here have been very much on my mind. I love Texas, but this place will always be special to me. This was the place where I first knew family, made my first friends, learned to ride a bike, and first tasted success and applause. It was the place where I learned to be strong-willed and independent, and now it's the place where I get to perform in my chosen vocation, serving others by performing valuable (and well paid) work. When I do my best while clinging to the ancient words passed on to me, I'm making my elders look good. When I succeed in that, they're smiling and busting out their buttons. For me, that's something to be proud of.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 1 July 2011

Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the LORD. There is surely a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off. Proverbs 23, verses 17-18.

I'm not perfect. Many of you have seen, heard, or read of my extramarital activities; guilty as charged and it's a charging guilt that never leaves me now. Many of you know of my ambition and desire to be more, to be published, or to stand in the spotlight. Sometimes that's overwhelming. Still many more of you who read these have seen me ponied up to the bar. Just this week I killed a consultant's share of brain cells, sampling mojitos at a rooftop bar. In these things, I will confess envying the fun people because, well, I'm a fun guy and I like to have fun. In the course of my trips around the sun, I've had a lot of it, sometimes too much. Hank Jr. sang it best: "I have loved some ladies, and I have loved Jim Beam. And they both tried to kill me..." Guilty as charged there too.

Billy Joel sang this as well: "I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints. The sinners are much more fun. Only the good die young." Is that your philosophy? I've done more than my share and I'm not young anymore; thank God I didn't die yet. I have many friends who live by these words, throwing themselves headlong into things they enjoy doing. Quitting time can't come around quick enough to get to the bar and get loose. Some people feel more at ease when they are away from their responsibilities. Dance, drink, drugs, party, burn the candle at both ends, a beauty on each arm and maybe another in your bed: the sinners are much more fun. Yep, I've been a fun guy there too.

Why did it leave me feeling empty? Maybe I hadn't contemplated these verses close enough in-between ordering the next round.

Please understand, I'm not condemning your partying; cite my mojito Wednesday mentioned above. In fact, I'm writing this at 38,000 feet with an empty beer can beside me (and I intend to ask for another full one). Jesus was a fun guy too, you know. He didn't drink to get drunk, but you bet your bottom dollar that he drank wine, maybe beer or other spirits. Christ sought out the sinners wherever He went and met them on their level. I'm betting there were both laughter and tears at those dinner tables. He shared His innermost soul with His best friends, knowing full well they would all betray Him. If it's good enough for the Savior of the world, it's good enough for me. I won't condemn your partying if you won't condemn mine. Maybe let's just leave it at "everything in moderation" is the best approach because it is.

So, then, why does faith have to be somber? Why do we think it has to be serious, moody, pious and grave? Answer: it doesn't! Yes, living a life of faith does indeed mean re-evaluating those things that were risky, dangerous or sinful, but then willingly living the attitude of saying "thanks but no thanks." But there's so much more than that! It's a choice, and it can be a happy one. For most of life's situations, faith is meant to be expressed in joy, smiles, happiness, laughing and contentment. Who wants to hang around with people who scream "JESUS SAVED YOU AND YOU'RE A DAMN SINNER AND EVERYTHING YOU DO IS NO BETTER THAN FILTHY RAGS!" Yes, I know. Guilty here. Thanks, but no thanks. Sure, there's a place for the law and a time to remember it. But for God's sake – literally – that isn't all the time.

No, faith doesn't have to be a downer. It's not about me, and that's such an empowering attitude. Faith is about living in joy, and part of living in joy is not envying the life you choose to leave behind. I like my sauce, but I don't envy the people who have to have it to get by, or whose goal is to get wasted every weekend. Been there, done that. I like my female friends, but I don't envy the man-whores (or woman whores) who think they're flattering themselves with their latest conquest; been there and done that too. I don't regret leaving behind my sailor's tongue because it made me sound careless and stupid. Do you see how we could record a whole laundry list of our favorite sins and how we're better than them? The truth is we ARE better than them and it isn't a sanctimonious thing to say that. We can be better, we are encouraged to be better, and it all can start by simply respecting the LORD. He really does know what He's doing, especially with wayward Lutherans like yours truly.

Not long ago, I was having dinner with a new friend and co-worker. He is a late-middle age, non-smoking, non-drinking gay man. In talking with him I learned that I've rarely met a kinder, more honest and open and deeply faithful person in all my life. What, you say! Dave, he's gay! How can you condone someone living in such an open sin? Answer (actually, 3 of them): 1) I don't care and think you should be ashamed of yourself; now go look in the mirror and tell yourself how sinless you are, then come back and let's chat. 2) It's not my place to judge anyone's sin as worse than my

own (especially since I don't want mine held against me). And 3) I don't condone anyone's sin (and don't expect them to condone mine). His words talking about faith, being disillusioned from religion (which has so little to do with 'faith' that it's shocking), and simply living the Golden Rule as Christ wants us to made me feel encouraged. I don't envy his lifestyle, nor do I envy his struggles in living in it. He and his partner have been committed to each other for more years than I've been married. According to him, they also haven't had the instances of betrayal or infidelity that I've brought into my relationship. Who, I ask you, is the bigger sinner? Personally, I think my friend has much hope in the LORD, respecting Him and anticipating an eternal life without the struggles of this one. There's a place for both of us in Heaven. That's the purpose of the verse, especially for imperfect people like him and me. You're imperfect too. Read those verses again, then go have a great, long holiday weekend. Now where's the flight attendant? I'm thirsty.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 5 July 2011

Listen, my son, and be wise, and keep your heart on the right path. Proverbs 23, verse 19.

In raising child #3, I'm finally discovering that I want my kids to be wise. My son is 15, and he has always been more precocious than preparatory. He and his older sister are dyslexic, but he has the more severe case. This condition has meant that, for the last 10 years, he has had to work doubly hard to learn. It has given him grit. Couple that with an stubborn disposition – something I'm sure he inherited from his mom and not me – and he is one of the more hard-headed people I know. Yesterday, we were all talking and it hit me that I want him to be wise. This happened even before I read the verse, and I don't count it as coincidence that this would be the case. It's something to be talked about here and now.

And we'll talk about it in the context of things unexpected; I will venture where men of better decorum dare not in order to make the point. Our conversation discussed 'manscaping.' For those not familiar with this term, said vernacular refers to personal grooming in a very personal area. In talking with the 15 year old, somehow we got onto this subject and he mentioned how he prefers to be groomed rather than, shall we say, unkempt. He had me in stitches describing how, during one of my travel absences, he used my moustache trimmers to perform said grooming function; I think I'll use scissors the next time I trim my beard. We then discussed why my shaving razors have all disappeared; I'll leave it to you to deduce the logical conclusion. Again, he had me laughing so hard I couldn't breathe. Was it a wise discussion, and is he acting wise? Probably not, especially if he drops the razor. Yet I don't think this is a matter of keeping his heart on the right path as much as it is a matter of personal choice.

But then he recounted unexpected wisdom. He talked about an acquaintance of his and says that he has learned to take the guy in small doses. They are on again/off again friends, and in the last year or so they have been more off. They talk, they get together, and when they do they always have a good time. But he's learned that the two of them together could constitute nuclear fission, so he self-regulates the friendship. He mentioned all this (while texting, of course), just after the conversation regarding personal hygiene. How we segued from hair down there to a sometimes hairy friendship I don't exactly know, but I saw a hint of wisdom in my fifteen year old's eyes and realized again how I should never take him for granted.

And then there is another friend from school, who, just the other night, messaged him out of the blue. The boy proffered a somewhat-apology for their falling-out over since leaving middle school. Son's response in this one is carefully measured; after all, once bitten, twice shy. But here I counseled forgiveness and mercy. I told him that he should contemplate a meaningful response, sans smart aleck, and not shut the door on what could be a good opportunity for redemption. After all, doing so would demonstrate wisdom and keeping one's heart on the right path. It turns out he didn't need my counsel: he'd already figured that out on his own and kept his response to himself in responding to his estranged friend.

In all these things, I want him to be wise, not wisecracking. I want him to keep his heart on the right path. Every parent wants this for their kids, and I want it for both him and his sisters. If there is such a thing as luck, then I'm lucky to realize that I've been blessed to have a special relationship with each of my kids, from the oldest one who poured an ice cold bottle of water on her stinky dad yesterday, to the rebellious youngest daughter who told me the other day that she misses hanging out with me having daddy-daughter time, to Son Bull (one of my nicknames for him) who regales me with stories of using my trimmers for unconventional and unwise purposes but then drops pearls of wisdom about judicious friendship and how he values it.

I'm reading a book that talks about practically applying a life from Ephesians, how we are in Christ as believers and how being in Christ means that you're already living in the heavenly realms. God is already at work in you, not being some standoffish referee in your life but as a living, breathing person hard at work in your mind and heart, positioning you in life where He wants you to do best. He purposes us to be whom, what and where we are so that we might open our hearts to the possibility of Him living through us to others. I want my son to remember this, to focus on how God is at work in him, and let himself become wise. Such wisdom shines like a light in a dark room, even in the bright Texas sunshine. From what I know of his life, such wisdom is already at work in my son.

These are things I want because this good kid, who is going on a 12 day mission trip starting next week, is the same kid I spent with whom I spent a few minutes watching "Man Versus Food." Then, "Family Guy," complete with its constant references to being generally rude, crude, and socially unacceptable. Earlier in the day, I found him watching "1776," and I saw a Bible near his bed that isn't usually there. I'm not sure anyone is really wise at 15, but I think he's generally on the right path. As I leave town again for another week of earning on the road, I find these thoughts encouraging me. They help me to know that underneath the churning surface of bad music, wise-acre attitude and, yes, manscaping, there is a young

man whose growing heart is open to God's wisdom just as surely as it is open to those other less admirable behaviors. In this, I find peace.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 6 July 2011

Listen to your father, who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old. Proverbs 23, verse 22.

Let's break this verse apart and see what we come up with.

"Listen to your father." As a father, that's my favorite command. I love it when my kids respect my words, mainly because it's uncommon to receive public recognition of that. Every father loves this. We really dig it when we say something and then it actually happens. Yes, it's dangerous to suppose anything about what God wants or feels; if you think about it, it's pretty close to idolatry. But it isn't idolatry to say that I imagine our listening to Him pleases God the Father for the same reason it pleases me: we rarely heed His words in the way He intends. I'm betting He likes it when we do.

"Who gave you life." I have a little trouble with this part, I must admit. I like the Bill Cosby disciplinary threat of "I can take you out and make another one just like you." We all know that's not true, but when you have rebellious kids who relish thumbing their noses at you, it's a false comfort. Sure, I was present when they were conceived but I didn't really give them life. I was simply one of the two necessary beings God used to impart His unique gift. Biologically, that's how it works, but it's a humbling thing to think that God works such a miracle through the ultimate act of physical intimacy.

Add the two clauses back together and I think the verse is talking about more than just your average dad. It clearly alludes to the Father himself, who gave us life.

Not only that, but fathers (like the Father) impart lessons for life, teaching us wise things that we need to know to get by in the world. Things like baiting a hook, how to channel surf, the proper way to stare at someone like they have a third eye, and snoring through movies are valuable talents. But then there is listening, discerning, wisdom, resilience, perseverance, steadfastness and a number of other traits & behaviors that make those pedestrian things look small; memorable, to be sure, but minor.

Finally, there is the last clause: "and do not despise your mother when she is old." This one I really have a hard time swallowing. To be honest, it's something I don't understand. How can someone despise their mother? I don't despise mine, but I know people who don't get along well with theirs; is that despising? Are we shallow enough to only appreciate our mothers when they (and we) are young and they offer vigorous support? Are we shallow enough to actually despise the woman who gave birth to us just because she is on in years?

I'm afraid that, to be honest, the answer is yes. Some of us are. I never despised my mom, not even once. When I was a kid, though, I did find myself wishing she were younger and could better relate to my generation. She was born in 1929 and was in her late fifties when I graduated from high school. I sometimes resented the fact that she wasn't younger, cooler, better able to hang out and relate. Is that despising? I don't think so, but I do see how in some other relationships, with just the right goading, it could turn despicable. My mom wasn't a helicopter parent, didn't obsess over my grades or performance, and while she was (and is) a worrywart, she didn't instill in me insecurity, insufficiency or congenital ineptitude. It took me awhile to see that she has always done her best to be a parent and friend. All mothers do. What if she hadn't? What if she had instilled in me all her fears, obsessions and personal shortcomings? In that light, I can see where some people would despise their mothers because I know plenty of mothers who did this.

By breaking down the verse, I think we come up with two things: one, that God's advice stands on its own whether you parse it or swallow it whole, and two, the advice is better left as is. The proverb works individually but works even better if we remember that He wants us to listen to our father, who gave us life, and do not despise our mother when she is old. It's an extension of the commandment that implores us to honor our parents that we may enjoy long life because of it. In everything we think, say and do, He wants us to remember the ones who raised us and all the lessons they taught. In doing that, He knows we will be able to draw the parallel between our parental relationships here and the parental relationship He has with each of us as spiritual Father and mother both.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 7 July 2011

Buy the truth and do not sell it; get wisdom, discipline, and understanding. Proverbs 23, verse 23.

WOW! Powerful words of advice. If you read the full context of the verses around this one, it is smack in the middle of sayings that talk about parents and children. (If you remember) Yesterday's verse talked about revering our parents; tomorrow's will be about parents who rejoice because of their kids. This verse, however, sticks out because it works entirely on its own and because it is a unique thought contained in between two similar ones. I wonder why that is?

Perhaps the reason is irrelevant. It works on its own because it is a singularly powerful message about the fundamentals. Do you think we buy and sell the truth? I do. Think about it: a sale is nothing more than an exchange of one thing for another. We tender money in return for something. Isn't a lie the same thing? We buy truth by exchanging truth; honesty begets honesty. We can sell it for a lie simply by lying. In doing so, we compromise ourselves. Bit by bit, white lies or big lies, we chip away at our integrity and sell the truth we once bought so dearly.

The other day, my son and I were watching one of the Lord of the Rings movies, and we were talking about the theme of the books and films. I said that it really wasn't very complex, that it was a simple choice between good and evil. The forces of darkness represented evil; the forces of darkness represented lies. The Fellowship chose the hard path of good, choosing to buy back good through a difficult quest. In this, they bought the truth and refused to sell it even in the midst of overwhelming odds and constant temptation.

Is your life any different? Think about it!

No, we constantly need to buy the truth and that isn't easy. It is a lifelong never ending process. We need tools. We need wisdom, discipline and understanding. Understanding without wisdom is little more than hollow knowledge. Wisdom imparts understanding of truth; understanding needs wisdom to apply the truth. Discipline without wisdom and understanding is little more than stress. It is going through the motions for no good reason. Wisdom without self-discipline and understanding is an empty lesson. It is good words spoken to an empty room, honesty without action.

"One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them." That too is from the Lord of the Rings, inscribed on the ring of power. It is the opposite of truth, wisdom, discipline and understanding. Truth is good and the opposite of truth is a lie. Carrying this logic further, then, the opposite of truth must not be good. The opposite of truth is to be found, brought, and bound in the darkness. The opposite of the truth is evil.

Extreme? Not really. Evil takes many forms. Isaac Newton learned that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. For every small truth there is a small lie; for every large truth, there are large lies. Exchanging one for the other exchanges wisdom for folly, discipline for sloth, and understanding for darkness. Exchanging the truth for a lie is to wear the one ring and in the darkness be bound.

I'm not a big fan of fantasy, and I found the Lord of the Rings books to be long and dull reading. But I was mesmerized by the movies, reveling in the morality play shown on a grand scale. Our lives may not be the struggle between epic forces and armies of hate...but then again, ask any single parent struggling to keep their kids safe, or an alcoholic fighting off the demons of temptation, or a lonely traveler trying to fend off the blues. I bet they will tell you that their lives are no walk in the park, that sometimes it seems like a titanic struggle just to do simple things, just to stay on the straight and narrow. Is that any different than fighting off the power of the one dark ring? You decide. Me, I choose to follow the little men into Mordor.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 8 July 2011

The father of a righteous child has great joy; a man who fathers a wise son rejoices in him. May your father and mother rejoice; may she who gave you birth be joyful! Proverbs 23, verses 24 and 25.

I'm a dad and for those of you who aren't, I'll give you a peek behind the secret curtain: I love my kids no matter what. I sincerely hope you have/had a dad who felt this way because it makes all the difference in the world. If you still have little kids, well, you aint seen nothin yet; if your kids are grown, then you'll probably agree with me. There are challenges with every age, but it rarely gets easier as they get older. Kids will do their level best to put you through the wringer just by being themselves. They'll fuss and break rules; they'll back-talk, fight, and push your limits; they'll get arrested, kicked out of school, join gangs, do drugs, smoke, drink, and become promiscuous. They will turn their backs on things you believe in, and they will mock whatever pleases them.

In other words, they'll act like me and you.

Through it all, I love them no matter what. I really do. I get so mad at them I could crunch glass between my teeth. And there are times when I am so frustrated with them that I could scream. Doesn't matter: when I let the clouds of anger pass by, I love them no matter what. It always comes back to that. They're my kids; they're part of me. I love them unconditionally. I may not like them sometimes, and I really may not like some of what they do, but I love them no matter what.

I imagine that's how God feels about you and I.

But I have to tell you another secret: I'm especially proud when I see my kids doing the right thing. They're good kids with a background of morality behind them, struggling in a world full of sins and struggles. They slip and they fall. Actually, they stand on the ledge overlooking a tempting, beautiful cesspool called "life" and they jump into it in a screaming cannonball. Those times make me wince because it's damn hard to watch your kids make mistakes. It's even harder to pull yourself back and let the inevitable happen, knowing how much it's going to hurt them and you.

The times that make me proudest, though, are the ones when they stand on that ledge, then decide, "um, not today" and back away from it. I could burst with pride. Then there are the times when they stick up for weaker or bullied kids, especially when they've been bullied themselves. Makes my eyes tear up I am so proud. Or when they listen and just hold a friend as they cry. That makes me cry. I'm so very proud of them when they plan ahead, save for tomorrow, and do the right thing without anyone looking. There is hope for them because they have integrity. I'm even prouder when they stand up for what they believe.

Kind of like you and me sometimes, you know?

When they do that, I know great joy. I rejoice in them, knowing that God has lived through me and into their lives. Faith has taken root in their lives and it means something to them because they do something with it. Their mom rejoices as well, beaming with pride at knowing the life she shared into them is moving along a right and honorable path. Moms are just as important as dads, you know, maybe more. She shines when they shine. My kids are becoming independent young believers in a hard old world, but they have 'the stuff' that it takes to succeed in that hard world no matter what it sets against them. That's something to be proud of.

A few years ago, I went to a wedding reception where the best man was the brother of the groom. Said best man gave his toast, saying how happy he was to be able to stand beside his brother as both a brother in family and a brother in Christ. He said they had learned that from their parents. That's the kind of relationship I want with my kids; it's the kind I hope I've inspired in them. I doubt I'll ever win any 'dad of the year awards' because all too often I've been a crabby, angry, poopy old man. But I'd match my kiddos against any in the world. I love 'em unconditionally, I rejoice in them, and I want them to know how they always make me proud, especially when they live in the Spirit.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 11 July 2011

My son, give me your heart and let your eyes keep to my ways. Proverbs 23, verse 26

In the interest of full disclosure, I'll say that I parsed the verse for today from a complete saying that talked about adultery and wayward spouses. At this writing, it's 3 AM in the central US and I've been awake for most of three days. I don't want to talk about adultery or how I've been a wayward spouse. On these subjects, I've said enough, and said subjects keep me awake many nights, including this one.

Instead, I want to offer a few words on the first verse. My son is going on another mission trip tomorrow. He's leaving for a Spoke Folk trip up in northern Illinois. If you haven't heard of the concept, Spoke Folk is a group of high school and college students who ride around the country, going from town to town on bicycle. During the day, they ride 40-60 miles through the countryside; during the evenings, they set up at different churches, staging musical shows and skits, mainly for young people. This is a big thing for my son, and he's nervous about it, not sure what to make of the concept. It's his second mission trip in as many years, and he volunteered for it and raised the money to go. His heart is in the right place. No doubt about that. Physically, he will struggle with it, but he's in pretty good shape, so other than a sore 'bicycle butt,' I expect he will do fine. His older sister has been on two SF trips and both were moving experiences.

My ways haven't always been good ways; I will be the first to confess that. There are so many things I've done that I don't wish on my young man. But there are other things I would like him to remember.

One is a lesson on bullying that we discussed just this Saturday night. He's been bullied a lot the last few years. I was too. I was the kid who got beaten up in school, or ridiculed, or made fun of. I reminded Dillon that perhaps God has him where he is for a good reason, saying that perhaps part of his mission is to stand where he is, maybe to help stop the bullies from hurting anyone else. Presence and location are no coincidence; God places each of us where He wants to best live through us and reach out to others. It's no coincidence that Son Bull is going on this trip, where and with whom he's journeying. He is going where he is going for a good reason, and that reason is bigger than himself. I believe everyone should, at some time in their lives, lose themselves in something better and much bigger than ourselves. For Dillon, this is one such opportunity. I hope he remembers that.

Then there is something about trust. Yesterday, I wrote that "Trust is the easiest thing to lose and the hardest to find. Guilt is the easiest thing to find and the hardest thing to lose." That's a Dave quote that came to me while sitting at the pool, relaxing and thinking I would get tired enough to sleep at night; fine lot of thought that was! But trust and guilt are lessons I'd like him to take into his trip. Trust that people love you because they say they do; trust that your family and friends have your back. Guilt can be a healthy and convicting reminder of times you slip and fall, but if it eats away at you all the time, then maybe you should step back and ask yourself why. Beyond all of that, remember that such feelings are gifts from God, who really does have you in the palm of His hand. All that has happened before now pales in comparison to the wonderful glory of life that is still to come. I want him to remember that too.

Finally, I want him to remember that it isn't about him. You've read here how the mottos from my church, "Eternity Matters Most" and "It's Not About Me," are challenging themes by which to live one's life. For my son, this trip is (literally) where the rubber meets the road. It's an opportunity to simply be yourself as part of being involved in something much bigger. God works through us to change the world one little act at a time. He does it so that all of us can get to know Him, and let him saturate our lives with his indescribable love. He does it so we can all accept that love and share in His eternity. I'd like my son to remember that this week by pouring himself into the fellowship, the relationships, and the gift of the chance to connect others to the Savior by just being himself. Son Bull isn't a perfect kid; who is? But he's a good one and has much deeper faith than most people see. I'm so happy he has this opportunity to put it on display.

In an hour or so, I'll get ready and head off to the airport for another week up in the air. I will give my son a kiss goodbye; yes, dads are still free to do that to their 15 year old sons. I wish him Godspeed on his journey as I leave for my next one. Blessings to you and God's troubadours, Dillon Mackenzie. Give it your all and leave nothing on the table. Theatrically speaking only, break a leg.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 12 July 2011

Do not envy wicked men, do not desire their company; for their hearts plot violence, and their lips talk about making trouble. Proverbs 24, verses 1 and 2.

I was a wimpy kid; they didn't even write a diary about me. I was just wimpy. Here's where I'll tell you a secret: I was also very envious of the cool kids. I really was. I wasn't attractive, rich or cool; I felt wimpy. I was a great student, and I had a vivid imagination, but (especially during my teen years) I felt I wasn't very good looking, wasn't popular, and I didn't fit in. I let others define my perception of myself. Enough, already, Dave. It was thirty years ago. True enough.

I say all of this to give you an idea that I envied the people who I wasn't. The twisted part of being bullied and being an outcast is that you envy the people who bully and cast you out; at least I did. I wanted to be one of the people who others went to for friendship; I wanted to be the guy who everyone flocked to. Bullies are wicked. Not all the kids I envied were bullies, though, and not all of them were wicked either. But I did desire their company. I wanted to be like them, to be the cool kid in the hallway, and the one to look down on others. I'm ashamed of that now.

I'm nearly 45 years old and still these things make me think. Thank God for that. Thank God that He made our lives versatile and full of memories which were once little life changing moments that made us into who we are. More than that, thank God for the tender mercies and little miracles that surround those life changing moments. They're everywhere. In a life led by the Savior, the memories are sometimes bittersweet but they can never defeat me. In a life led by the Savior, everything can make you stronger, not just that which does not kill you. Thank God He can show us that being cool doesn't include plotting violence of the heart. Thank God He shows us that talking trash just makes your talk sound trashy.

And yet, here I am in middle age, still envying who I am not. I don't envy the people who have the fancy houses, cool cars or nice clothes. But I do still envy the slick managers who get ahead while I've pole vaulted by my choices spectacularly into middle management. I do envy the people with the answers, even though they all too often play "I've got a secret" with those answers and act condescending to the new kids on the block. Why do I envy them and want to emulate them?

The only answer I can muster is that I'm not much different than the boy of decades ago. Got skin, got sin; still got both here. Yesterday I wrote about things I want my son to remember: this is another of them. The years will come and go but you will still be who you are now. Don't envy the people who plot petty evil. They aren't worth your time. Don't talk others down or, worse, do something to make trouble about it.

Instead, emulate the people who indwell their lives with the Spirit. Envy nobody, especially wicked people. Focus on being humbly thankful for who and where you are. You're exactly the person you're supposed to be, who God made you to be. You're very good. Emulate people who inspire the best in you. Find people whose hearts are tender but wise, experienced but caring; rejoice in their fellowship. Let yourself be led by love into relationships that build up and encourage. Finally, walk away from the people who will talk others down. Enjoy a light sense of humor and embrace skepticism, especially when you've been wronged. But never surrender to cynicism and sarcasm. Wise cracks don't sound that wise when they make more trouble than they're worth. Pray for the bullies, and pray for the ones who got bullied, like you and I. Pray for them, then step into the breach.

My son isn't a wimpy kid. He's muscular and, on the surface, is quite self-confident. Just below that surface, though, is the same kind of sensitive and scared kid that I was. He, too, wants to be the popular kid; he wants to fit in and be accepted just the way he is. Didn't I want that same. The kids are alright though. He will be alright, and it will turn out ok. Better men than I was or am learned these lessons at a much younger age; it took me until now. My son is a better man than me. Back then I couldn't pray for the ones who put me down. Now I can, and now I can pray for their healing and well being, too. They need God as much as I do. It takes a powerful God and an irresistible love to teach those lessons to a scared, insecure and wimpy kid like I was. It takes a powerful God to take that child, help him embrace those qualities, and mold him into someone else, someone hopefully better.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 13 July 2011

By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established; through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures. Proverbs 23, verses 3 and 4.

"Spock, you want to know something? Everybody's Human." That's one of my all time favorite movie lines, from the last Star Trek movie starring the original cast. I think of it here because it ties my life to the verses for today. I'm human; so are you. We're frail, struggling sinners living in a fallen world. We are also wonderful, beautiful people made by God in His own image. We weren't built for the fallen; we were built for the beauty. We were built for that and yet we are human.

Knowing that, I like the pictorial language in these verses. I really do. I like how the writer refers to all we build in life as being built by wisdom. My concordance says that the 'house' is an allegory to life; that's obvious. I think it's comforting and wonderful to know that our lives are well-built when they are built on wisdom. It means that our lives are what they are for a reason. We are put here to learn about the vast magnificence of God's love through living with each other in His creation. As we do those things, we gain wisdom. We make good choices, we reason, we learn from mistakes, we teach others of the love we received from Him. As we do these things, we gain understanding of them, and that understanding establishes the foundation of a Godly, happy life. Our house is built on a solid foundation.

Atheists of the world, you want to know something? Everybody's human. Everybody has a soul, even you who deny yours. Read on.

What's more, our lives are made of experiences and memories that fill up our days. One by one, as we live within His guidance, we are blessed with treasures. The love of other people is the greatest of those, you know. Spouses, girlfriends, boyfriends, children, family, friends, even strangers: they are the rich colors of a beautiful tapestry that is your life and mine. They are comfortable furniture, colorful paintings, beautiful furnishings that fill up the rooms of our days and enrich us like possessions do. Each of our memories is a rare treasure beyond human value.

And yet everybody's human.

I think back on my treasures and I'm now even thankful for the ones that hurt. The jerks at WMS pushing me into the locker every time I rounded the corner; being fired in Montana; that fight I got into in fourth grade when Tom laid into me without my even provoking him; the auto accident in Italy where I should have died; being passed over again and again for men of lesser ability; involving myself with the predator: all these experiences where I was a victim and hurt, I'm thankful for them. They are rare and beautiful treasures. Then there is breaking up in 1985; the cruel way I treated Gene at Andy's house (again, when I was in fourth grade); all the lies; breaking 'the news' to my kids; repeatedly hurting the woman so very dearest to me by not committing: all these experiences where I made others victims and hurt them, I wish I hadn't done them, but I am thankful for them as well. They, too, are rare and beautiful treasures. Some have vivid colors; some have dull hues. All are part of the landscape and the picture, the room, would be so incomplete without them.

You see, everybody's human.

Even the bad memories are the adornments that fill the rooms of my house. My house is where I live, in a neighborhood probably a lot like yours. There are sunny and rainy days in our neighborhood, and some of our lawns need mowing, some of our houses need paint, some of us are magnificent housekeepers and a few of us are hoarders. You want to know something? Everybody's human. Everybody's human and everybody living in the presence of God lives in a house built on wise understanding, filled with many rooms, enriching memories, and rare, beautiful treasures. I prefer this outlook to thinking I'm simply a bunch of atoms waiting to return to the dirt. This outlook means forever because as beautiful as my rooms are here where eternity matters most, everybody who's human aint seen nothing yet.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 14 July 2011

A wise man has great power, and a man of knowledge increases strength. Proverbs 24, verse 5.

There are times when writing these come easy, and there are times when they don't. Today, I'm in the latter. We all have up's and down's, and after a particularly emotional week and day, I'm more down. I don't feel wise; I don't think I have power (let alone great power); I don't feel like much of a man; I don't think I am knowledgeable; I feel weak. I'm prone to periodic battles with the blues, and among the tribulations in my life, they're in this moment.

That's a deception that the enemy easily plays, you know. The enemy, the prince of the world, is a coward. He hits us where we are tender and weak; his most effective weapon is doubt. He plants seeds of doubt in us that feed our tendencies to think we are nothing.

And let's face it: we really, truly, can be a whole bag of nothing. I am the worst of sinners you know. Your sins are bad, very bad. I can top them with mine. You've done things worthy of being shunned; I have been shunned and deserved it. You've done things worthy of eternal damnation, of labeling you for the chief of sinners you are. I can beat that. I'll see your sins and raise you some. There are times when writing these words isn't easy because there are times when I realize what a damned wreck of a human being I am. The enemy plays on those thoughts, plants doubt, and makes the sin increase.

But you see that line of thinking goes only so far. Specifically, it goes only to the cross. The buck stops there and only there. Compared to He who is there, we are nothing...and yet, He's there for us. He knew He would be there when He spoke us into existence and declared us "very good," not nothing. There, at that terrible cross, the damned sinner is forgiven. There, the raised sins are eliminated. There at that bloody execution, the shunning stops, the one-upmanship of my sins over yours is rendered moot. At the foot of the cross, there is only you and Him, me and Him. There, you and I fall on our knees and confess that we've done such terrible things, and with a drop of His blood, he washes away the shame and stain and guilt we feel and says "I forgive you. Forgive yourself. I love you."

I love you. Truly amazing, you know. "Phenomenal cosmic power in an itty bitty living space;" very Aladdin words, with so much power jam packed into three simple words. Words mean things. We will live and die for words. Those three words are the ones we should live and die for. They don't come easy either: they were redeemed with eternity. And because that happened, even when it doesn't feel easy, the wise man wields great power, and he knows in his heart that there is strength in this life. He knows in his soul that it is his soul that has strength because of that sprinkling of holy blood into his own. "I love you." They are both statement and action; philosophy and life, emotion and reason. They are the beginning of the conversation and the last words we hear. They demand action and they drive action, everything we can do. But without them the action is meaningless. I love you: they are the great power and they are knowing strength. They are all we hear from Him, in every word He spoke. They are the Alpha and the Omega. Him. We get to share that and, when we do, we are something.

I'm given to bouts with depression. When I'm sad, there is good reason; when I am distraught, I feel little consolation. In times like these, things don't come easy indeed. In times like these, I feel like I'm under attack by the enemy from Eden. In times like these, though, it's best to remember that "I love you" is all you need. Everything else flows from it.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 15 July 2011

For waging war you need guidance, and for victory many advisors. Proverbs 24, verse 5.

Another full disclosure here: this verse is coupled with the one that says "a wise man has great power, and a man of knowledge increases strength." I de-coupled them because the point of verse 4 simply struck me. But to be fair and lend verse 5 its full meaning, we need to remember that the prior verse talks about wisdom and how true wisdom and knowledge (i.e. love) makes us strong.

It makes us strong so that we can wage war. We need that; we truly do. We need it because we fight a war every day. I was trained in military arts, and saw 'combat' from the inside of a world few others see. It's real, it's for life and death stakes, and it's deadly serious. There are people for whom that task is a 24/7 calling, and I'm so proud to say that, for a time, I was one of them. I have been out of it for years now, and the deeper I dive into my faith, the more thankful I am for my time in the service. Basic military training is great preparation for spiritual warfare. Physical training, defensive tactics, weapons preparation, moral lessons, self-discipline, teamwork, going on offense, duty and honor above self: all those are necessary components we each need to wage the war of the spirit that is put on our hearts with each and every choice we make.

In this era of video game war or the cowardly tactics of weasel terrorists, it's difficult to remember that war is supposed to be waged with wise loving power. Yes, even when raining hellfire down on our enemies, we are supposed to do so with wisdom, targeting for compulsion those that are in opposition to us. Our model is supposed to be the daily spiritual war we each wage against the enemy. We are tempted, we resist, we persevere, we fail and slip and lose, we retreat, we advance. Our weapons aren't missiles or smart bombs or cyber attacks: they are the Word of God himself and the scythe of truth that He places into our hands when we absorb that Word into our hearts.

For war we need advisors. The corporal, sergeant, major or general all lead, but they don't wage war alone. War is offense and defense; it's no coincidence that the military academies emphasize team sports, especially football (which is all about strategy and tactics). Nobody wages war alone. A line never advances just because of one superstar. Whether it be military combat or spiritual warfare, no man wages war alone. We need others to support our strength, carry out mutual plans, formulate those plans and responses, and advise us on them. More than this, we need a Savior to train, equip, sharpen and fuel us to fight the good fight in His name.

You're kidding yourself if you think we aren't each at war every day because we are. When you're angry and things spin out of control (and admit it: there is an empowering feeling in that anger), do you think that's a coincidence? Do you think it is sheer chance when chaos and anarchy spread so quickly? Are you so blind to think that mass murder on a scale that history has never seen is just some random happening? Make no mistake about it, my skeptical modern friends, Satan loves the twenty-first century as much as he loved day one in Eden. He is corporal, sergeant, major and general with a legion of angry minions at his disposal. He hasn't changed his weapons or tactics at all, and they worked just as well on that first family as they do on the First Family in Washington, or the family you see first in your home. He wars with us, using his tactics to do anything he can to separate us from the safety and peace of God. The enemy's goal is to take the place of the Almighty in our lives, a self-delusion and bald lie if ever there was one. He constantly attacks. He never retreats because he doesn't believe he has to. How will you overcome it?

You and I can overcome it by emboldening and enriching ourselves with the sword of Him who made, loves, and guides all things. Daily strengthening in Scripture, surrounding yourself with believing friends, encouragement and support from the same, constant confession and absolution, and working to make changes that are based in Him are all weapons at your disposal. As we arm ourselves with them, we'll find there is safety in numbers. As we seek God's counsel for all our actions and reactions, we are surely moving forward to something bigger than ourselves, and a better land than any for which we struggle here today. Make no mistake about it: even if you don't like the fight, we're in the war together. Me, I find supreme comfort knowing He is beside me just like you are. We're a great team, all of us, and He will win in the end. He will be victorious and we'll be standing there beside Him.

Suit up, lace up your boots, pick up your weapon and let's get in line, my friends. We are made strong, wise, guided and victorious by the author of truth and love. We don't move at dawn: we advance now.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 18 July 2011

Wisdom is too high for a fool; in the assembly at the gate he has nothing to say. Proverbs 24, verse 7.

That's a cheery Monday verse, isn't it? I don't know about you, but my weekend was pretty short and very full. I had a great Friday, I accomplished a life goal, I went for a long run (and ran farther than I ever have in my life!), I got to attend great worship on Sunday, I got some much needed relaxation by the pool, and I was honored to speak and write the words. I really love the words. To come back on Monday and jump back into these Proverbs again with a verse that is, well, kind of a downer is a downer in itself. I really don't need this.

See the trap? It really is an insidious thing, especially when a verse like today's confronts you at the soft underbelly of your pride. By my count, there were 12 mentions of "I" or "my" in that 111 word paragraph. That's better than 10%! In church yesterday, Patrick talked about the 10% tithe as a gift exemplifying our love for God; it was encouraging because it wasn't a pitch for money (itself a discouraging, sometimes necessary, typical thing in most churches). If I were tithing with my words, my 10% wouldn't have been to God, at least not the God of the universe. Sadly, my god would have been the one in the mirror.

Kind of makes the point of the verse, doesn't it? Kind of makes me look like a fool standing at the gate with another group of fools. In the Hebrew context of verse 7, think of the people at the gate as being intellectuals, businessmen, or men of prominence in Jerusalem. They ran the temple and ran the city, and they were the powers-that-be to be reckoned with. They would congregate at the gate of the city, or at the gates to the temple and meet, conduct business or politics, and converse. You were somebody if you were in that group, and they didn't tolerate fools. They were the movers & shakers in the Hebrew power structure.

What's changed? I attended two different high schools. In both, before classes and in-between, cliques would congregate in their usual places, by lockers, by entrances, in the hall. Brownsville Station and Motley Crue must have gone to my schools because you could find them smoking in the boys room too. You had to be somebody to fit into a clique, whether it was the jocks, the industrial arts crew, the nerds, or the outcasts; you had to fit in. If you didn't, you were just a fool.

Anyone see a difference between the group of prominent Hebrews and the cliques in the hallway? I didn't either.

The fact is that we're all fools if we fall for the idea that we need the wisdom of groupthink. I'm prone to drama; it's something I've struggled with for years. I wanted to be an actor and for a short time I was one (of sorts). It was escape from a life I saw as dreary. What was dreary about it was actually my outlook. In truth, I had been given a life of many blessings, a childhood of privilege and excitement that few could rival. Yet because we moved around so often (8 schools in 10 years), I always felt excluded. Even as an adult, I've wanted to be accepted, to fit in and have people want me just for me. All too often, then as now, I've found myself standing on the outside of the cool cats, wishing I could be one of them. Why, in the workplace today, you'll find me cutting up, trying to be the center of attention instead of a member of the team. It's a fault I've been working to change.

I had a hard time realizing that the cool people also stood at the assembly gate with nothing to say. They were just as much outside the temple as I was. I didn't realize until so much later that the only wisdom that matters is God's, and that His wisdom isn't found in being cool or even being included. Indeed, if you fully believe in God's wisdom, you're signing up to have a hungry heart filled with contentment, living the life of an outcast. He doesn't ask for half-measures: He wants it all, our all. You'll be accused, persecuted, ridiculed, scorned and hurt...and that's before you leave church. Out in the world, things may indeed be much, much harder.

Besides, just where is 'the gate'? Is it outside the temple or church, is it in the workplace or the halls of your high school? Is it at a family reunion, or is it maybe standing outside the gates of heaven, where no fool will enter? It's important to not lose sight of such a question, you know.

God uses sinners like us to work His love in the world. We aren't perfect, we all slip and make mistakes, we are outcasts, and sometimes we fail. But that doesn't make us failures. When God seems silent in life, He's still there, holding His tongue to let us process what He's saying. When His wisdom seems too high for us, maybe He's actually telling us something. It's not something difficult, either. It's "come to me. I love you and think you're extraordinary. I love YOU just the way you are and I love you so much that I joined you and died for you." Not tough at all. On a Monday that I'm

determined to make cheery no matter what, I don't need the clique to tell me what really matters when it all comes down. More than that, what matters most isn't about me or I. That's the best thing about it.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 19 July 2011

If you falter in times of trouble, how small is your strength! Proverbs 24, verse 10.

Did you know you are stronger than you give yourself credit for being? I'm back on Facebook after taking a few weeks away. I missed interacting with friends there, and I missed seeing what my friends were doing. A confession is in order here: I didn't miss the drama. It was pointed out to me that I sometimes am dramatic, and that's one of the reasons I backed away for awhile. I didn't want to put up with the drama. More than that, I really tired of causing drama, especially in the heart of one so dear. I had brought too much drama into life and caused times of trouble; my strength had begun to feel small. I needed a break, needed to center myself.

It got me thinking that, online or off, these are still times of trouble. Joblessness, worry, stress, strife, falling away and falling apart: we all know people who struggle with these things. Sometimes they are us. Life moves us in new directions and when that happens, it causes angst. God talks to us all the time, but we don't listen all the time. When we don't listen, is it any wonder that times of trouble enter our lives? And in those times, how easy it is to fall prey to the idea that our strength really is small, that things won't get better, that God can't possibly care or love us the way we are, that happiness just can't be had.

Rubbish.

In the hardest time of my life, during a time of trouble that I largely brought on myself, my Mom gave me a gift that says "Don't tell God how big your storm is, tell the storm how big your God is." It's a reminder that, in love, all things are possible. Last year, I met a man who told me how he prayed over the weather, how he earnestly prayed when a tornado threatened his house and that tornado moved away. I listened and looked at him thinking, "is he for real?" Praying over a tornado? You're kidding me, right? But that's exactly what Christ says anyone with faith can do. The power of the Almighty can accomplish anything. Was it his faith or force majeure? Only God knows, but the man's house is still standing today.

Every day, we're faced with decisions, large and small, that shape our lives. Some of them are life-changers; some are just about what to have for dinner. All of them are important. And every day we do a thousand or more small tasks that shape each other and what comes after. I'm discovering a side of myself that I buried for a long time, namely a decisive one. It's easy to do when things are going well. In the recent past, I've been very blessed with some small but significant successes in my professional life. In my personal life, though, I've been wrestling with other issues and I've been discovering how good it feels to remember that, even in the middle of feeling down, my strength is anything but small. It's hard to think and be decisive when you're down, but those are the times when we should let Him who guides us do the leading. In the times when things are tough, the best thing to do is to knuckle down, prepare and train, gird yourself for battle and then...

...let go. Let go of the control, the worry, the angst and the pride and let God go to work. That's a message that the verse is delivering. Read it again and I think you'll see it sitting there in-between the letters. It's saying "you don't need to falter because My strength is your strength. Rely on that so that, if you falter in times of trouble, you won't be left thinking how small is your strength."

I briefly talked with my son last night. He's on a mission trip, biking across northeastern Illinois, doing VBS programs at various churches. He said they biked 36 miles yesterday (and also that he's allergic to corn leaves...no explanation needed). He's sore, tired, worn out already, and a little homesick. It would be very easy for him to think that his strength is small during tough days of riding...but it isn't. He's learning that he can rely on a personal, life-churning conduit to the strength of a Savior who never grows weak. The physical exercise is grueling and the spiritual stripping-away of the dross of daily life is a tough thing at any age. But he's doing it. He's proving that the verse is a good warning to heed, and a reminder that divine strength can overcome anything.

I'll remember that as I'm weaving my way through Facebookland again. I'm determined to do better, to not be snarky or gossip; I want what I say and do to build others up as well as have some fun that never tears down. It isn't worth posting something if it hurts someone or makes my God look small. He's anything but small. After all, I am stronger than I give myself credit for being when I base my strength in Him who is bigger than myself. When that happens, whether the storms are in the clouds or online, they're no match for me & God.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 20 July 2011

Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter. If you say, "but we knew nothing about this," does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay each person according to what he has done? Proverbs 24, verse 12.

There are some times when I feel like a sacrifice staggering toward slaughter, especially this morning. I'll spare you the gory details but you may remember a few weeks ago how I mentioned that I thought I was losing my best friend. A days-long argument has sealed that, and our relationship is at a final, painful end. We were up late last night arguing, trying to find common ground, and it didn't end well. Today, I'm so sad that I can barely function. I feel like a limb has been cut from my body. I feel the shock of someone dying, an unrecoverable loss. I'm devastated, sick to my stomach, and worn out from my soul. The morning changes nothing, and as much as I so wish I could take back all the harsh words and accusations, I can't. I'm responsible for my share of them, and what's said and done is said and done. I am responsible for much of that, too, and some of it cut deep. Very little of what we argued over was faithful or scriptural; it was all self-serving, especially at my end. I pushed her too far as she was pushing me away but demanding more. At the end of it, we've lost a relationship that endured for years, past things much more serious than our recent issues. At the end of it, we lost each other.

And at the end of it, I staggered toward the slaughter. The way I feel today, I would almost welcome it. Did we say or do things unforgiveable? At the end of a loving friendship, it would seem so, but I also hope things aren't all they seem, that the enemy is simply using that as yet another way to turn us from what matters most. Isn't that the essence of being led to death, that the enemy does whatever he can to turn us from God's love? God perceives it. He weighed our heavy hearts and found our behavior lacking, yet He still guards our very lives and knows that, to have us with Him, we are unable to be anything but lacking. He sent the remedy; all we have to do is believe.

At times like these, when I am completely lacking, that is the easiest thing to remember but the toughest to actually absorb. This too is a Satanic deception.

God is a just god, and He repays each of us according to what we have done. Without faith in Him to have saved me, I could only imagine what my list of transgressions would look like if I were to be judged before him right now. Based on last night alone, I would be damned immediately. It wouldn't matter what she said to me: what I said and did, how I spoke and acted selfishly, would merit my spending in eternity in hell, separated from all love. God would be more than just to do that. Today, I am devastated, conscious once again of all my guilt and soaked to the bone with it.

Yet 2nd Thessalonians says that, "God our Father loves us. He is kind and has given us eternal comfort and a wonderful hope." Without knowing that, by reading just the proverb alone, then God is nothing more than an eternal hammer. His divine plans in our lives are nothing more than manipulation, and our prayers for comfort and absolution are just wishing well delusions. We are waiting for slaughter as the just punishment for what we've done. Instead of feeding us into the chute or lining us up for execution, God pulls us back, rescuing us from what our actions merit, what our caustic words deserve. Even as we walk away from relationships we counted on, God is running back to us, holding us up and giving us the strength to try again. Suffering, perseverance, character and hope: it's a Romans 5 kind of moment for struggling sinners like me.

It's good to remember this when things hurt so badly. At the end of it all, much will change, and for the first time in years, I am left without my North Star. That change scares me. After the argument, my wife and I talked once again about this relationship, sharing words for spiritual healing and forward motion, and it gave me comfort; she knows my friend and what all this has meant to me. Faith isn't for nothing, you know. It's to keep us close to God when the enemy attacks us. I could say that I really don't know what I'll do now, what to think. But there would only be some truth in it because I know what I have to do and I know what I am. It starts with remembering that the just God of Proverbs is the loving Abba of 2nd Thessalonians. I will wrap myself in what I failed to remember all along, that it's not about me, and I will throw off selfishness once again. Prayers will be sent up once again for my friend's comfort and hope, for that of our families and friends, and I will pray for my own. In time, the soul-racking sobs and utter nausea will go away. Today is the day to lean on people of faith to give me good counsel, and I forgive. That I do already. I hope she knows that.

But she may not. We're done talking, and I am afraid it's forever now. It's ironic that she always said we were two of each other's forever people because there are some people who you have in your life, in one way or another, forever. Today I'll cling to the hope that she was right, that maybe one day we can be friends again. And I want her to know that I'm sorry. I'll admit that I still feel like I'm led to the slaughter today, but perhaps there's a light in it and it isn't a train rushing toward me.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 21 July 2011

Eat honey, my son, for it is good; honey from the comb is sweet to your taste. Know also that wisdom is sweet to your soul; if you find it, there is a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off. Proverbs 24, verses 13 and 14.

These are times of change. Perhaps that could be said about every day, but in my house, these are days of major changes in the fundamentals, especially as regards children. Changes are occurring here and within them I'm watching as my children are changing as well. "Big duh" on that one, you might say; kids are always changing. So are we all. Our circumstances change, our jobs change, our habits change, our friendships change, we change. I won't recount some of my changes; you read about them enough. But I will talk about the apples of my eye.

I talked with my son last night. He called his mom, so we shared the phone and talked for about 20 minutes. You may remember he's on a mission trip in Illinois, biking from town to town and then participating in VBS shows at night. He's finding his element now, riding hard and opening up. They rode 36 miles one day and most of 70 yesterday, although this included a 5-mile detour for a Dr. Pepper; go figure. They ride only 21 today. He's also singing, which he only does in private. More than that, God is working in him, through him, helping to come out of his shell in talking with strangers and repairing frayed relationships. Son Bull and I both like honey; we're the only ones in our house who do. Far from our house, he's freely enjoying it, perhaps not even realizing how God is changing him from the inside out to assure future hope.

Then there is his older sister, who may or may not be moving out of state next week. She's having a tough time making a decision about what to do, oscillating between staying and going. I think I know what her final decision will be, but I'm refusing to tell her what to do. She's an adult, and she has to own it. I'm also refusing to bankroll it. That means she's having to knuckle down and raise the money for her wherever-move all by herself. Economics is a hard lesson but a firm teacher. She's on the cusp of a major change, and maybe she also doesn't realize that God is putting these choices, these changes, in her life to remind her to not handle it all by herself. No man is an island; no young woman either. A month from now, the initially hard part will be done, and it will onto the next batch of changes for the new graduate. Her changes are monumental; given her disposition, they're also full of drama. But God is moving in her life whether she sees Him or not. She doesn't like honey, but she's being sweetened all the same.

Finally, there is their older sister. Oldest child is a child no more. She's a grown woman, entering her third year of college. She is in love with a great guy who has become another son to me. Next year they are getting married in what promises to be the event of her lifetime. Economics has been a good teacher to her, too, and she is self-sufficient in most things. That makes me glad, knowing that this once-flustered young woman has assumed the mantle of adulthood. Oldest daughter is working full time in a job that, well, she doesn't like much; the place is mismanaged. I get a call from her every day in which she downloads her frustrations and opens up her heart. We also get to have lunch every week. One week she buys, one week I buy. I've come to cherish our time together as peers, as father and daughter. Her life is full of the changes that accompany a twenty-something taking her place in the world, and she's learning to look for the tender mercies that come with realizing how God is changing her from within. No, she doesn't like honey either, but she's already lived a sweeter life because of it.

Through it all, I hope we've instilled in our kids the knowledge that life is good, that there is hope. I've said it so many times before and will keep screaming it out: God's hope isn't a wishing well. It isn't just a way for us to say to him "I want this" or even to just ask "please let this happen." God's hope is a promise, a guarantee, a covenant. He says what He means, and He does what He says He will do. Always. Always. Always. When a verse like this says "your hope will not be cut off," He means it. He guarantees the sweetness of life no matter what happens. God's hope is pure love and real wisdom. In accepting it, we learn that the happiness we feel is a product of that loving wisdom.

He doesn't guarantee happiness, though; that's true, at least not here. Here, unhappiness is a dysfunction of our allowing it to exist. God doesn't have a hand in making that happen, but He is active in letting it happen so that we might see how much He actually loves us. It's not unlike those lessons of economics and hard rides that wear you out. Many people have been stressing to me that happiness is my own responsibility, that we're each responsible for letting ourselves be happy. I see that now. Whether it is the pursuit of wealthy, secure happiness from Jefferson's Declaration, or happiness with ourselves and our lives, we are each responsible for it. In this responsibility, God implores us to trust in him, that He is the founder of real happiness. It goes back to His loving wisdom. He promises to strengthen and preserve us even as daily, even hourly, struggles with the world try to drag us down. He promises to impart His wise love into our lives so that we can stand up, smile from the heart, and move forward. God promises to sweeten our souls with His love and His wisdom. Come what may, He never lets go.

Some changes can be frightening; if we don't keep perspective, they can scare the hell into you. When relationships end, I get down, very down. When tension happens, I get nervous and defensive. When the world is cold, I get a chill. And when my kids are in flux, I get to be a concerned dad. In all these, we also get to celebrate. The trick is to remember that changes are always happening; they're actually blessings God puts in our lives. They are ways for us to remember that through them He is buying back unhappiness and replacing it with its opposite; they are ways to remind us that He loves us so much He gave Himself up as fully as anyone could. And they are ways for us to remember that the taste of honey is sweet, that it never spoils, and that life is so much better because of Him. No change can ever take that away.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 22 July 2011

Do not lie in wait like an outlaw against a righteous man's house, do not raid his dwelling place. Proverbs 24, verse 15.

Where is your house? Taking the verse literally, it's talking about burglary, robbery; simple enough. I live in Texas and I own guns. Under my state's laws, if someone breaks into my house, I have the right to shoot them just because, even if they are fleeing. That makes sense to me because I believe it's an affront to one's security to break into their dwelling place. Our safety, our love, our security is found in our homes. If someone breaks into mine, they threaten the people I love, me, my property and all that my home represents. Potential North Texas burglars are hereby warned.

Is that all the verse is talking about?

What about relationships? Where are outlaws trying to break into your house? I have been confronted by jealous, abusive husbands because I was involved with their wives. I have been confronted by other jealous men who thought I was involved with their wives or girlfriends when I wasn't. I've committed adultery. If someone is involved with your spouse or significant other, aren't they like the outlaw who lies in wait to break into your house? They threaten the relationship you love; they threaten the well-being of their heart, your heart. In my life, I have been both the outlaw and the occupant. When the woman you love is in danger, you want to do something about it. I would want to take action, and that's not a good place in which to find one's self. Take it from me, you get what you deserve.

What about your self-esteem? Is it fair when someone assails you because you feel good about yourself? Is it a crime of the spirit to have someone pull you down over jealousy? Bitter hearts will try to drag you to their level of bitterness just because misery loves company. Is the bully at school or the overbearing SOB at work like an outlaw, clawing at your dwelling place from the outside, trying to steal your joy, trying to take what you have? Will you just let that happen?

What about your values? It's not that different from the self-esteem example. If you cherish something, or if there is something you hold dear, is that something worth fighting for? I think of my dad, who seemed like a pushover in many ways. It was only when I really got to know him as a man and husband that I saw how he rarely gave ground on the principles he held dear. Everything else was just a small battle that might or might not be worth waging. I think that's a sagely outlook. If someone tries to change you to make you 'better' in their eyes, or if someone assails what you believe, aren't they like the outlaw?

Finally, what about your faith? That's the ultimate value for even those without faith in God put their faith in something; atheist emperors of the world, your delusion is real and you really are buck naked. But let's face it: especially when you're young, from the outside looking in, being a believer is really pretty dull. You aren't in the cool crowd, you believe in all these un-fun things, and all the really fun and cool things are off limits! From faith looking outward, the outlook on the outlaw is a little bit different. Looking from that vantage, I want the outlaw to know the faith, peace and love that I know. It's too good to hold it inside. I want to share.

In these things, we have weapons. They are sharpened by believing in a loving and wise God; they are formidable when held in the hands of one so determined; they are unstoppable when we ask Him to join in our fight. Outlaws don't stand a chance when me and God are standing watch, and Satan is the ultimate outlaw. . I bet you don't feel much different.

Lately, I've been conscious that I'm not very righteous. I hear outlaws outside the window, sneaking around, plotting. My house is in disarray, my heart is tugged in many directions, and when I look in the mirror I see a tired, worried, stressed man staring back. But that's just the looking glass. I am those things, and I own what I've done, what I believe and who I am. In all that, I still cling to who I love and what I believe and will gladly do whatever it takes to preserve them. I'm still struggling, wrestling and fighting, raging against the machine in so many ways. What's better, I'm also forgiven and saved by Him who can calm all those struggles. Because of that, outlaws should beware. I'm a Texan who's armed and dangerous and I'm not afraid to defend what I love most.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 25 July 2011

Though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again, but the wicked are brought down by calamity. Proverbs 24, verse 16.

Last week, this was about how our 'house' is stalked by outlaws who want to do us wrong; remember that verse 15 says, "Do not lie in wait like an outlaw against a righteous man's house, do not raid his dwelling place." Like other verses we've shared, these two are married for good reason. Though they read well separately, they are together for a purpose. As a personal aside, I have long thought that this is one of the reasons that 'proves' the fact of scripture instead of just the faith in it, namely that I know of no other body of writing where sections and sentences can be parsed and broken down yet still hold both consistency and clarity. Try parsing the Gettysburg Address and you're left with incomplete thoughts. Ditto for the Communist Manifesto and anything written by Al Gore, Stephen King or me. But I digress.

Taking the verses as a complete message, I don't think it's a coincidence that one talks about violation of the dwelling place (spirit) of the righteous and then how the righteous will rise from such attacks while the attackers suffer. Complete, done, finished; the message is done. Of course I'm not...

...I'm not done because I want to tie this to my friend Patrick's message from church yesterday. As a lead-in to worship, he mentioned how these are days of darkness in our culture. Specifically, he briefly talked about the recent bombing in Norway, then the senseless death of Amy Winehouse. Neither of these things needed to happen. The neo-Nazi nut in Norway published 1500 pages of screed that could have tipped someone off to his intentions, but we (as humanity) seemed unable to stop him, unable or unwilling to do anything about the warning signs. Amy Winehouse was a walking time bomb of addiction and self-destruction. That her life ended in those things is not a surprise, but surely it is as much of a tragedy as any death.

Let's get something straight, though. The 90+ people murdered in Oslo weren't wicked. I wouldn't even say Amy Winehouse was wicked (though addicted, disturbed, and possessed might apply). Patrick's point was that their lives were examples of the darkness in our world. Outlaws of the mind must have plagued Ms. Winehouse in her desperate, drug-addled existence. Outlaws of the soul must have tortured this extreme left wing nut to slaughter so many innocent people. Were they wicked? No comment and no judgment from me on that point, yet their actions were certainly wicked. One murder, one overdose/suicide: that's wickedness to me. They were brought down by calamity, much of it self-embraced.

Patrick then challenged us to be weapons of light. That's a phrase that stuck with me all day. Are you a weapon of light? Christ is the light of the world; He said so and proved it. To believe in Him allows you to share in His light that is love, truth, goodness and hope. To believe in Him empowers you with patience and boldness, confidence and grace. The antidote to the hopelessness of Oslo and Amy is light. The cure for the common evil is Jesus. Am I naively saying that if someone had shared a little more of Christ with these misdirected souls, then everything would have turned out ok? Yes, I am...but only to a point. The message is only half of what's needed. An open heart is the other.

And when a heart is open ground to receive the fertile, nourishing message, then a heart is ripe to be made righteous. A righteous man can get knocked down but will have the inner fortitude to fight back. A righteous man will do what is required to fight on. A righteous man knows himself and from where his real strength comes. A righteous man can be struck and struck again, an infinite amount of times even, and he will still rise to the occasion. That's the point where the verse and my friend's sermon intersect. The light makes us righteous and resilient, and it is the light that enables us to rise again.

This morning I turned on the TV to find more bad news. An abusive, distraught father murdered five people at a roller rink here in North Texas before killing himself. What kind of evil possesses someone to do such a thing? And according to the AP, two Southern California men charged with severely beating a San Francisco Giants fan face a judge for the first time today. Why? Over in Arkansas, a Muslim fanatic is being examined by psychiatrists for his murder of two people outside a military recruiting station in 2009. Again, why? I say the answer is fairly simple, and it's the one my friend preached about yesterday. Knowing that, I say that when we let ourselves become servants and weapons of light, we become justified by His love and we are enabled to stand up and face again the trials of petty evil. Perhaps a weapon of light could have confronted the terrorist in Oslo and framed a different path; perhaps with some light, Ms. Winehouse would still be alive. We will never know because both succumbed to the petty evils in the world. Whether we like it or not, we have to face them every day in an increasingly dark culture where that darkness is embraced instead of shone bare with true light. Thank God He gives us the weapon of choice to do so.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 26 July 2011

Do not fret because of evil men, or be envious of the wicked, for the evil man has no future hope, and the lamp of the wicked will be snuffed out. Proverbs 24, verses 21 and 22.

Do you fret over what you don't have? More than that, do you fret over who you aren't, where you aren't? I have and I do, and I have to confess to you that it's a not a trait of which I'm proud. There's a country song that says, "Just as soon as I get what I what I get unsatisfied;" Sara Evans sang it. She didn't know that she was singing lyrics fundamental to both my psychological makeup and my many insecurities. I wonder if I'm wired that way too, to always get unsatisfied. That can be a healthy thing, you know, a motivator that constantly urges you to do your best, try harder, keep pressing on toward the ultimate goal; nothing wrong with that.

For an insecure man, though, I live with it as the opposite. This behavior has always made me envious of others, envious of the lives they live and the freedoms they have. It's not that I am jealous of them; they are who, what and where they are and I am who, what and where I am. We are each the products of our choices and our beliefs, and there are blessings in our lives. What I'm talking about is a behavior that feeds my own self-image in which I think I'm not good enough, not worthy enough, not deserving enough. What 'enough' is really is a moot and fluid point. When you allow yourself to behave insecurely, 'enough' is something for other people, not you.

Thus, a compulsive man can't live happily, always letting himself and those around him be compelled to bigger and bigger happenings. A co-dependent person can't really be happy by solving others' problems for them. An insecure woman can't find happiness by always giving up things she needs just so others can get what she thinks they should want. I'm unhappy because I've given too much, or forsaken too much, or tried to be someone I am not. You are unhappy because someone else stole your thunder or your joy or is always doing you wrong. For people such as us, it becomes too easy to fret about how the world has us in a pinch, how the never-ending crises of life always drags us down and if we could just rise of above X, Y or Z, then things could get better.

Did you know that X, Y and Z are illusions? They are mirages, shifting on the horizon of the sand. I spend so much time envying them that I feel my future hope is in jeopardy.

And that's a lie. It's a lie that the enemy of this world wants me and you to believe. Hope is a promise from God and it is never in jeopardy. We are the ones in jeopardy. The enemy wants us to believe that we can be like 'the wicked,' that we should be unsatisfied in all things because that dissatisfaction breeds diffidence with God. He wants to breach our trust with God, driving us to let ourselves think that God doesn't want or trust us, that God doesn't want happiness to rule in our lives. The enemy wants us to doubt, question, and always remain unsatisfied in ways that he can use to drive wedges in between us and the Savior. Envy of others and the lives they lead is simply a useful way to do that. What the enemy doesn't want us to understand is the last part of today's verse, namely that rejecting grace and love leads to damnation. You and I don't know when we will die, so the enemy wants us to forget that words mean things and actions have consequences. Reject truth, love and love enough times and you may just find yourself out of time at the most inopportune moment. That would be tragic.

Behaviors can be changed. They can be changed when you let God go to work on your heart and talk with him about what you really believe, how you truly feel. It is a miracle, you know, and for some people it happens slowly and some quickly. It is a supernatural occurrence in our natural lives, an everyday extraordinary thing that is better than Harry Potter's magic or the fleeting fame of the tabloids. It's even better than Sunday chicken, peacefully sleeping children, and the love of a good woman. The kind of love I'm talking about is God's love, imparted individually for each of us, to each of us, from Himself. We get to share it, we live to love through it, and it increases each time it is sent out. That kind of love combats the enemy's petty evil with honesty, listening, and selflessness.

It's the kind of love that will change insecurities into quiet boldness, and envy into celebration. It's the kind of love that the truly wicked reject, fail to understand, and from which they flee in fear. The more we put that love into practice, the more it becomes the behavior we model and for which we hunger, and that hunger is always satisfied.

Personally, I think there has been enough hurting in my life and it's time to do better. It's true that I'm wired to be like Ms. Evans' song, to get unsatisfied. That need not be a bad thing. The missing factor in my equation has always been myself, believing the lie that I wasn't good enough or man enough or whatever enough to claim my place as a valued and cherished member of God's family. I'm sure it will always be a daily battle in my life, this war against happiness. Now is the time to do something better about it. That something starts with realizing it's not about me and giving up the fretting.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 27 July 2011

Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when he stumbles, do not let your heart rejoice, or the LORD will see and disapprove and turn his wrath away from him. Proverbs 24, verses 17 and 18.

This is a strange pair of verses about revenge, right? We are adrenaline-based creatures, thriving on the thrill of victory. Whether it is a personal fight, cheering for our favorite team, or any kind of competition, we are super-charged to take sides and then strive to win. God made us this way, and I sometimes think He gave us that nature as a coping mechanism for the stress of sin. Did Adam and Eve feel this before they snacked on the fruit? They had an enemy but there was no need to look at him as such. Evil was there in the garden with them, but they had no reason to see it as evil. They didn't know any better.

What's changed? When we are working hard, don't we still get an adrenaline rush, even when we don't do anything wrong? Is it wrong to be competitive, or to strive to give your personal best in overcoming odds (even the challenges of other people)? I say 'yes' and 'no.' Perhaps our innocent ancestors understood the good feeling of hard work well done. They might not have understood the biological chemical reactions involved in how our bodies process the rush, but they surely understand that it felt good to do something well.

And though our first example of competitiveness comes from Adam and Eve's sons, I think it's reasonable to assume there was competition before Cain slew Abel. After all, the boys' parents had the ultimate morality lesson to impart to their children; they had learned it first-hand from God Himself. I think it's a safe assumption that, pitting the lessons of life and one child opposed to another, there was competition in that first family involved in simply learning.

Again, what's changed? Through the eons since Cain and Abel, what has changed? When we play a tough game of softball, isn't it our natural urge to gloat over a win, even if it's low-key and subdued? Even if it's just silent, from our heart? I think it is natural, especially if you consider our nature itself is sinful. In these verses, God is imploring us to be humble, to resist our nature. On the surface, it almost strikes me as hypocritical for God to make us this way and then expect us, from our hearts, to not rejoice when we overcome opposition. That's on the surface, and all on the surface isn't what it seems to be down below. Down inside, it is still our nature to want to gloat, to want to be superior. Boil it down far enough and I think we would find it's little more than a second or third cousin to idolatry, making ourselves superior to God.

Besides, let's not forget the message behind verse 18, namely that God loves all of us equally. He loves the sinners as much as the saints. One of my favorite books is (not surprisingly) "The Shack." In it, God the Father repeatedly says, "yeah, that one is special to me." We are all special to Him. The Jews murdered in Auschwitz were special to God. Billy Graham and Billy Currington are special to God. Osama Bin Laden, Pol Pot, Karl Marx and Ted Bundy were all special to God. You and I are too. I believe the verse is saying that we shouldn't gloat over others, even those whose actions are wrong (or in the last sentence, wicked) because God loves them too and wants the best for them too. He rightly judges, of course, and reserves that power of judgment for Himself. In doing so, He asks that we trust that He knows what He's doing and leave ultimate justice to Him. That one is special to Him.

No wonder the verses say the LORD will turn away wrath and justice directed at true wrong-doers. Would it be any surprise if He saw us in the same light? I didn't think so either.

Yes, some of the verses we talk about here are strange, and some are strangely paired. If you let that line of thinking go to its logical end, though, you'll see that all of Christian faith is strange. It's a strange thing to care for your enemies instead of gloating over them. It's a strange thing to forgive when you've been hurt badly. And it's a strange thing to understand that practical living in the natural world is only truly possible by subordinating everything to the supernatural love of a being who lives both in and out of that world. That's a strange thing to do in a world of logic and skepticism, but the closer you get to knowing about it the more you see that it's really something to be stoked about.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 28 July 2011

Fear the LORD and the king, my son, and do not join with the rebellious, for those two will send sudden destruction upon them, and who knows what calamities they can bring? Proverbs 24, verses 21 and 22.

Throughout these writings I've repeatedly said that I think most references to 'fear' in Scripture are actually talking about 'respect' and 'reverence' for God. I do indeed believe that most fear discussed in the Bible is actually loving respect for the awesome magnificence of the Creator. His love and wisdom know no ends, and His ability to overlook our flaws and our wrongs shows grace and mercy that you and I can't even begin to mimic. Of course we should respect that! Of course we should revere Him for those things.

These verses are talking about that other kind of fear.

Sure, I think it's a good thing to respect anyone who has the power to impose will on another. I don't have to agree with it or them to respect it or them. In verses 21 and 22, though, I read that here is a case where we should have genuine dread of God and His earthly authorities when we give them cause to heap destruction on us. With simple words God spoke the universe into existence. With a sad smile and bitter tears, Christ silently endured the torture of the cross to defeat Satan and all his powers. With barely a thought, President Obama can unleash nuclear war on anyone who happens to cross him when he's low on carbs. Without batting an eye, your employer can fire you if you fail to toe the company line. Would it take much for him to smack us when we deserve it?

We should always be mindful of these things. Our God is a loving god who longs and proves to us how He wants us to live fully in His love. He is a just god who wants us to partake of His justice, to live within it in our lives and to put it into practice with each other. He is a patient God who endures your wrongs and mine and continually forgives us for things that you and I would hold against each other.

In other words, His behavior and His attributes really are the model for how we should live our lives. We should be unashamedly and unconditionally loving. We should be just and fair, shrewd and perceptive in all our dealings. We should be patient with each other, forbearing unintended slights and listening, living for context, not conflict. What's more, we elect leaders and work for managers who exhibit these qualities; we want the best and we demand the best. No comment on the goings-on in Washington this month.

Note to the rebellious: time to shape up. Your boss, your supervisor, your elders, your elected officials and your God all have your number. If you're flagrantly ignoring authority for any non-selfless motive, you're basically screwed. It doesn't take much to harden one's heart; take it from me. If you think you know better, and if you think it's all about you, watch out. To quote the Pussycat Dolls: "be careful what you wish for 'cause you just might get it." If you're selfishly rebellious in your attitude or action, at some point you'll find out how much you know and at some point, the wrath of authority will indeed be all about you. Personally, I think that would scare the hell into me.

Please note that I'm not talking about your average Jane or Joe. I sincerely believe most people want to do right, act right. I believe that most people, even those who commit heavy and heavily impacting sins, don't want to do those things. The more I learn about people, the more I see that most people genuinely want to do what's right, even when they're struggling with some seriously wrong thoughts and actions. I know that's my case, and I don't think I'm much different from you or most people. I'm stuck in some serious sins, with some real guilt and some heavy consequences. Are you much different? I sincerely hope so. I don't like to rebel; I hope I'm not openly rebellious because that isn't my aim.

It isn't my aim because I'm genuinely afraid of what would happen to me if I were really rebellious. I dread what the living God could do to me if He didn't see remorse and regret in my heart. An eternity of separation from Him, from any love, frightens me. I don't love Him or others out of fear or compulsion, but I'd be lying if I told you that the opposite of love didn't frighten me.

And I loathe the idea of being unemployed so I do what I can to give honest work while toeing the line. That's hard for me to do because I don't tolerate fools in the workplace, but it's also not always my place to judge them. In school, it's cool to look up to the kids who push the envelope. They're the ones who wisecrack, buck the system, and flaunt the rules that chafe others. I think there's a little bit of rebel in all of us; I know there is in me. Here's to hoping that we can each keep it in check. The alternative could be dire.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 29 July 2011

To show partiality in judging is not good. Proverbs 24, verse 23.

We judge everything. Have you ever stopped in the middle of the day and asked yourself how many hundreds of snap judgments you have made just to get to the middle? Turn left or right out of your driveway; another cup of coffee or no; spell-check the email or ignore it; flip flops or sandals; CNN or Fox; boxers or briefs (or bikinis or something else); smoke one now or wait until the next break; 1st or 2nd Timothy; talk back or listen: thousands of small decisions make up the days of our lives and behind every one is a judgment of one kind or another. It's not just a fact of life: it's the way things were designed. In the Garden of Eden, mankind still had choices. Even before the fall, God gave us choices as ways to increase glory: His glory by sharing love as we made the best choices possible in that love. Since the fall, He redeems our choices by giving us the knowledge of right and wrong, and the opportunity to turn to Him in the right. To do that requires judgment.

Nuff said.

So we aren't supposed to judge at all? Isn't that what the verse is saying? Au contraire, and the verse even says so. Break it down and it clearly states that we should judge. "In judging" obviously implies that we do, will and should. Again, it goes back to God giving us choices. What He cautions us against doing is playing favorites. If you have siblings, chances are you (and they) have been players in the game of favorites at one time or another. If you are employed, chances are you've felt the letdown of not getting ahead for the merits of your actions. If you have wanted something so bad, chances are you've felt the dejection of having your desire denied because something or someone unexpected took it away. Somehow, somewhere, somebody played favorites and wasn't impartial. Ever been the teacher's pet? You've been the favorite, and while it looks great from your vantage point, put yourself in someone else's shoes.

How are we supposed to judge without being partial to one thing or another? You know the answer. We are supposed to take our choices to God and ask for His involvement. He is not impartial. He wants us to live our lives in His grace and all divine, all wise love. He truly wants to infuse our lives with that love, wants us to use that love as our primary tool, motivation, and profit in life. God doesn't act impartially in our lives: He clearly sides on the side of right and love. He stands by His own.

When we don't take our choices to Him is where we run into trouble. When we don't involve the LORD in all those minutiae choices, we run into inevitable moments of "what should I do?" When we have worldly choices to make and we are partial to one side over the other, we invite unfairness into our lives. We include unfairness in how we deal with others, especially non-believers who need God's all encompassing love in ways believers don't. When we don't act in good faith, try to incorporate something selfish in our choices and judgments, trouble awaits. It's not to say that we shouldn't think of ourselves or self-preservation when we are threatened; God doesn't demand we become fools. But it does say that in all decisions, our motivation should be selflessness instead of the man or woman in the mirror.

Sometimes that's tough. Ok, that's an understatement. It's tough ALL the time. It's tough to keep our feelings out of things, tough to let faith rule over those feelings. It's tough to wait a little longer for something you have waited years for. It's tough to hold on to hope when logic says hope should be abandoned. And above all, it's tough to keep your feelings out of dealings with other people. I think God gives us our feelings to be senses, warning and danger signals that tell us when something dear to us is involved. Perhaps that's the lesson, though, in how to keep partiality out of our judgments with others: to let faith and not feelings rule the day. We will still judge, but by letting faith rule the judgment, we can be honest, fair and true at all times, even in the middle of very tough ones.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 1 August 2011

Whoever says to the guilty, "you are innocent" peoples will curse him and nations denounce him. But it will go well with those who convict the guilty, and rich blessing will come upon them." Proverbs 24, verse 24 and 25.

What do you think about these verses in light of the Casey Anthony verdict? And remember OJ? How about that? Or the Clinton Impeachment? Just about sex or also about perjury? In all three of those instances, that the accused probably committed those crimes wasn't really up for debate: it was whether or not the law proved them guilty. No comment from me on the fineries of American jurisprudence, but isn't it a memorable thing to know that so many people believed all three of those people guilty and yet they were legally, perhaps rightfully, acquitted of their crimes. Were these verdicts fair (understanding that, in our human experience, 'fair' can be little more than a four-letter F-word)?

Justified. I'm justified. Are you? This isn't some stupid game of "I've got a secret." This is the real deal, the real life. I've got one and so do you and just what are we doing with them? I hope yours is going well. Mine is going as well as I make it, or more precisely, as well as I let it happen. All too often, I get mired down in self-pity, in feeling sorry for myself that things haven't gone my way. More times than not, I disappoint the people I love most. I try and I fail, and even in the middle of my trying, I let drama slip in and mess things up. I start out each week, resolving to do better, and by mid-day, I find myself stuck in the mud of living, getting dirty with all the things happening around me, because of me.

Through it all, I'm still justified. Through no doing of my own and deserving none of it, the Almighty One still justifies me and makes all my junk moot. He feels my disappointments and frustrations, and He imparts to me wisdom that I might learn the lessons he teaches. In the middle of the quagmire that I make of my life, He steps in, pulls me out, and cleans me off. He justifies and sanctifies me, declaring a clearly guilty man innocent. For this, He is ridiculed and scorned; by a world that is cozy with evil, He is denounced. He takes it without uttering a word of complaint. Then you know what happens? When I'm standing there, clean from my soul inside out, He says "suit up and get back in there. I'll be with you. We have more work to do with a smile on our faces."

That's crazy; it's a radically crazy idea that the awesome, fear-inspiring and universally just GAWD ALMIGHTY should come to us in a gentle voice to bind up our wounds and encourage us to live better. He does so knowing that you and I live in a world full of guilty people. His truth convicts them and us, declaring our guilt to make us aware of it: all for the purpose that we might turn over our guilt to Him and let him sanctify us clean. He wants it for you, me, Bill Clinton, OJ (and 'the killers'), and even the elusive Ms. Anthony, wherever she is.

He wants us to know that we should judge the actions of the world and turn our hearts away from embracing them. Two wrongs really don't make a right. He wants us to judge our actions and our hearts against His standard, His word, applying that to how we live our lives in the muck and the mire. There is no other standard, there is no other Word: His really is as good as it gets! He wants us to stand on His side, and then live out our lives back in the mud pit where the rest of the world lives. We'll get filthy on the outside again, and our white linen clothes of redemption will get caked with dirt again. Inside, we'll still be lily white. And when we're ready for a break, He will be standing beside us, then helping us out of the pit again to wash off, fuel and sharpen up, and then get back to work again.

There are many things I could write about today, many topics that are very much on my heart and crying out for equal time. Governmental irresponsibility, deep personal disappointments, fighting for love, trying over and over in the face of desperation, unfinished dreams: these are just some of the themes running around in my head on an airborne Monday morning. If you know my opinions, you'll easily figure out where they lie on the subjects of Ms Anthony and Messer's Simpson and Clinton. Said opinions are meaningless. They're guilty as hell. I'm guilty as hell. So are you. We stand before the giver of divine Providence full of shame and full of blame. And because we believe in Him and stand by Him, He renders our guilt moot, declaring us 'not guilty' no matter what the world and all its hurt demand. His pure love convicts us and holds us close, then imparts rich blessings into our lives in ways we little deserve and can imagine even less. He justifies us. He makes us innocent and righteous when we don't deserve it, and when we're too dirty to do it ourselves, when we can't. Chew on that idea as you wade out into the mire of a new work week. It's a thought worth living for, an idea to get us past the disappointments of today and into something much better just up ahead.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 2 August 2011

An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips. Proverbs 24, verse 26.

If you aren't a fan of mushy talk, you might want to skip today.

In church this week, my friend, Mark, was preaching and he said something I've been saying for quite awhile now: the Bible is a love letter. Scripture is a centuries-old, centuries-long love letter from God to His people. Even the gory stuff, the smiting and conquering parts, are about the lengths God will go to just to ensure His people know they are loved. Sometimes the love letter is lyrical, as in these Proverbs or Psalms; sometimes it is historic and heroic, as in the life of Christ. In some ways it is confrontational, as in all the prophetic books and even the writings of Paul. Sometimes it is romantic, as in the Song of Solomon, or the book of Ruth.

Through several thousand years of history, parables, proverbs and lessons, God tells us that He loves us, and he woos us with his mysterious and magical Word. He reveals Himself through Scripture, through this love, this many-chaptered love letter, showing patience, teaching, kindness, passion, and forbearance. He reveals that He is love, and love is truth. Truth and love are interchangeable in Him, along with life and freedom. Freedom is life is love is truth. All are our God.

And in it, His truth is like a kiss on the lips. It is like one of those passionate movie kisses, the kind where the man holds her head in his hands and presses his mouth close and long to hers. Truth is like a passionate embrace, a sharing, loving moment between perfectly matched partners who seek to take their relationship to a new level. It took me until I was in my forties to understand how kissing really is so underrated. Whether it's a peck on the cheek, a smooch on the lips, or one of those Hollywood moments that I just mentioned, kissing is the connecting gesture of intimacy. It is so much more than just an expression (or lead-in) to sex. You can kiss someone publicly, passionately and it will make both teenage girls and elderly women swoon. You can kiss away the tears of even the hardest day and share the most honest moments without ever saying a word. I can see why teenagers like kissing so much. The older I get, the more I want that kind of intimacy for my own.

Yes, His truth is like that. It is intimate, personal, sharing, embracing, loving, flirtatious, exciting and enriching in a thousand and twelve wonderful moments. Lately, friends have been telling me how, the more they dive into Scripture, the hungrier they become for it. I agree with that, except it's not like a physical or even spiritual hunger that I feel. For me, embracing Scripture is like anticipating that kiss from my beloved, from looking in her eyes, connecting to her soul, and simply feeling her love in such a simple and personal expression. That's what God's word feels like to me. The total honesty of it, and the clear truth of it is like falling in love all over again. Even when it convicts and hones my emotions, the pure love always comes through because, in Him, freedom is life is love is truth. All of them are in one, as sweet as love's first kiss.

The best part about all this is that it's what He wants for us. The verse is yet another reminder of this. He wants us to deal, interact, and love each other in full and total honesty, without hesitation or agenda. He doesn't want us to hold back on the truth because truth is love is freedom is life. It's how He designed them and it's the way He wants us to live out our lives. He wants for us to share this truth in every bit of our lives, especially in how we communicate. An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips, full of promise and commitment, love and selfless devotion.

"Kiss me beneath the milky twilight...Strike up the band and make the fireflies dance. Silver moon's sparkling. So kiss me" That's one of my favorite verses in one of my favorite songs, and it reminds me of the hope, the potential, and the raw honesty of a kiss given in true love. That's how it feels for me when I open God's word into my heart and let it really go to work on me. Sometimes it really kicks me in the teeth and sometimes it is like a drink of good scotch. In others, it is peaceful like a sleeping baby, or hopeful like a fresh spring breeze. ALWAYS, though, it is honest, like the kiss of a beautiful love, sharing something special with me. Whether it's beneath the milky twilight or in a Sunday morning sermon, in days of despair and helplessness, I constantly take heart in remembering where resides this truest love of all. I will always anticipate the honesty and tenderness of a true love's first kiss.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 3 August 2011

Finish your outdoor work and get your fields ready; after that, build your house. Proverbs 24, verse 27.

Make hay while the sun is shining. There's a platitude that could go hand in hand with this verse, don't you think? After all, they're saying much the same thing. Work while you can...work hard in the sun while the sun is shining. Do the smaller tasks first – or the first things first – and then move on to the bigger ones; do your prep work first, then move on to the tougher stuff.

In other words, don't waste time. We devote so much of life to planning, and because our God is a god of order, that's not all a bad thing. I finally finished the PMP certification; passed the test 2 weeks ago. The entire project management process is all about planning, all about putting things in order and getting them done in the most effective and efficient manner possible (knowing that processes are efficient while people are effective). One central, implied tenet of project management is 'don't waste time.' As much as possible, put things into a logical, sequential order in order to maximize resources and minimize mistakes.

In other words, do what God would do. Do you think it's any coincidence that the things of the world were made in the order in which they were made? I don't. It takes time and forethought to do things right, especially when you're doing things that become more and more complex. In the tale of creation, he was giving us a model for the basics of project management. Plan things out. Be methodical. Do first things first. It's how He created the universe and it's how He intends for us to do our work here. The verse is another model of that concept. Do your laborious outside work first because it takes time to grow and bear fruit.

It takes time because the things worth having, the things worth doing, take time to do them right. If you make a rash decision, things generally don't work out well. If you rush into buying a house before getting all your ducks in a row, you might just end up with a pile of junk on your hands. If you invest unwisely, you stand to lose big. And if you don't act out of love in a relationship, then you risk losing the heart of someone very special for the rest of your life. Life takes work. Love takes work. It took work to make the universe, but it was a labor of love, for love's sake. What's worth having in life is worth doing right.

In other words, finish the outdoor work first, then go build your house.

According to Project Management Institute, the phases of a project are initiation, planning, executing, monitoring (and controlling), and closing. If you skip one phase, you put the others in jeopardy. Sometimes they overlap, and sometimes the end of one occurs well after the start of another has passed. Every project from building a Mars lander to building a new house can follow the basic precepts of project management; these same steps occur no matter what, even when we don't formally recognize them. It's logical, it makes sense, and it's a fancy, detailed way of saying "make hay while the sun is shining." It's hard to resist the urge to rush ahead, but in the long run it's worthwhile to do things right.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 4 August 2011

Do not testify against your neighbor without cause, or use your lips to deceive. Proverbs 24, verse 28.

There are many ways for us to deceive each other. We can deliberately tell lies; we can tell just enough truth so as to let someone draw their own conclusions. We can omit facts without twisting them, and we can lay out facts in truthful ways that are still meant to steer someone to a particular conclusion, thus leaving us feeling blameless. And then there is Congress. Yes, there are many ways for us to deceive each other.

We deceive ourselves, too. We can want something so bad for so long that it becomes our reality even when it hasn't or hasn't yet come to pass. We can talk ourselves into seeing things that aren't really there. And we can convince ourselves of something, based on half-truths or out & out lies, then believe something to be true that is actually false.

Wanna know (what I think is) the spiritual answer? Answer: you're missing the point.

The point that the verse is trying to make is about the heart. Adultery starts in the heart. Stealing starts in the heart. Murder starts in the heart. You get the picture. It is in the heart where we have the choice, make the choice, about whether or not to play God and put ourselves beyond the straight and narrow. Which is worse: the lie or the intention behind it? It makes me wonder because we can't deceive God and we can't lie to God. We may think we can, and we may act like we can, but we just can't lie to an omnipotent and omniscient God. He sees every lie we tell ourselves, every lie against each other, and every intention we have to deceive others. He looks in our hearts and asks us to ask ourselves why we are lying to Him. After all, is it worse to actually lie about something, or is it worse to think of the lie before telling it? Which would you prefer: to have the love of your life lie to your face or have them lead you on and make you believe something is true when it really isn't?

If we get wrapped around the axle on the semantics of the verse, we'll miss the underlying point. It starts in the heart. Words don't come out without thought behind them; the mind won't think without the heart stating what it believes. "And my heart won't tell my mind to tell my mouth what it should say." So singeth Zac Brown. I agree with that. It's actually a pretty Scriptural concept.

Notice the verse doesn't say 'do not testify against your neighbor.' Even in cases of genuine misunderstandings or wrongs, we are and should be free to give our side of the story. Especially if we are wronged, or if people misunderstand, we should be free to address them in wise love. Nothing should be done out of selfishness, even though too often we do things that way. When something needs to be said, we should say it. But in all things truth and moderation, please. That's what the verse is asking of us. It's saying "speak in love" because love is truth. Like it says in 1st Corinthians 13, "love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

Love is always the truth. Love never lies, no matter what form or intention that lie may take.

There are many ways that we deceive each other. In my own life, I have lied openly, lied slyly, lied quietly and lied with big, public whoppers. Lies cost me relationships, friendships I held so dear, and very nearly the love of my life. They cost me family, jobs, dignity, self-respect, and the respect of others. So deep did the lies become that I couldn't face myself in the mirror sometimes out of shame and loathing for the mess I had made of my life, sometimes out of pathetic self-pity. Through it all, God made a happy ending. Through all the worst of the worst that my twisted heart could conjure, God set it right by forgiving my too obvious guilt and giving me one more last chance to try again. There are still many ways in which we deceive each other, and many ways in which my wavering heart is tempted to walk down the wrong path. In facing those times, He stands beside me, encouraging me by saying, "you can do better." Open your eyes and I think you'll see Him there with you, too.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 5 August 2011

Do not say, "I'll do to him as he has done to me; I'll pay that man back for what he did." Proverbs 24, verse 29.

In a matter of not too many days, I'll be forty five. To some reading this, that isn't very old; to others, I'm ancient. Much has been packed into my trips around the sun. Marriage, family, trouble; death, rebirth, first birth; jobs, losing jobs, real vocation; faith, hurt, and love, real love; losing, winning and forgiveness: these and so many more things are the mileposts by which I'm blessed to measure my life so far.

There's one thing I've learned above all else worldly: revenge sucks. Let's just say it like it is: revenge really sucks. Revenge has been done to me by the unlikeliest of people and the dearest hearts. I've caused good people to stumble and fall into sins they might not ever have contemplated on their own. In return, in their good time, they extracted revenge. Sometimes I deserved it, sometimes I didn't. I've paid for the wrongs done by others with years of bitter harvest; in return, I sowed the seeds of more bitterness. I've been emotionally beaten and physically and metaphorically bruised to where grudges were buried so deep you don't even realize how toxic they really are. Through all, I learned that it is a cold and lonely thing to want revenge on another child of God.

It's cold and lonely because it serves to gratify our most base desire, namely to be God ourselves. We all know the platitude about 'revenge is mine, sayeth the Lord.' To be honest, I have no idea if that's in Scripture or not, nor do I really care. Its lesson is still true: we want the power of exacting revenge on others so we can feel like God. After all, if you've been beaten by your husband, he deserves a taste of his own, right? If you have submitted time and again and felt cheated and let down, your mate deserves to feel what it feels like to walk around in your shoes, right? When bullies have taken pieces of your hide, it's only fair that they get what's coming to them, right? Someone has to pay, right???

You know the answer.

You know it because what the verse says is more than just a caution. It's the foundation, the building block of real peace. We can't be at peace if we let the demons of the past still nag us in the present. There can be no forward motion if emotion anchors me to unresolved issues that shaped me into who I am today. Love is a lie if it is based on making up for shortcomings of yesterday instead of selflessly sharing the miraculous blessing that God gives us in the loving. Without truly knowing that we were made for love instead of revenge, then peace, tomorrow and love are simply unrequited dreams, unanswered prayers. They are elusive goals instead of tangible gifts. In time, with enough defeat and sadness thrown into the mix, they seem to mock us, teasing us to catch them if we can, grasp hold of what we've always just barely missed.

In my middle age, that's an option I choose to pass up.

I choose to pass it up because I'm finally embracing that I was made for something better. I was made to serve, to love, and to use what talent I have to do my best wherever God places me. He didn't put me here to focus of all the unhappiness that I've tugged along like heavy baggage. He didn't impart His love into my life to let it be dragged down by the defeat of my sins. He didn't give me talent to squander it on something petty. And He didn't make me to take revenge on people hurting in ways other than how I hurt.

More than any of this, though, I'll pass up revenge because the dues for all my junk have already been paid in full in ways I could never begin to comprehend.

Instead of revenge, He made you and I to do something better. You know this, too, and I hope you haven't misplaced it. He made us to love each other, to pass up on dwelling on the hurt and move beyond it. Instead of revenge, He made us for forgiveness. Instead of unhappiness, He made us for joy. Instead of worry, which dishonors Him and us alike, He made us to trust and let go of the hurt that holds us back. On a day like today, He reminds me of these things by saying, "It's time to let go and let me work my thrilling love in your life, Dave. That Golden Rule I taught really is worth more than gold." And these days, gold is worth more than it's ever been worth in all of human history.

Pretty amazing thing, don't you think. And it's not a bad thought with which to end a long and struggle-prone work-week. There have been successes this week; I'm thankful for them. There have been failures both in and out of the office, and I'm thankful for them too. For the success I'll gladly deny all credit, embracing that I've only been privileged to use the gifts given to me by others. For the failures, I'll now gladly eschew revenge and forswear some twisted repayment against

perceived slights and mirage-like wrongs. I was made for better. So, my friend, were you. You don't need a middle-age crazy Texan to tell you that. You need only follow a better voice that's calling you to become better by listening to Him. Take it from me: revenge sucks. It's beneath us, and it's really not worth the time. I'm ashamed that it took me forty-five years to learn this, but thankful the next forty-five can be lived in light of this truth.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 8 August 2011

I went past the field of the sluggard, past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment; thorns had come up everywhere, the ground was covered with weeds, and the stone wall was in ruins. I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw: A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest – and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man. Proverbs 24, verses 30 – 34.

I'm poorer than poor. That's a statement and a lyric from a hymn written by my friend, Anthony. He sang it in church yesterday and the line really resonated with me. Yes this is a shameless plug for his music; check out "Anthony Celia" on iTunes. I don't think you'll find the song he sang in church, but you'll find others equally good.

That song, one called "Passover Me," got me thinking about being the sluggard. That's a word we don't use much anymore: sluggard. The closest I get to using it is "slug" (as in those slimy things that crawl around, or the action performed when you see a VW Beetle). These days, if someone thinks you are lazy, they will probably just call you lazy, shiftless, or good for nothing; you know, all those words parents use to describe teenagers who do little over summer vacation.

A sluggard is more than that. There's a special brand of apathy and laziness involved in being a sluggard when such a word is recorded in Scripture. I think it's being a witches brew of laziness, sloth, ineptitude and that "I don't care" attitude. That's the biggest part, I think: I don't care. It delves into the land of selfishness and sin. Notice that the first verse links the sluggard to lack of judgment. By my read, it's not that the slug is necessarily ignorant or unwittingly in the dark. No, the way his fields are neglected shows a practiced lack of good judgment, a self-focused posture of that "I don't care" that moves from the understandable alibi of not knowing something is errant to the conscious realm of willful abandon.

Prepare the fields of life. We are meant for work and life; our lives take hard work. Lately, I've been trying to focus on 'getting' to do things instead of having to. I get to go to work; I get to go to pay bills; I get to do work around the house; you get the picture, eh? It's a way of reminding myself that while I have obligations, I also have blessings in how I get to meet them. God provides, and in the middle of my job, my debts and my chores, He's putting those things in my life as the consequences of my choices and as instructive lessons in how I should rely on His providence. He provides resources and he provides people to help and love. In doing that, I get to prepare, to till the fields and maintain them, and to tend to growing a good crop. I don't have to: I get to. How about you?

But there's a bigger theme in all this. Where have I been a sluggard in my relationships? Have you or I neglected my relationships, with my family, marriage, friendships, boyfriend/girlfriend, co-workers and best friends? Have my words or actions demonstrated an 'I don't care' attitude to the people who matter most in my life? My answer: yes. Guilty as confessed and charged. For a myriad of reasons, some of which don't even make sense to me now, I've done this. It's a delusion to think that people don't get hurt when this happens. It does. I've neglected the good people blessed into my life and let the blood of love run cold. Have you done this too?

And have I neglected my relationship with God? Have I taken for granted the blessings and plenty He provides just for me to take my breath every minute? Yes I have there too. Have I trampled on the relationship of grace that He imparts into every heartbeat? I have. Have I dishonored the fields of love that He planted in my life with the seeds of His word and the nourishing rain of His blood and cross? I have there too. If He walked by the fields of my heart – and He does every minute of every day – perhaps He would see an overgrown briar patch of thorns with broken down fences and ugly weeds.

Or...

...or perhaps He would be singing my friend's song, remembering that I'm poorer than the poor, but that he passed over me and took me in His arms to forgive me because He chooses to. I'm thinking that He knows of all my shallow junk, and the way I've hurt the people I love – and how they hurt me too – and that He chose instead to offer up His eternal grace yet again. He passes over the ugliness of my fallow fields and plants a new harvest in my life, one of bountiful love and his Christ-given peace. He sees Christ in me, not the harvest I've squandered.

For awhile I wanted to be a farmer. I went through phases in my life where I wanted to own a farm, to till my own fields and do honest hard work for a living, the way people have for centuries. Life hasn't turned out that way yet, and maybe it never will. And I envy my friend's musical gifts. Words are wonderful things, but to couple them with music you write

yourself is to harness the life-song of God himself. Words can touch and teach us: music moves and enriches us. Perhaps the farmer, the musician, the writer and the consultant aren't so different, though. Perhaps we are each farming the fields God has given us, trying our best to make our way in a world that is set against us. We make good choices and we make bad ones, but perhaps we're still doing the best we can. In light of these verses and my friend's songs, we get to see, yet again, how God the farmer, musician, writer and worker stands beside us through all of it, cautioning us to yet do better and blessing us that it might really happen.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 9 August 2011

It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings to search things out. Proverbs 25, verse 1.

Deceptively hiding what you believe or feel never works in the long run. Do you fully realize that? It's a tough truth acknowledge, and an even tougher one to practice day by day. We've talked before how we each keep secrets. I think each of us likes the idea of having a relationship where there is full disclosure but in my own life I've rarely found this to be true, and I haven't practiced it myself. Most people don't live like desperate housewives on Wisteria Lane, always moving from deception to deception. Some people do, though, and all of us hide things or shield things from others, even the people we love most. Call it self-preservation, parsing the truth, or saying only what you need to say, I think we all keep secrets of some kind. I sometimes wonder if this isn't one of the things that grieved God most when He banished Adam and Eve from the Garden. He knew that secrets and disorder were in their future and that they were completely unequipped to handle them without Him.

We can hide no secrets from God. He has the ultimate security clearance. He keeps all secrets and allows only what He believes is best for His kingdom. What's more, as the creator of all things, isn't it His privilege to conceal what He wants? Have you ever considered that, if we had full disclosure on all matters, because we aren't God, maybe our simple minds couldn't handle it all? Even in the afterlife, when there will be ultimate truth revealed, you and I will still not be God and will still not know all He knows. I expect we will know satisfaction with what we do know, however, and that'll be more than enough.

God conceals what He does and it's His place to do so. Why then does the second part of the verse say what it does? Is it a criticism of earthly power, a statement of fact about that power, or is it a faint endorsement of it? Maybe it's all three; at least that's how I read it. The glory of kings to seek knowledge of matters in their dominion— and control and power over them — is a warning. It is a warning against personal vanity and that power which comes with position. I think it is also a statement of fact, saying that the commander in chief is who he is and is vested with power that is his alone, including the power of discovery. It is a reality and a truth to be considered. Finally, it's an endorsement, and maybe a good thing as well because there is an unwritten implication that a righteous ruler exercising his God-given authority will search for the truth, will work to root out what is concealed by men so that he might rule effectively and righteously.

Mind you, none of this is to say we shouldn't keep things in confidence. Living in honesty means never being afraid to disclose what you think say or do, but it means something else too. There's no way to build trust between friends if we don't keep mum on things better left unsaid to others, abiding by requests made in good faith. We share things with God in our thoughts and prayers, and he doesn't blab them out on the internet. He keeps our confidence, then uses our information in loving trust to better our lives by growing that love. I believe he gives us His model as the model for our lives. He keeps some personal truths quiet, even hidden from others and so should we.

If there is illegality involved, then search your conscience for how to address it; I believe you already know the answer. But for other things, there is no dishonor or misdeed in righteous and loving concealment. Personally, when someone drops hard news on me, I have immediate thoughts and reactions, but to truly discern the right path, I need time and prayer. I need to let the Spirit reveal truth to me as I unpack and process it. The affections I have for my friends deserve this so that nothing is done out of malice or haste. If you love someone, then "love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps not record of wrongs." Thank you Apostle Paul, especially those last three parts. Love knows when to listen and to keep to itself. In that vein, I know many secrets, and while I disclose here things to amplify these Scriptures, I don't do so to tear others down or to gain petty advantage, and it doesn't happen out of hurt. I hope you do the same.

And I hope you do it knowing that there is honor in pursuing the truth and doing the right thing. We do indeed want to model the way God acts, namely lovingly, like 1st Corinthians says. It's a good time to remember something written here a few days ago: freedom is love is truth is life. All those things are found in a wise God because all those things are and are of that wise God. In Him, there is no fear of truth and there is no recoiling at love because He imparts both in every facet of our lives while freeing us from the slavery of our misdeeds...and our deceptions. He is both counselor and confidante of the ages, as well as the final arbiter on the truth of our lives. He and not some other person or king will be the one who judges our lives when we are finally called to account. That's no secret.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 10 August 2011

As the heavens are high and the earth is deep, so the hearts of kings are unsearchable. Proverbs 25, verse 3.

My resume shows that I have been a high-level manager in only a few things. I've managed projects, managed corporate divisions, managed teams, and managed tasks. I'm nobody's king, and because I wear my opinions and feelings on my sleeve, I probably never will be. Personally, I'm okay with that because even though I'm trained and now certified as a professional, if my career doesn't move in that direction again, I'll still draw plenty of oxygen to be satisfied.

But that's only me. Someone has to be in charge. How well do you really know your boss? Or even your pastor? How well do you really understand what makes your father tick? And does anyone understand the president? In order to lead large endeavors and in order to govern, one has to play their cards close. It would be hard for a Dave Terry to be CEO or President Terry without first learning to keep a few things mum. It's not the same vein as what we talked about yesterday, that is, keeping some things in confidence.

Instead, this verse is talking about things spiritual in things physical. Physically, the king is the man at the top. The ruler is alone, empowered and responsible. The buck really does stop someplace and that's with the person at the top. To do that job, that person has to be shrewd, wise, confident, assertive, decisive, just and faithfully brave. It's a lonely job because there's nobody else who is your confidante or your peer. You're the captain of the ship, and if it sinks it really is your job to be the last one off or swimming. Such people, by necessity, must be aloof, unique, even alone.

Here's a shocker: so it is with the follower of God. One commentary I read on this verse (from http://www.biblecentre.org/commentaries/lmg_24_prov_ch_25.htm) said, "The spiritual man is a strange enigma to the world. His wisdom and understanding is evident, but his attitude is a cause of wonder and bewilderment to those who have not the Spirit: "the heart of kings is unsearchable." " When you start to live your life under the tutoring and mastery of the Lord, you let yourself start to become a different person.

It's not a matter of becoming someone you aren't: it's a matter of casting off who you were never meant to be. We get to take stock of our lives and become aliens to a familiar world. When anger beckons, we learn to give patience. As crises happen, we trust in His wisdom. During tough times we begin to turn to prayer. Instead of reacting, we begin to listen. When wrongs happen, we forgive. These kinds of things are foreign to people who embrace a way that espouses retribution, revenge, reaction and regret. Good people following bad ways don't see how it is a good and empowering thing to choose a different way.

In learning to be a person of God, our hearts become unsearchable to the people we used to be, and even to some of those we know. It doesn't make sense to turn the other cheek, and it doesn't make sense to let some invisible, maybe imaginary force determine how we should live. Such a thing is illogical, astounding, even stupid. And be ye advised: it won't be easy. It is always so tempting to slip back into old ways. It's hard to live down the choice to follow God when it isn't cool and when it's tough. But here's where I get to give you some good news: check out Ephesians 5, verses 22 through 24. It describes the fruit of the Spirit, namely new things to embrace when you let God make your heart unsearchable to the world.

Just remember: it won't help you get ahead, at least not in the ways of the world. If you think being a believer is the way to professional advancement, I have news for you: even in Vatican City that's not the way to become CEO. If being the head Fred is your goal, look to God for encouragement and sound advice on how to pursue your career, but Scripture isn't the One Minute Manager, it isn't Agile, and there's no Sigma measure for it. It's much better than that. The closer you get to the top, the more you'll find that you're walking out onto the stage alone. At least that's how it will feel. For the woman or man of God, you are never alone. Even when others don't understand your heart, true love always will because true love starts, finishes, and lives in Him. That's better than any resume.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 11 August 2011

Remove the dross from the silver, and out comes material for the silversmith; remove the wicked from the king's presence and his throne will be established through righteousness. Proverbs 25, verses 4 and 5.

I've never worked in a refinery or a metals plant. I toured one once, and my father in law used to work in a plant where they made aluminum engine castings. From what I understand, in that process, they would take melted aluminum and machines would mold it into car parts. As the metal melted, any impurities in it would be skimmed or filtered off and thrown away. That way, the desired engine parts could be made of only pure metal so they would be durable and of the highest quality.

Is this principle any different from other things in our lives?

This morning, I was on the Facebook page of a friend of mine. This man an atheist who uses his page as much to advance and defend his disbelief in God as much as I use mine to advance my belief. He's a good man and a good friend, even as I reject his belief in atheism. A fire and brimstone preacher (or even a soft spoken one well-versed in his Bible) might say that such people are the dross who will be skimmed on Judgment Day. That's true... but it isn't yet that day; I'm not in charge of that one so I won't worry about it. Until that time, because my friend embraces reason as a basis for his life, I hold that there is hope for him to see the foundation of reason and truth that is faith in the Almighty. His heart can be a work in progress, ripe ground for the Spirit to walk in and get to work if only my friend will open the gate. Were I a king, would I remove such a 'wicked,' unbelieving man from my throne room? To be honest, probably not.

Probably not because he's as much a child of God as you or I. Children don't have to acknowledge their parents to still be their children. I know many people who are estranged from their parents, even a co-worker who is currently in a big fight with his mother. He is still her son and she is still his mother, even when they can't see or won't speak with each other. Why is it so different with people and God? I don't think it is. It's a good thing I'm not a king.

And it may seem like all this is digressing, but perhaps it isn't. The concepts of purifying metal, my atheist friend, and parental estrangement are more related in Scripture, and in verses like today's, than they are anywhere else. I think you can't believe that Scripture is a love letter from God without understanding that He wrote that letter (and translates it into our hearts today) to people who were the dross that should be filtered from his holiness. If I died without Salvation, I couldn't stand in front of God, face to face, which is foretold for the believer and unbeliever alike. Wearing the purity of His Salvation, God will see past my wickedness and see it has been made clean in His own way. Without wearing it, I would be removed from the King's presence and cast out with all the other unholy impurities.

Just as an induction furnace melts metal to remove undesirable, just as a skeptic uses reason to try to understand the world in which he places himself, and just as people struggle in relationships, so we are purified, reasoned, and struggling every day in this world. We weren't made for this: we were made for better. We were made for eternity, which matters whether you're stuck in the undesirable dross of your own junk or hip-deep in the rejection of things that you haven't let really work on your hurting heart. We matter; you matter. You, me and all of us matter because we were made to share His love here, which is ultimate reason (remember: freedom is love is truth is life and all are Him and from Him) so that we might all share it together forever. We're better than this.

It hurts to be refined. I know metal doesn't have feelings, but if it did, I'm sure it would hurt to have things bonded to you melted away. It hurts to confront your feelings and emotions, and to think that things that most of the world believes are the reason for that hurt. And it hurts to love other people sometimes...or does it? Maybe the source of all these hurts isn't the love – or God – itself. Maybe the source is what is opposite to God, which we let influence our lives and actions. That's a proposition as old as humanity itself, going all the way back to the first pair of naked humans, going even farther back into eternity, before humanity, to a timeless battle from heaven in which rebellion first presented itself. We struggle with it today; I do in the pride of these words, and I'm sure you do in your own way too. When we allow Him to go to work on us, we are being purified, made ready for Him as the silversmith to make us into something beautiful, useful and valuable. The hope for the day is to have the dross of what makes us struggle refined out of us by the purifying wisdom of Salvation, letting Him take away what matters least and replacing it with eternity, which truly matters most.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 17 August 2011

What you have seen with your eyes do not bring hastily to court, for what will you do in the end if your neighbor puts you to shame? Proverbs 25, verse 8.

My youngest daughter has moved out. We moved her to Colorado this past weekend, where she will work and go to school now. I got home Monday after a whirlwind drive up and back, and this morning is only the second back in Texas without her in it. Of course there were many tears in parting on Saturday night, some happy tears and some sad. She made this choice, and I respect her for it; she has wanted to move back to Colorado since we left there for Texas six years ago. It's true that I wish she hadn't, that I wish she had wanted to stay closer to North Texas, where we could spend more time together now that she's an adult on her own. But if she had chosen to live life based on what I want instead of what she wants, well, that wouldn't have been right. It would have been a half-life and a compulsion instead of independence.

She's one of the more fiercely independent people I know, and I'm thankful for that because it's a trait that will serve her well now that she's on her own. She's smart, resourceful, resilient, and very attractive; she can succeed anywhere she goes. At this point in her new life 'back home' I hope she remembers this verse. I hope she remembers it because this is a trying time for her, what with struggling to make ends meet, remaking old relationships and forging new ones, and learning her way around an old but newly strange place before the snow flies.

I hope she remembers the verse so that she is prudent with her words and doesn't jump to conclusions. People will do you wrong, and people will wrong her there, especially if she is alone and vulnerable. When we are genuinely wronged, or when someone genuinely hurts us, we should seek redress, even if it is in the courts. When we aren't wronged, when there is only perception and innuendo, it becomes more difficult. The verse cautions us to not do so in haste. When things happen, it is wise to let the effect and meaning of them sink in instead of rushing to judgment or rushing for judgment. All too often, we don't see the big picture and that causes more trouble when we make hasty judgments.

Take a couple of my friends from online. I got de-friended again, but also blocked this time and I still don't know why. Several of my acquaintances were having an online discussion on someone's page and brought my name into the mix. I didn't even know about it until I went to the friend's page. When I saw my name I posted "please leave me out of it." I didn't think it was inappropriate; maybe I should have just let it slide instead. Anyway, it started a series of other discussions (which I did stay out of) and a bunch of drama that ended in my being blocked. The callous part of me says "no big deal and no big loss" but they were my friends and I don't know why it happened. I can honestly say I didn't instigate or give them cause to do so, but it bothers me to not know. It would be very easy to speculate as to why it happened, and to pass judgment and move on in anger.

It would also be wrong, un-Christian, and inappropriate. The better approach, I see, is to sit back and watch, and to not rush to judgment. God doesn't rush to judgment; why should I? I'm sure my friends had good reason for what they did. I'll trust that God leads them as He does and that things generally work out for the best anyway.

I'll trust that for Youngest Daughter as well. I hope she heeds the words of the verse, just as I hope she carves out some private time for her and God in His Word at this time. When times get tough – and they will – I know she'll find strength and comfort in that. Absorbing His Word builds patience and wisdom. It helps us to be shrewd and discerning instead of reactionary and emotional. She's moved out and is moving on. Moving in His direction will never lead her wrong.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 18 August 2011

A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver. Proverbs 25, verse 11.

This is perhaps the most poetic and visual of all the Proverbs I've read. Several times I've read and re-read it, and each time it evokes a slightly different chain of thoughts.

An apple a day keeps the doctor away; that's thought number one. Apples are healthy, prodigious, natural and just plain good. Who wouldn't like apple pie, or apple juice, or the image of a big, beautiful apple fruit hanging from a tree? For several years, my family and I used to visit an orchard in southern Colorado where we would pick for hours in the sunshine and tall grass. Those are some of my cherished memories. To link them to the beauty of well-spoken words and the luxury of precious metals makes the memories that much richer. All those years ago, we weren't picking fruit to store in the freezer: we were harvesting gold to store in our hearts, then share with others.

What of that silver and gold? Say those words together and I think of Burl Ives, and of ingots and wealth. I think of a polished silver service, beautiful jewelry, the standard of monies, and what people have sought in frenzied rushes of greed throughout history. When I think of silver and gold I think of the object of our admiration, and how gold looks wrapped around a diamond, and I think of all the gilding on churches and places of grandeur all across the world. When I think of gold and silver and how precious they seem to be, I remember, too, that they will look like rust compared to the glory shining from the Almighty when at last I can see Him face to face.

People of few words. We all know them, the terse but seemingly wise people who watch their words and only use them when they're needed. It's a trait I admire because it's an ability I don't possess. Reticence has never been my strongest suit; few will ever describe my words as "concise" even though they're better that way. I admire the Gettysburg Address and he who authored it. Even more, I admire that He who created us all could pen all the words we'd ever need to read in one short volume of books from multiple authors. Concise communication is both a gift and a miracle.

Finally, there are the words spoken at the right time. How many of us can say that they remember times when someone, somewhere said something to us that resonated at just the right moment in time? I'm betting that each of us could say that, at one time or another, a friend, family member or even a stranger has said something that meant a lot, something that was exactly what (we believed) we needed to hear at the time. Such words get us through tough times and past crises. I've tried the whole 'blindly-find-a-verse-in-the-Bible' thing, thinking that if I closed my eyes, opened the Good Book and put my finger on a verse it would be exactly what God wanted me to know at that very moment. Perhaps it is; perhaps not. Either way, it's what I chose and the older I get the more I find that those words do work at just the right time. They make sense, even when I don't always understand the context.

Of course, it also reminds me of the joke my mom recounts from a class she took in college. A man decides to consult Scripture on what he should do with his life. Opening the book he puts his finger on the first verse he turns to and reads Matthew 27:5, "So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself." The man thinks, "Surely God doesn't want me to do that," so he decides to try again. He does so and turns to Luke 10:37 reading, "Go and do thou likewise."

But I digress 9. Perhaps a bit of humor can be a rich word aptly spoken too. At least I hope so if only to lighten the load of weary world travelers like you and I. That's the point of all Scripture, you know, not just the verses that evoke poetic images. The point is to infuse our lives with love that we might share it and share in His glory in every way on every day. The point of Scripture is for God to draw near to us that He might draw us near to Him. The whole thing really is a love letter from eternity, and there aren't many words better than that.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 19 August 2011

Like an earring of gold or an ornament of fine gold is a wise man's rebuke to a listening ear. Proverbs 25, verse 12.

In today's 'modern' America, you see tattoos and piercings everywhere, especially on young people. In the spirit of full disclosure, I have two tattoos but no piercings; piercings hold no allure for me. All three of my kids have piercings, two of them in the ears, and one in ears (several) and a nose piercing. One kid pierced their own lip but let it fill in when it literally became a pain to care for it. Lately, my son has been badgering me to get a tattoo, and I've been resolutely responding, "no." His sisters waited until they were 18 to get theirs so that it was their own adult decision and responsibility. I think it's only reasonable that he should wait as well. He keeps telling me "it's a Christian symbol" but I'm afraid his arguments are falling on deaf ears. In this, I'm hoping my rebuke is wise and his ears are listening.

What do you think of the proverb tying jewelry and adornments to loving correction? How can someone upbraiding, rebuking, or correcting my behavior be a thing of wealth and beauty? There are so many messages we could learn from these few simple words. Wisdom is more valuable than gold; wisdom is beautiful like gold. A wise man's opinion is valuable; a wise man's rebuke is more than just an opinion. Those who listen to wisdom receive great value; those who open their ears to rebuke are wealthy in spirit. Rebuke has great value.

They all seem like simple lessons, but to be honest, they lack the flair and showy language that is used in other verses. They lack, that is, unless you consider that the figurative language was specifically chosen to make a point, and it's a point that I hope resonates with younger people today. Words spoken in loving correction are valuable things that adorn our lives like fine jewelry. They complement our looks; they complete our image. Where we want to accentuate our features or maybe draw attention away from them, loving and wise rebukes teach us how to move past those desires, how to learn from them. When we take those words to heart, we get to wear wisdom like fine jewelry. It is polished, shining and beautiful, and is something that other people see. If we wear it well enough, it might draw others to us, or open avenues for communication and sharing.

Like objects of beauty, God uses the words of good people who care for us to demonstrate His love and to help impart it into our lives. It may not always feel like love, but someone who doesn't care for us won't give us a second thought when we're in crisis or trouble. Those who do will confront us. When that happens, it's good to remember that God's Spirit is moving between us, working His will in our lives by moving our hearts to love others. And when that happens, we can be sure that God's spirit is adorning our lives like beautiful jewelry, something to treasure and something to share and wear in the world.

My friend, Karen, said today, "words are seed. What crops will you plant today?" I like that phrase and will work to remember it because it's so very true. Our words are like seeds, like apple seeds if you will. Remembering yesterday that words aptly spoken are like apples of gold, with every one we speak in love we are like Johnny Appleseed, planting good seeds so that others might be nourished and fed long after we are gone. The seed-words we plant, too, are like fine gold and fine jewelry. They are a testament to what we believe and what we hold most dear. We get to wear and share them to others who want them too.

Knowing all that, I'm still not sure that I'm completely down with the idea of all the body piercings and tattoos that fascinate my kids and their generation. And I'm still against my 15 year old getting one without my consent. I hope he understands, and I hope he knows that, in God's good time, there will be a time for it. Some of what I see in youth seems too confrontational to me, too self-focused, yet I have to tread carefully in saying that. As I said, I have two tats myself and would like to get at least one more, maybe even two. They are statements about what I believe – both are inspirational – and they are artwork that I want to show to the world in my own way. Others may rebuke me for those things, but that's ok. Some do so in love, and when that happens it's like wearing a fine necklace or gold jewelry. Given today's generation, it could even be one of those puka shell necklaces. As long as it's done in expression of Godly beliefs, that's not such a bad thing after all.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 23 August 2011

Like cold water to a weary soul is good news from a distant land. Proverbs 25, verse 25.

“But” is a favorite word of Satan the enemy. ‘But’ can be a conjunction that links one thing to another, or it can be a contrast between opposing ideas. The enemy uses it both ways, and it’s no surprise that, since he’s a damned coward, he uses it most effectively where and when we are vulnerable. “Things could go well, but you know that isn’t likely.” Or “that’s true, but you know you’ve tried everything.” And then there is, “You may have been forgiven you in the past, but you know you’ve used up your nine lives, Mr. Cheshire Cat.”

The surprising thing about this versatile word is that God uses it too, moving His Spirit at moments of crisis to say “I know you’re hurting, but...”

This past weekend was a weekend of “but” for me. I had moved myself to a distant land. Specifically, I moved out of my house. This had been coming for a long time. We had been separated, reconciled, and falling apart again. For months my wife and I had been talking, trying to spend time together but also trying to have it both ways, ensuring we each had something for ourselves just in case things didn’t work out. For me that didn’t work and I looked for a way out. I rented an apartment and moved there. I knew what the message meant: divorce, dissolution, change. In the land into which I moved my heart, I accepted this.

All through this process there were ‘but’ moments, and the longer I waded into it, the more I felt like a man in that distant land. There was no good news for me. Yes, moving out meant divorce which, on a so-called ‘positive’ note meant taking charge of my own life, of getting some of ‘me’ back. It meant being able to break free from unhappiness and discontent. It meant forward motion in life after so many years of uncertainty. Or so I thought. Get ready...

...BUT not really.

I sat in the apartment after loads of furniture and belongings and I wept. It wasn’t the life I thought it would be, and it wasn’t going to shape up to be either. I didn’t want to be a live-away dad; I didn’t want to be a single father. I didn’t want to be a former-friend or a single anything; it wasn’t me and it wasn’t the me I wanted or envisioned. And it wasn’t worth it to me. I cried and I prayed and I unloaded things into the apartment, putting them away as I brought them in. That only made me hurt more. I knew inside that the hard moment wouldn’t last long, but the hard heart probably would. When I had finally made my move and played my card, I would win...and lose. I would get what I wanted, and that’s what made me weep even more. The few people to whom I did reach out hadn’t been able to follow through yet. Never had I felt so alone even as I knew deep inside that I was never alone, that somehow God was at work through all this even when I couldn’t figure out how. My spirit really needed a drink of cool water, ya know?

So I resolved to go and talk, once again, with my estranged wife. That’s where a bit more resolve set in for me. Proverbs 25, verse 24 says “better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife.” How ironic is it that this verse immediately preceded today’s? My wife hadn’t been too quarrelsome, but neither had she been supportive to me in ways that I needed. I had already felt like I was living on the corner of a roof. She knew something was wrong with me, but didn’t know how to go the extra mile to find out what it was. The tension had only been building, not abating, and that only made me rebel even more. The verse 24 wife was the one I expected when we finally put it all on the table. If I went to her and she was angry and fuming, then I would stick with my decision and go back to my new place of residence.

“Oh give thanks to the Lord for He is good. His mercy endures forever.” That’s Psalm 107. That’s also what I found when I went home to my wife and really, truly opened up about the things that were bothering me. We talked about my estranged heart, about not being in love, about the affairs, about my hang-ups and her hang-ups, about balancing work, about friends, about kids, about our daughter moving, about money, and about a hundred other subjects. I cried even more, even harder, about just wanting to love and be loved, and about wanting so desperately for someone to fight for me as I felt I had been fighting for others in various ways. She had every right and every reason to be angry, to throw my middle-age-crisis butt out and scream for me to talk about it to an attorney.

Instead she held me while I wept. Then she prayed for me. She could have been angry, BUT instead she chose His path.

We’ve been in arguments before, and we’ve cried and held and prayed together before; every couple does. But nobody has ever done that for me before, not in this way. It was undeserved grace and mercy and love. Where anger and even

hatred had taken root and logically should have been in play, love stepped in and covered over all of that. She listened and gave mercy to one who didn't deserve it. She changed my life. More than this, He changed my life through her.

Yesterday I looked at pictures of ladies with whom I sought comfort and compassion, both as friends and as more. For the first time in many years, I looked at them and smiled with happiness, feeling glad that I was privileged to have shared their lives (even in the middle of crisis), and feeling even gladder that they can live them as they do now, with or without me as a participant. For the first time I looked at them with forgiveness in my heart, feeling thankful to be putting shame and regret behind me and goodwill in their place. And despite great beauty and cherished memories, none of them can hold a candle to my lady. I'm privileged to be in her life and to invite her back into mine. In reality, she never really left. Despite separation, drifting apart, infidelity, change and discord, she never abandoned hope, never stopped insisting that God wasn't done with us yet. When I should have found vindictiveness and anger, she gave me undeserved grace, mercy and comfort. Nobody I know has ever given me such a gift as this. Nobody could, because in the comfort of her arms while I wept out my tears of hurt, I felt God's presence and mercy in her own. I had chosen to live in the distant land of divorce and future days alone, yet she was like a spring of cool, living water as His mercy flowed through her over my parched and sunburned soul.

I went incommunicado for most of the weekend. My pastoral calls were eventually returned as my friend reminded me to pour out my heart because that's what Christ always does for us. And my China/Uganda/mentor pal called me too, to talk me through the bad moments and give me more encouragement; thanks Brother Bill, thanks much more than you know. I spent time deciding what to do now, and working to cancel the lease. And I moved home. I decided to kick my pride to the side, and let love get back to work on where it will lead us next. It became a time of re-connecting, of starting to build back. To the eternal enemy, I got to deliver a message: I made a choice and accepted the consequences, but then love revealed its true colors. Good try, Mr. Devil, but you lose this round.

And there's that 'but' again. Thank God for it, and for how He used it in my life.

The days ahead won't be all wine and roses; we can't afford them all the time. Besides, we don't want to tarnish their magic. There are more times of hard talking ahead. We will be doing much more talking, and not all of it will be as soothing and pleasant as our talks this weekend. More counseling is in our future, and some struggles; God-forbid, we might reach an end that neither of us wants. More changes are likely, and some people will fall in and out of our lives. I refuse to focus on that anymore. Instead, I will center my relationship on my wife, and start pouring my heart into hers. I will center my life on God's mercy through His son, as it was given to me by one I cherish dearest of all. I will put my own proverbial words into play and do my best to live my life as He wants me to live it, to use my talents for better good, to pour myself out for others the way He pours Himself out for me. That will be hard, but, you know, maybe I can then be a drink of cold water to some other weary soul wandering in distant, unfriendly lands.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 25 August 2011

Like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of gifts he does not give. Proverbs 25, verse 14.

It actually rained for a few minutes today. We are in the second hottest summer ever here in North Texas and there has been very little rain. The high today is supposed to be 107; that's without humidity. When it gets that hot it doesn't take much to cool you down. The AC in my office set to 80, and fans are on all over the house, blowing around hot air that actually feels pretty comfortable. Most of the clouds we've seen here this summer have been the cruel, dry kind that blow by without wringing any moisture onto the ground. Have you ever been like one of those clouds?

It would be very easy for you or me to be a Pharisee, you know. If you aren't up on your Bible, the Pharisees were the Jewish leaders of old who subscribed that the ancient laws of Moses were the basis of Judaism. Their descendants became the forbears of modern rabbis. The book of Luke contains the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, both of whom went to the Temple to pray; you probably have heard of it before. To paraphrase, the proud Pharisee prays "thanks, God, for not making me like that poor slob over there" and then the tax collector, the worst of the worst in the 1st century social scale, cries out in anguish "Lord, forgive me." You can almost feel the empty rainclouds beginning to circle over the temple as the clueless Pharisee walks out feeling no different and the forgiven tax collector walks away with his load a little lighter.

That story harkens me back to this proverb, because here is a splash of cold water (or cold rain): you and I are both of them. You know this, and I'm thinking it goads you as much as it does me. There are times when I feel so beaten down by the weight of my sins. Even after letting some of the anguish go, I still get reminded of things I've said and done. A look at the sun just right, or a stranger in a crowd, or anything and the hurt wells up. I'm learning to repel it by prayer, and by laughing at it, and by focusing on Him & what He did. It would lying to you if I told you these things work every time because when you've been broken enough, it's sometimes too easy to let the breaks start to crack open again. Sometimes I feel like the tax collector, just wanting some peace, just wanting to feel loved even though I know I've done wrong. How about you? Ever felt like you needed to stand in the rain?

While you're thinking about that, let's keep it real here, shall we? We're Pharisees too, you know. We're pretty vain, you and I, and there are times we can't tell the forest for the trees, or the narcissist in the mirror from the humble man we see. Ever play keeping up with the Joneses? Or how about comparing yourself to your co-workers, or even your best friend? Have you ever told a story about something you did, then embellished it a little, just a little, to puff yourself up? Let's dig deeper: ever padded your expense reports and told yourself you deserve it? Have you ever told someone you loved them without following through on it, or have you ever been so proud that you just knew your world couldn't fall apart because, well, it was you! Ever been in love with that new look that the hairstyle or the clothes gave you? And when was the last time you let your pride get in the way of something, anything, and you just shook it off and moved forward? Has this hit a nerve yet? Face it, friendly reader: we're Pharisees sometimes too. It's an ugly thing to face that sometimes you and I let our healthy pride become an unhealthy thing.

Take heart: Like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of gifts he does not give. And like cooling, healing rain on parched soil is the man who humbly thanks God and others for the things he has been given, and the ability to serve others by giving. It doesn't take much effort to try to turn things around. It takes realizing you need help, the kind of help He can give you. It takes a one-on-one conversation with Him to get you started, and it takes clamming up a little, starting to listen instead of talk. All three of those are tough for a guy like me, but since I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed, if I can do it then so can you. Think of how much better it will feel to be cooled down instead of heated up all the time.

Walking out of the gym this morning, I felt a few sprinkles from a quickly passing summer storm. It has only rained here once or twice since the beginning of June and I have to say that it felt great! The amount of rain we got in my town won't do much to reduce the drought, but it did provide some relief; any moisture helps. Several of us stood in the parking lot and smiled in the rain shower, enjoying the gift from above, thankful for it. I didn't feel the need to boast to anyone that I had run three miles (instead of walking the steep mile I did), or that it was the best rain ever (though it did feel pretty good). Nobody else did anything like that either. We simply enjoyed the moment, basking in how love flows down even when we don't deserve it.

And in a different ending to the story, perhaps the Pharisee went out of the temple and thought to himself, "wow, I can't believe I said that; what a jerk I was!" Or perhaps the tax collector might have gone out and shaken down someone who owed him a back payment. I won't speculate on what could have been alternative outcomes from the story; after all, it was told by the Son of God Himself. There wouldn't have been anything negative about it. Instead, I'll imagine what it could

have felt like if both of them might have walked off the Temple Mount and felt a warm Judean rain start to sprinkle down. Maybe that would have been enough to make both of them stop, pause, and think. It was for me.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 29 August 2011

Through patience a ruler can be persuaded and a gentle tongue can break a bone. Proverbs 25, verse 15.

Patience and gentleness: I pray for these more and more. If I died today, I fear they would not put "he was a patient and gentle man" on my tombstone. Indeed, I doubt they would put "he was a gentleman" at all, and I sometimes fear just what they would put on it, if anything at all; we'll save that insecurity for another day. For years now I have been working to improve my patience and gentleness because those qualities are important to me. I admire men who are patient and wise, the fatherly or grandfatherly men who seem to know just what to say at every moment, and who quietly move forward through every day instead of frenetically attacking each one as I so often do. Such people are calm and confident, living in self-control and Godly understanding.

Add gentleness to that behavior and I think you have the kind of man after God's own heart. Solomon's father must have been that way even as he was strong. Society tells us that we men are supposed to be bold and confident (a word that I already used to describe patience...hold that thought), that boldness is the recipe for success, a tasty life of achievement and glory. In my own experience, when I've been bold and glorious, I found I was also cold and aloof, selfish and self-centered, tasteless and not tasty at all. Perhaps the better trait would be gentleness, kindness, and a soft touch. Indeed, I find that gentleness is the friend-maker, that a man who is both patient and gentle is the kind of man you want for a friend, a partner or a husband.

Solomon knew this and God knew that Solomon knew it because He inspired the proverb. Patience is rooted in wisdom and learning. Wisdom is contemplative, seeking understanding and common ground. Patience then becomes a fruit of wisdom. Patience breeds confidence and trust, and those take time to build. As the King, God knew that we men would be inspired and persuaded by people who could patiently make a case, or patiently live their lives, or patiently wait and learn to see how things shape up. People who display patience are trustworthy. Kings need trustworthy people. I'm no king, but I need them too, and I'm betting you do as well.

People who are both patient and gentle are strong. It takes gentle love to raise a child, and it takes long years to instill lessons of gentleness and kind love into children. It takes gentleness to listen to a friend who is hurting, or to go the extra mile, or to be forgiving. In that, we find that real gentleness takes great strength, especially when its opposite of cold harshness is that to which we are naturally disposed. Gentleness is selfless; harshness is self-serving. When the verse says that gentleness can break a bone, it means that gentleness is firm and resilient, able to overcome other strengths that aren't based in love or understanding. Underneath a calm exterior is a strong core, able to withstand the hurricanes of hurt.

Wasn't Jesus both patient and gentle? Being true God and true man all at once, he exemplified those qualities and displayed what is God's real make up, namely patience and gentle love. Yet all throughout His life, Christ was never weak, never wobbly, never spiritually or physically soft. Underneath the patient and gentle exterior was and is the Son of Man who would withstand all the world could throw at Him for the sake of true love. If God weren't patient or gentle, he could have hammered humanity into submission or wiped us off the earth. Instead, He dealt with us kindly, patiently and gently encouraging us back to Him as he encouraged our hearts while we are still thick with sin.

Those are the kinds of qualities I want to encourage and develop. I would much rather raise my son to be patient and gentle than bold or cocky. Patience and gentleness produce self-control and reliability. Boldness and cockiness eventually breed risk and dissatisfaction. I would much rather hear his teachers, his friends, other parents, or his closest confidant (who he affectionately calls "Tigger") tell me, "he is patient and gentle." Love is patient and gentle, and real love takes time to grow. One of my new favorite songs says this, specifically how patient and gentle "love don't run." Amen to that.

I would much rather spend the rest of my life quietly, patiently and gently working to sand smooth all my hard edges, to increase the span of time between actions and my reactions, and seeking to merge patience and gentleness into the way I conduct my life. I have it in my heart that I would like to be the kind of dad who my kids could come to for a strong but soft shoulder to lean on. I have it in my heart that I would like to be the kind of man who a spouse could rely on to be soft-spoken and soft on the edges but never soft at my core. I have it in my heart that I would one day like to be the kind of grandfather who my unknown grandchildren could love and look back on and think "he was a good man." And I have it in my heart that, if anything is ever said about me after I'm gone, it would be "he was a patient and gentle man." Means I have a very long way to go.

God's patience and gentleness are the keys to that, and I can't do them alone. To have them be more than just superficial words, I need to heed the Proverb and let God continue to work on my heart. They are His strengths and His qualities. To make them my own, I need Him to work them in me. And when He is in me, building my patience and softening my gentleness, he is also increasing my confidence and shoring up real strength in me to withstand the petty attacks of the world and the enemy. I may still be very much a work in progress, but becoming gently patient is good, Godly progress indeed.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 30 August 2011

If you find honey, eat just enough – too much of it, and you will vomit. Proverbs 25, verse 16.

Happy Tuesday and isn't this just a wonderful thought to start the day with? Eat too much sweet food and you'll puke! Who wants some more Captain Crunch? Honey with your tea? How about a little stomach bile? My son and I are the only ones in my house who like honey. Bee spit doesn't quite become anyone else. Even I will admit that, after reading this verse, I'm not down for honey any time soon.

Believe it or not (said Mr. Ripley) but this verse makes sense following God's advice yesterday to learn patience and gentleness. What patient man gorges himself on purpose? What gentle woman purposefully eats sweets until she throws up? What patient and gentle person willingly starves themselves or goes to the other excess? See, it makes sense.

What's more is that I don't think it's much of a stretch to look at the verse and look through it like a photo negative. I think it's also a caution against starvation. Don't eat enough and you'll make yourself sick. Eat too little and you won't be taking in enough. That's the key point: just enough.

Could the verse be construed to mean avoid gluttony altogether? I think so. Take out "honey" and put in any food or drink and it still works. In fact, subtract food altogether and substitute any activity that can be gluttonous and the verse still works. Maybe that's the biggest point about the whole thing: everything in moderation. If we go overboard on anything, we make ourselves sick. In the very least, we compromise ourselves.

How do we know when we've had just enough? Let your conscience tell you. I have long believed that one way God talks to us is through our conscience. When it is silent, He is letting us bear the consequences of our actions so that we may learn to rely on Him. When it speaks, He may very well be speaking to us, trying to keep us on the straight and narrow. I find that, usually, when my conscience tells me I've had enough, that I'm full, that I'm near my limits or near the lines, that I'm satisfied and content. If I keep pushing it, I will make myself sick. That's something I'd like to avoid. I don't know of anyone who likes to get sick; I know I don't.

So here's to hoping you go into your Tuesday on a happy note. No need to avoid the sweets as long as you don't gorge yourself. Come to think of it, I will have the cup of tea after all.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 1 September 2011

Seldom set foot in your neighbor's house – too much of you and he will hate you. Proverbs 25, verse 17.

True confession here: for a guy who wears his heart on his sleeve (or on a blog and email), I don't make friends easily. I really don't. My way is to be social, bragging, and sometimes over the top. Those are insecure manifestations hiding the fact that I don't open up to people easily. I could tell you on one hand the number to whom I really, truly open up. The Good Lord has blessed me to know hundreds of people in this world, but there have been very, very few to whom I intimated the closest details of my life.

Part of the reason for that is that I don't want to be the kind of friend who is always down your throat. I don't want to be constantly in someone's place, on their case, or in their living room. Privacy is something I value, and I value the ability to respect others'. Even so, I'll also confess to a bit of envy of my daughter, who can make twenty friends in an empty room. All summer long it was frustrating – and heartening – that friends of hers would come to the house at all hours of the day so they could spend time together. Yes, I HATED when they showed up at 11 PM and I was up after that, but I'm glad they cared enough to do that, and that she can make friends so easily.

But the biggest reason is that I worry that if I'm around too much, I'll smother them. I don't like the kind of friend who constantly is barraging your inbox with messages or texts; there have been times and people to whom I've done that, and it isn't a caring thing: it's insecurity, and that isn't how friendship or love performs. I don't like to be the guy who is clingy, who is the Dave-cellophane wrapping you up so you can't breathe. It makes me feel uncomfortable to yield myself to too many people, so I sometimes find myself holding my cards very close because I don't want to play them in too many poker games. In this, though I didn't know it, I heed the words of the proverb. That is a good thing.

And yet, I have to say, I want to have the kind of friendships and relationships where you can show up at my place and we can sit and talk for hours if we so choose. It would be wonderful to get a call saying "meet me at Y and let's have a beer;" it would be even more wonderful to make those calls myself, so I'm letting God work on my insecurities. I relish the times when neighbors come up to the front patio and we just chat. And just this week, I found myself very privileged to talk for hours about things and relationships and getting through this thing called life with the best people you'll meet anywhere.

I value those times because they don't happen very often. I don't like to plop myself down on somebody's couch very often and chat just because, but thank God He presents those opportunities to do so every now and then. It sometimes makes me uncomfortable to reach out to someone to talk, to get things off my chest, but thank God he puts people and telephones in our lives to do that when we are so moved. It's hard to ask for help or reach out when I need someone, but thank God he even puts people in our lives to whom we can reach. And it can hurt to open yourself up, to really bare your soul and let in the healing light, but thank God He gives us both His encouraging word and His energizing Spirit that let us forge relationships and keep them strong. Listening to Him, we can know when to open the bottle of wine and pour another glass to chat, to pick up the phone and talk for a couple of hours, or to sit back and listen when someone says "hey, do you have a minute." Listening to Him, we can know, too, when to smile and say "see ya tomorrow" and know with a smile in our hearts that good friends and love in your heart are only a thought away.

Thank God for that because we need it. We really do. I really do. Perhaps Benjamin Franklin segued off the verse when he said that "fish and visitors stink after three days." I love the times we're privileged to spend together, especially if we haven't seen each other in awhile and we do some catching up. Like you, I also love some space, and the opportunity to unpack our other times and be real too in that way. It's okay if we go for years and don't see each other. We can be privileged to let those absences make our hearts actually grow closer and then cherish the times we get to re-connect. I'll love you for who you are, period, and be thankful we get to be in each others' lives whether it's every day or every few months. When we finally do get to look deeply into each others' eyes, it'll make the moments even more special. That's a work in progress for an insecure North Texan, but thank God for His tender mercies that make it even possible.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 2 September 2011

Like a club or a sword or a sharp arrow is the man who gives false testimony against his neighbor. Proverbs 25, verse 18.

On the plane home from San Francisco last night I watched a movie: "Basic Instinct." I hadn't seen it in years. You've heard of it, I'm sure. Sharon Stone and Michael Douglas; you know, the really lurid movie about the cop and the killer writer. It was basic instinct that drove the woman to kill her victims and manipulate her prey to her alibi. I'll admit it: I watched some of the really raw parts on the plane; the most sexual scenes, well, I skipped through those, a prudish, embarrassed Lutheran who figured the people in the seats next to me didn't need to see it anymore than I did.

It's our basic instinct to lie, isn't it? Just like in the movie and just like in the proverb, we give false testimony about our neighbors every day. We use people to get what we want, and we put on false faces to serve our own advantages. Some of us are Sharon Stone, extremely adept at the art of misinformation while stalking our next victim as part of a game of fiction. Some of us are Michael Douglas, trying to catch the killer but wrapped up in our own lies that seem to be interwoven into and all through the lives of others. Some of us are the victims, and some of us are the strangers just watching.

Pretty sad story, isn't it? Sure, it made a provocative and entertaining movie, but as a life story it's really pretty sad. I think it's sad because it points back to the idea that our basic instinct may just be falsehood and deception, to hurt each other and to betray the neighbors around us. Maybe your neighbor is your friend and maybe your neighbor is just a stranger. We give false testimony in ways large and small. Strip everything down to brass tacks and it's an-us-or-them kind of game. I have lied. You have. We all do it. After all, it's our basic instinct.

And that's the biggest lie of all. We weren't made for the lies; we weren't made to give false testimony against our neighbors. It's no coincidence that the proverb uses language that describes lies as weapons of pain and war. They are. They truly are. False testimony, deception, even incomplete truths which we selectively release are all weapons we use against each other. Isn't just lies: it's talk, it's gossip, it's false living, it's not keeping our word, it's inconsistency in our words and actions whether it's deliberate or not. If we bear those things against each other, it's like we're attacking each other on the common grass between our houses. We're making war against each other.

We weren't made for that. Long ago in the Garden, we were made for perfection. We were made to reflect the ultimate love-truth of God, to be His most magnificent creation and the one into which he poured his inerrant and honest love. The human soul was made for eternity because eternity matters most. It was made for an eternity of love, to be shared with the infinite originator of love and reflected with other souls made for perfection. When that soul was joined with human flesh, we took on the nature of our ancestors, who believed the original lie of deception told by the prince of lies himself. It was a supernatural manifestation of untruth brought into our natural world of honest harmony.

Our basic instinct is to love, not to deceive, and especially not with an ice pick, slick soft-core pornography, or the cat and mouse game of manipulative deception.

I'm not going to advertise movies here, but there's another movie I want to see. "Seven Days in Utopia" comes out today, and I read the book several weeks ago. It's the story of a golfer who loses his way, believes the lie of "you can have it all," and then finds his way home by getting back to the basics. Yes, I enjoyed the story acted out by the naked Ms. Stone, but to tell you the truth I'm more looking forward to the second movie. Each of us loses our way now and then, and I believe that when we do, when we make war with the weapons of dishonesty, it takes love and God's kindness to get us back into natural harmony. Me, I'm tired of all the lies, tired of looking in the face in the mirror and even on the days when I think I'm happy, seeing a face staring back at me that is wrinkled and gray-haired by all the dishonesty of the past. I could use seven days in Utopia in which to reform my basic instincts. I'm anxious to get started on living a new life, walking thankfully in the grace of the Almighty and laying down yesterday's lies at the feet of Jesus. The time to start is now.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 5 September 2011

Like a bad tooth or a lame foot is reliance on the unfaithful in times of trouble. Proverbs 25, verse 19.

Let's ask a question: have you ever relied on someone for something and they didn't follow through? Have you ever loved someone and they've been unfaithful to that love? Or have you done it yourself? I'm betting your answer is like mine. Chances are you don't have to think back very far to remember when someone did you wrong or willfully failed to measure up. Chances are I don't either. So let's not dwell much on that. We all have enough times of trouble, so here's to hoping that when yours come, you aren't the unfaithful. You know that we don't have to cheat to be unfaithful. We can lie; we can say things with a hidden agenda; we can be oblique; we can think we can hide from God. Whatever our vice, any time we deviate from the loving, wise truth of the Almighty we are unfaithful. It's a tough thing to realize that we sometimes are what we don't want to be; it's a tougher thing when those we count on are the same.

Take it from me: being unfaithful breeds guilt, lots of it. I'm reading a brilliant book: *The Search for Significance* by Robert McGee. In it, Mr. McGee talks about how our fears and our habits surrounding them keep us from finding significance through God's love and power. One of the ways in which that happens is when we clothe ourselves in guilt. It almost comes natural. When we do wrong, we incur guilt. That's a pretty basic thing. The book talks about the difference between guilt and being guilty. We can be guilty, be convicted of our wrongs and our sins, but we don't need the guilt. The guilt starts as a natural reaction when our conscience, our voice of God, informs us that perhaps we should feel bad about something we did, said or even thought. In and of itself, that's not a bad thing. Like our feelings, guilt can be used as a quick gauge in measuring right or wrong and how we should deal with them.

But it becomes a bad thing, like a bad tooth or a lame foot, when we rely on it to hide ourselves from our shame or our responsibility. It becomes a lie when we internalize it and believe we deserve the guilt, we deserve what happens to us because of the bad things we've done. It is compounded when others dog-pile onto it, whether with or without merit. That guilt can start to overwhelm us, occupy our thoughts, take a much bigger place in our psyche than it merits. The enemy uses that lie against us, and because he's a damned coward, he uses it most effectively when we are weak, vulnerable, or even desperate. It is a weapon of choice for him.

Before we know it, things get worse as we choose to use that weapon on ourselves. When we wrap ourselves in guilt, refusing to let go of it, refusing to let the Son take that guilt away, we are the unfaithful. We become the unreliable in times of trouble, and don't you just know that every day is a time of trouble. Like a bad tooth or a lame foot, we let ourselves stay crippled and hindered from being healed.

Here's the crazy comparison that turns guilt upside-down: guilt versus conviction. Guilt accuses us (over and over in fact). The Spirit of God convicts us. He shows us what we do wrong, not to hammer us or hurt us but to show us the destructive nature of those wrongs, how they keep us apart from God. Guilt says "I'm a screw-up and I'm no good" but conviction says "you screwed up but God makes you good." See the difference? Guilt has a long record of wrongs while conviction ends at the cross. God uses conviction, his righteous justice and His healthy principles, to show the destructive seriousness for our sins...and then immediately declare us 'not guilty' through His Son. Astounding and astoundingly simple yet earth and guilt-shattering in its implications.

That which isn't biblical isn't best. That, too, isn't very hard to understand. Has anyone ever been unfaithful to you, ever said they loved you and did something contrary to that? Don't everyone raise your hands all at once. For years I've carried around much guilt and it has weighed me down, caused me to say and do things that are contrary to God's Spirit and His desire that I should live in His love. Relying on the unfaithful to do faithful things for you isn't a biblical thing; being the unfaithful to the faithful isn't a biblical thing; willingly being the unfaithful while wrapped up in the noose-rope of guilt isn't biblical either. It's time to let go of that. It's time to pony up and admit that I am the unfaithful and I have been the unfaithful in my thoughts, words, and actions. There are many ways in which my unfaithfulness has manifested itself, and some of those are much worse than others. I have felt much guilt because of them, and some of the things I've done have caused me to be righteously guilty.

End of story; that's where it stops. I've confessed things I've done and owned them, and I still own the consequences of them until they've played out however they will. I don't need to keep confessing the old sins over and over now that they are forgiven. God will remember them no more. I ask and need Him to do something about it. The next thing that happens is where I ask God to convict me of them, and point to my sins and show me where I have done wrong in His eyes. He does that by taking the hand of my soul and conscience and leads me to the cross where He says "Guilty on your behalf.

You are declared innocent. Go and sin no more.” My bad toothache and lame foot are spiritually healed and I’m free to leave that unhealthy guilt there at His tortured hands and feet.

Sure, the guilt continues to come back on bother me, especially early in the morning or when I am vulnerable. As we talked about, Satan is a miserable coward. Rarely does he attack us in a full frontal manner. I can’t take back things I’ve done, and I also can’t let the unfaithfulness of others occupy such an important place in my life anymore. That’s a tall order, I know, and the world we live in doesn’t make it any easier. What makes it easier is letting go of it, every time it comes back to haunt, understanding that it’s ok to be convicted guilty but it isn’t to carry around the guilt. He forgave and declared you and I innocent, even when others hold it against us or we try to hold it against ourselves. All we have to do is believe that. Relying on the unfaithful hurts, but the healing medicine of convicting forgiveness carries away what we carried around and bids us to be and do better.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 6 September 2011

Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day, or like vinegar poured on a wound is one who sings songs to a heavy heart. Proverbs 25, verse 20.

Ok, at first read this verse sounds kind of cruel. I mean, who would take away a garment on a cold day? It sounds all 'Scroogy,' if you know what I mean. And vinegar on a wound? OUCH! How about you follow that up with a little salt, eh? Maybe some turpentine when you're done? Just WHAT is this verse saying?

Let's start with a colloquialism: try a little tenderness. When I'm down, I need someone to listen. I don't need someone trying to blow smoke up my you-know-what: I want comfort. Our tendency is to want to help, to want to cheer someone up. Me, for such a Gloomy Gus (or Eeyore), I try to say "look on the bright side," and as strange as it sounds, that isn't always the most appropriate response. Perhaps the verse is cautioning us that there is a time and a place for such optimism, but it's not always right this moment.

After all, if someone loses a child to cancer, would you say "it's going to be ok. Cheer up!" Or if your best friend loses his job, would you say, "aw, it'll be alright" and leave it at that? This weekend, we watched 2 movies: Seven Days in Utopia and Soul Surfer. The first one was the golf movie I mentioned last week; I highly recommend it because, as a terrible golfer, I'll tell you that it isn't about golf. It's about getting back to the basics of life through faith. See it, feel it, trust it: SFT. Go watch if you want to learn what that means.

In the movie, a down and out golfer finds a stranger with a past who helps him get back to the basics of both his game and his life. When he was in crisis, the golfer was as low as he could sink. It would make not only a cheesy movie but an unrealistic situation for the solution to this man's problems to be "aw, it'll get better. Just keep trying." 'Just keep trying' was what got him into trouble in the first place. He needed appropriate encouragement from a strong source.

Movie number two is the story of a championship surfer who loses her arm in a shark attack; it's a true story. Surfing was this young girl's entire life and dream. Her happiness was predicated around her success on the waves, and all of that changed in an instant. She struggles to regain both her skills on the board and her skills as a person. You don't just do that by saying "buck up, camper. It'll be ok." She needed to know how to relearn her sport as well as relearn how to live after such a traumatic shock.

In either of these stories, it would be like pouring vinegar on a wound or taking away a garment on a cold day to sing happy songs to a weary heart. At least it would have been to me. You see, I had a really bad weekend. Something happened that took me by surprise and changed the course of my life. Things didn't go at all like I thought, wanted, or even hoped they would just a few days before. I spent four days more down than I have been in a year or more, and both my family and I were very much in deep crisis because of it. If someone would have shown up at my door and said, "aw, Dave, you gotta just remember that "the sun will come out tomorrow...bet your bottom dollar that tomorrow there'll be sun," I would have exploded.

Instead, the better course was for someone to listen, and someone did. A few someone's, actually, and one person in particular. Good people let you know that you aren't alone; good Christian friends pray for you and encourage your spirit to both adhere to a Godly line and also to be strengthened in His grip. Good people were like a warm jacket on a cold day, like healing medicine when I was hurt and down. As a result, five days hence, things are starting to look better. The sun did indeed come up even without Annie trilling on about it.

And is it just me, or is that song cruel all on its own? I never was much of an "Annie" fan. I remember when it came out and I didn't like it much then either. But I digress.

When troubles come, we need encouragement and comfort. To me, that starts with listening, with understanding, and sometimes with the conviction of God's loving truth. That truth can occasionally sound harsh; perhaps it is. Deep wounds require strong medicine. As I navigate through the uncharted and sometimes rocky waters of life, I find myself more and more gravitating towards God's word as the primary advisor in my life, telling me what I should do as well as encouraging me while I'm trying to do it. A few days ago, by my own construction, life almost took a hard turn in a different direction. Who knows which direction it's going now? God does. And unlike the garment on the cold day or the vinegar on a hurting wound, He never fails to give just what is needed at each and every moment of our lives. I'll admit, it might not always be

what I wanted, planned for, or hoped for, but it's always enough and it's always right on the money. Where His Word is concerned, see it, feel it and trust it.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 7 September 2011

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you. Proverbs 25, verses 21 and 22.

In other words, when someone does you wrong, kill 'em with kindness, right? Go out of your way to be nice to them so God will be nice to you, right? Um, no. That isn't how it works. God wants a movement of the heart. He wants us to do these things because of His love, not to treat Him like some wish machine. That's a tall order, especially when we don't see eye to eye. Me, I fail at it all the time.

Segueing off something we talked about yesterday, let's try a little tenderness instead. In this case, try a little tenderness based in compassion. When someone does you wrong, delay your reaction and demonstrate mercy. Listen; learn; love. Help instead of return hurt; pray instead of punish. It also builds on a theme we talked about a few days ago, too: guilt versus conviction. When someone does you wrong, whether they lie about you or break your heart, turn the other cheek. The reason for doing this is instructive, not vindictive. You want them to know that what they did was wrong, not to just hammer them. After all, it could be you some day.

You see, God wants to rewire us. We believed the ancient lie of "you can be like God" and little has changed in the millennia since. You and I are thick with human stubbornness, which taken to easy extremes becomes this thing called "sin." It has rewired our brains and turned our world upside down. We were originally made for harmony but we're stuck in off-key melody. When our enemies are hungry, our reaction now is "let em starve!" When they are thirsty, we say, "good!"

That's not the way it was meant to be, so the Almighty wants to rewire us. If sin is an extreme thing, then God's love is simply out of control. It's crazy illogical and earth-shattering in its beautiful power. He wants us to look at things the way He looks at them, having mercy where none is deserved. He wants us to go the extra mile, the way He does by providing for a world that rebels against Him. He wants us to make our work caring instead of glaring, helping instead of hurting. So he tells us to do the opposite of what our proud nature tells us to do AND He tells us why: so that each moment of our lives can be a lovingly teachable moment. He wants us to remember that He teaches us, so we should teach each other. He wants each of us, even when we're angry, to come together and come to Him.

It's an ancient concept, carried forward many centuries to another time of trouble. In the New Testament, Romans 12, verse 20 paraphrases this proverb by saying "On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Centuries after the proverb was written, the surprise apostle, Paul, quoted the verses in the context of how we should address evil-doing people in our lives. The context of the verses (as compared to those before it) implores the church in Rome to live at peace with people and to not repay an eye for an eye. Consider the audience: they were forced to worship in silence and secrecy, and if they spoke out, they could be murdered. God spoke through Paul to say "I've got your back people. Do what I would do and care for the people around you." Care for your murderers. Love them. Two thousand years after Paul, what has changed? I'm an old warrior, and is God telling me to take off my armor of the world and put on, instead, His armor of mercy? Yes, yes He is.

And that isn't as easy as it sounds. If it is, how about you and I go through just one hour in our work-lives this morning and not spread any gossip, not tell any jokes, not think nasty or mean thoughts of any kind, and not do anything that God in Christ Himself wouldn't do. Call me at the end of that hour and let's compare notes on how we did. I'm betting we'll both be pretty embarrassed. I'm betting God would be too. I'm also thinking He would say "try again, you two. I think you're both worth it." He wouldn't kill us with kindness: He would save us with it. He intends to every day.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 8 September 2011

As a north wind brings rain, so a sly tongue brings angry looks. Proverbs 25, verse 23.

Will start with (yet another) maudlin confession since (I must confess) some of these writings are a way to publicly confess things that bother me while submitting them to God – and to you – so that better things might come because of Him. That's a wordy sentence. I've been rightfully accused of being a sly, slick talker. It's no secret that I love to write and talk, but some have accused me of using whatever talent I have with those faculties to be devious, mischievous, and cunning, maybe even deceitful. Guilty on all counts. Guilty and, as we talked about a few days ago, letting go of that guilt, being convicted of my guilt by the Spirit, and learning to be better.

Is it any wonder that a devious, mischievous, cunning or deceitful word would bring an angry stare? After all, if people love us, shouldn't they be angry with us when we are sly like that, whether we design to be or not? If you're like me and you've been sly for a long time, it almost becomes a second nature. It translates into flirting (which I have to watch). It becomes casual conversation (which I'm learning to guard). It can give false impressions (which I pray I never do). It is ungodly (which I am). Even if you aren't sly by nature, I'm betting you occasionally slip and fall into the cunning category; good people make mistakes too. Whether it's a long-standing behavior or a temporary fault, is it any wonder when someone calls you on it? God says it isn't, and (obviously, through this verse) that it's natural for people to get upset with us when we are less than righteous to them.

What about the other part of the verse? What does "as a north wind brings rain" really mean? Here in North Texas, we badly need rain. This is the worst drought in the six years I've lived here (seven if you count that most-of-a-year in 85-86). That Louisiana tropical storm blew more than just winds of change into my life: it blew in cooler weather, and I'm happy to report that our highs this week haven't gone beyond the mid-80s (sort of like my taste in music). A north wind can bring cooler weather and needed rain, and needed rain can be harsh at first. It can seem cold, scathing, penetrating, even unwelcome. It can seem to be all those things until it cools down hot temperatures (and tempers), and it waters the needy earth so that growth can happen again.

Rain from a north wind can be shocking but good for the soul, you know.

So can be those angry stares at the woman or man with the sly tongue. It can be shocking but healthy to see someone for what they are; it can be helpful when people you value are righteously angry with you. With the love of God in good friends, we might just open up to God changing us and working His miracles in our lives.

At least that's what happens with me. Of course it's back to me and my egotistical maudlin confessions; hey, I'm the scribe in this column. I'm a work in progress, and it's no easy thing to do the easy thing of letting God take over your heart to change you from within. Good people prayed with me this week to give me the strength to resist negative change and to be daily convicted when I'm over the line. Conviction of the wrongs we do lets the healing begin, changing the sly tongue into a supporting one, changing devious words into divine ones. If good can come from my confessions and God's using them through words like these, then glory be to Him and not me. It's nice to be able to say that without someone staring angrily back.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 9 September 2011

Like a muddied spring or a polluted well is a righteous man who gives way to the wicked. Proverbs 25, verse 26.

Disclaimer: I am NOT a righteous man. I've been made righteous by my faith in Christ, but of myself and on my own, I'm not a righteous man. No, it's not maudlin Friday, maudlin being one of my favorite words of late. Today isn't the day to air my dirty laundry; in fact, laundry is in the washer right now.

Instead, let's just accept this verse for what it says, segueing on that laundry theme. You and I are supposed to be white as snow. Because of the things we say and do, we're more like Chicago-street snow or, worse, Chicago-street yellow snow after a pack of dogs runs by. We're filthy. It doesn't take much to get filthy, either. Some of my favorite pictures of my son is the series of three shots I took of him in his Sunday best when he was only about 2 years old. I remember going outside after a rainstorm, looking for Dillon. He was wearing little boy blue trousers and a white polo shirt. Sure enough, he saw a mud puddle and it simply tortured him. I ran inside to get my camera when I saw what he was about to do, and the three photos are of his happy before & after face as he laid down into that mud puddle.

Of course his mom and I were very upset with him, but not too much. He needed a quick bath and change of clothes when we were already late for church. But you couldn't be too upset with him, even though, in his cute little boy way, he'd been all muddied up. Maybe that's how God feels when he looks at us. He sees the people he loves all covered in dirt, with a half-hearted grin on our faces wondering whether we'll receive mercy or a spanking. Thank God for His mercy, right?

In another example, last night at a monthly men's group meeting at my church, the team of men who just returned from Africa told about visiting one village where the locals showed them their water supply: a filthy, bug infested hole in which a polluted spring bubbled up. It was from that hole that the villagers got their water for drinking and food, for washing, for cleaning. It was from that same hole that they let their animals drink, and into which feces and urine constantly poured. Can you imagine drinking from that? Even after boiling it, which doesn't usually happen, can you imagine NOT being sick?

When you take that kind of muddied pollution into your body, you get sick. You open yourself up to disease, infection, bacteria, and organisms wreaking havoc on your system. Unclean water is why so many of the people in sub-Saharan Africa are sick and why disease spreads so rampantly. When you're underfed, malnourished, not vaccinated or prepared, and in generally 'iffy' health to begin with, you're susceptible to disease.

Our battles against the sins & temptations of this world are just like our immune system battling water-borne diseases. And it's why the verse is so effective at illustrating what can happen to us. Temptation is everywhere, even when it's wrapped up in love. Even good people wrestle with it, struggle with it, do minute-by-minute battle with it. If they come in little doses when we're healthy, we can probably fend them off. If they come at another time, well brother, watch out!

And don't you just know that "another time" is every time?

No, I'm not a righteous man. I'm nobody's good example of a Godly man or even the kind of man you'd want to be when you grow up. Too often I've drunk from the muddy spring and found myself sick before I sickened others. Too often, like my mud puddle boy, I rolled in the fun in the mud before realizing how dirty it made me. Thank God for the bleach-white love of God who can make us righteous even when we're in the middle of our filth. He can touch us, change us, rewire and remold us, and then send us out to try once again to do better.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 12 September 2011

Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control. Proverbs 25, verse 28.

Quite the analogy here, don't you think? I mean, what comes to mind when you think of a city whose walls are broken through? Defenselessness? Disrepair? Decrepitude? Disaster? (As you can read) Four of those 'big D's' come to mind for me. I think of some ancient city, lying in ruins, overrun by invaders and dead or deserted inside, sand and overgrowth reclaiming the city streets where once there was prosperity.

So it is with someone who lacks self control. Such a person is actually defenseless. They are vulnerable to attack from without or within. Self-control is a hallmark of maturity, of acting like an adult. It maintains things of importance in life, putting boundaries around what's valuable and keeping out what isn't. Self-control fends off aging and decay, and it forestalls disaster by making responsibility more than just a word in the dictionary.

That was me. My immature lack of self-control caused disaster in my marriage, cost me some of my closest friendships, and in two cases, cost me jobs. On a Monday after a not-so-great weekend, I'd rather not air more dirty laundry as to why those things happened, so let's just leave it at this: it stinks to live your life without boundaries surrounding your self-control.

I could use some good news after confessing that; how about you? The good news is THE good news. The news of the Savior is the ultimate answer to one's lack of self-control. Accepting forgiveness and salvation in Christ is the real assurance of freedom that a frightened, uncontrolled person needs. The world would have us believe that faith is a constraining thing, that it limits our ability to be free. A world that bathes in temptation is quick to preach to us how anything that interferes with our free access to temptation is prudish and wrong-headed itself.

That's just not true, though. Faith identifies boundaries without forbidding us to cross them. It tells us of better ways to live our lives without sentencing us to punishment if we don't do them. Faith convicts without condemning, identifying our weaknesses and misbehaviors without destroying us in the process. If you really examine it, it is our sins, our wrongs, that destroy us, not faith. I mean, how many faithful people do you know who are or look unhappy, and how many people who live faithfully are hurt by that faith? It is when they slip and fall, or when they consciously cross lines, that disaster entails.

We need those boundaries and we need them around our self-control. Without boundaries, the self-control of even devout and hyper-responsible people can quickly erode, exposing base instincts and base misbehavior that our self-control keeps in check. When our boundaries come down, it is like there are chinks in our armor, or holes in the wall.

Imagine that.

It has been ten years since the September 11th attacks. In those ten years, we have constantly been at war, often on the defensive from within. The attacks occurred after another ten years of relative peace and complacency in the American sphere of influence. It's a generalization, I know, to say that, during the 90s we as a nation lived under a lack of self-control. We lived well, we prospered, and we were led by politicians who had little interest in rocking the boat, even when evil kept trying to capsize it. The result when self-control breaks down is defenselessness, and the fruit of defenselessness is disaster. Whether it is war in our souls, war in our lives, or our nation at war, when we consciously fail to live as we ought to, it should be no great wonder that troubles ensue. Thank God He has a longer, larger view of our lives and is a god of multiple, not single, chances and opportunities.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 13 September 2011

Like snow in summer or rain in harvest, honor is not fitting for a fool. Proverbs 26, verse 1.

Death before dishonor: that's a catchy cliché to live by, right? I mean, we'd all like to say that we'd rather die than bring dishonor on the people we love, or the God we love, right? When I think of honor I think of Robert E. Lee, stoically but courageously fighting on even when the cause was lost. I also think of firemen, who rush into burning buildings knowing they could die just so other people might be rescued. I think of my son, going back to school yesterday and holding his head up high after paying his penalty for a transgression there last spring. When I think of honor, I think of Jesus quietly suffering in agony without complaining or making it about Him.

It's impossible to live in honor when living in fear. It just doesn't work; it just doesn't fit. Fear holds back honor; fear holds back faith. Only by letting go of fears can the coat of honor be worn again. It doesn't mean the fears go away, but that we don't let them rule us anymore. We can't be honorable if we keep going back to the same sins, over and over again, especially when we know they are destructive. That's like assaulting honor. You can't be a person of honor if you talk down others or gossip or manipulate; such things are the antithesis of honor. And I can't be a man of honor without giving up control, giving up the guilt of the past, giving up on wallowing in hurt, and giving up living primarily for the man in the mirror.

You see, I don't live in honor nearly enough. On my flight to California yesterday, I flew in coach and got mad (just as I always do) that the man in front of me reclined his seat. In my opinion, reclining seats in coach should be done away with because it's awful hard to work on a laptop when some sleepy goober reclines his seat back into your face. It's also selfish and rude, saying to the person behind you "in this cramped space, my comfort is so much more important than you." But, you know, it was no more rude than my less than honorable reaction, which was to slam my tray table whenever I could, and pull his seat back to get up out of my own even when I didn't have to. With the tray table down, my knees found a convenient place, jutting up through the thin cushion into the small of his uncomfortable back. For his listening pleasure I threw in an occasional "yeah, it sure is rude when someone leans back in coach." No honor there, and I looked like and was a fool.

In light of Scripture, I think that the key in why fools are dishonorable is self-focus. It's true that a depressed person can't always help being depressed, but only a fool would recognize that he's depressed and then not let God, himself, or other people try to help him. When that happens, the only reason I can think of is that he becomes focused on himself. Only a fool would let the dishonorable actions of others determine what he would do with his life. Only a fool would let something as insignificant as a 3-hour seat on an airplane become a point of proud contention. The common denominator is selfishness. Self-focus is the enemy of honor because honor is a selfless thing. It isn't about all about stoic pride or even humble silence. To me, honor is choosing the quiet dignity of serving others – and serving God – over the myriad of ways in which we can serve ourselves.

And it's also true that a writer can prattle on long after he's run out of things to say, thus making himself look foolish and, in a small but significant way, somewhat dishonorable. Is it me or is it snowing on a Texas September day?

Perhaps it is, or perhaps it's just my imagination trying to convince me that I'm hopeless, un-redeemable and beyond help. I may not be the most selfish man in the world – or maybe I am – but such a claim doesn't really matter when I profess that I alone am responsible for myself. If I'm responsible, then I can put a stop to it. I'm going to need some help to do it. On my own, I am hopeless, un-redeemable and beyond help. With His forgiveness covering me, I matter, I am redeemed and nothing is impossible.

Before wading back into self-focus, then how about we side-step it and give thanks for mirrors that let us see ourselves so that we can open up and ask God to change ourselves. In our little alaman right, how about we ask Him every day to wash us clean of the bad things we do and clothe us again with His snow-white clothes of honor? In going around the mud puddle of self-focus, let's lay aside our foolishness – better yet, let's throw it into the puddle – and ask Him to guide, fuel, strengthen and sharpen us to be wiser, stronger and better...and honorable. And let's then do something about it, you and me, and walk hand in hand through the rest of today, being thankful for yet one more last chance purchased by the loving blood of the man from Galilee. If we do that, I'm betting we'll look pretty honorable to the people around us. We can hold our heads up, and they might just be interested to know how we got to be this way and how they can get in step beside us. He chose death before dishonor, you know. How about let's choose His death to regain some honor in a world without it?

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 14 September 2011

Like a fluttering sparrow or a darting swallow, an undeserved curse does not come to rest. Proverbs 26, verse 2.

Awhile back, I was in a dying friendship. There were many reasons why it was dying, why it couldn't succeed, even why it wasn't Godly or right. In the process of struggling while it was dying, accusations flew around, most of which were leveled at me by my friend. Some of those accusations were true; it's best to never run from the truth but, instead, to admit it. Some of those accusations, however, were false.

Now, I've done enough wrong things in my life, enough things below contempt, beneath faithfulness, and beside the point that my list of sins is long and storied. Were it not for faith in Christ, I'd be terrified of what would have been ahead of me soon in the afterworld. I've done enough wrongs to fill a shelf full of novels, but I really don't appreciate and don't deserve to be accused of things I didn't do. I've told enough lies, I've deceived enough people, I've lived my life selfishly and hurtfully. I don't need to be accused of doing those things when I know and can prove I didn't.

If you've been a scoundrel, well, you shouldn't be surprised if people immediately think you're responsible when things happen; it goes with the territory. That doesn't make it right; it just establishes that it's a fact of life. It's the reputation of a scoundrel. Even scoundrels don't deserve to have falsehoods draped onto them, though. Lies speak for themselves; new ones need not speak for you just because you've told others in the past.

As time moves me away from the argument, I see two things at play in my life, both of them gifts from God. The first is learning the difference between guilt and conviction. He takes away the guilt but leaves the conviction for the bad things I have done. This allows learning and redemption to take hold, enabling me to be better for Him because of it. This also allows me the conviction to stand up and say "that's not me" when I'm falsely accused. From the lives they lead now, you might never guess that many fine, upstanding people you know were all fundamentally misguided sinners.

The second thing I see is that the proverb for today is so true. False accusations have little basis. They can look like they are true, but that doesn't make them true. There can be great similarities between them and what's real, but that doesn't make them real. When examined under the magnifying glass of truth, they don't hold up. You don't need Atticus Finch to see through the sham of them: they simply fall apart on their own. Like a flitting bird, they flutter about trying to find a place to land, something to stick to; like a fluttering sparrow, they are easily blown around by the winds of life.

Some people want to look for the first thing to believe in. Some people want to transfer their shame, blame, and game to you, especially if they know you're struggling with those same things. Some people want to just feel better about themselves, and some people are hurting and looking for some kind of answer, some solution to stop the big and small hurts that plague us every day. All people need redemption from these things, and it's up to you and me to take the radical idea of being forgiven and loved to these people everywhere. What they do with it isn't up to us: we are simply supposed to go. Whether it's on the streets, in your living room, here on a blog, or riding the subway, we are supposed to go and be open to talking about these things so that everyone might understand what the Savior's forgiveness really means. Most people genuinely want to love and be loved. All of us are, but we don't let ourselves see it.

That's everyone including my former friend. I'm no longer friends with the person, and don't know what they are doing now. The life they led was one that I couldn't reconcile to my own, and the more I really got to know them, the more I found I couldn't be friends with them. They ended the friendship, but I was blessed from it. I suppose that sounds strange to say, but it's true because good comes from it. A friend of mine said last week, "time doesn't heal hearts. Jesus heals hearts." I agree one hundred percent. All I can do is hope and pray they are well and blessed too. We've shared this message before, my former friend and I, so I know it's on their heart as well. The best I can do is pray and hope they are well, and that the troubles of this world fly around like a fluttering sparrow, but that they land someplace else instead of on them.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 15 September 2011

A whip for a horse, a halter for the donkey, and a rod for the backs of fools! Proverbs 26, verse 3.

So I'm reading this verse to be another contrasting verse, pitting the lot of farm animals against the lot of animalistic fools. Do you think the horse gets tired of being whipped? Horses are smart animals. They express feelings and emotions. If a farmer or a jockey whips a horse to get it to do something, the horse does it. The animal has been domesticated and trained to perform an action in response to a stimulus. So, again I ask the question: do you think the horse gets tired of being whipped? Would you? I think the answer is obvious.

And do you think the donkey likes the halter? Animal halters come in one of two styles: the kind that rest over the animal's snout or the kind that rest in the animal's mouth. The ones in the snout restrict the animal from opening its mouth and doing some things, and their heads are turned when you pull the attached reins. Mouth halters have a bit that 'comfortably' rests in an indentation in the animal's jaw. It restricts the animal from eating, drinking and so forth, and is very effective at turning the animal one way or another. Humans don't have jaw indentations but I'm betting that, comfortable or not, I would not like having someone put something in my mouth to control me. So, here's the question one more time: do you think the donkey likes the halter? Again, I'm thinking it's another obvious answer.

Control: it seems to be all about control, and isn't that the reason for the whip, the halter, and a rod for the backs of fools? Even though I've been quite a fool, I haven't (literally) felt someone hit me with a rod or switch. But I have suffered the discipline of harsh words, arguments, scolding, shunning, hatred, loss, grief, job loss, lost relationships, marital dissolution, threats, anger, shame, humiliation, abuse, and a hundred other negative connotations. It's what happens when you act like an SOB...or a fool. I said it a few days ago that it isn't our faith in God that condemns us: it's our sins. What we do in life, some of what I've done in life, usually determines whether or not those negative actions come my way.

Sure, every now and then we come up against someone bigger, cannier, or meaner than ourselves, and yes now & then, random things happen that negatively affect us. Things we can't control happen and we're affected by them. That's not what I'm talking about. Generally speaking, when things happen to us, it is because they are consequences of other things occurring.

By and large, that's the way it is. It isn't a matter of us getting what we deserve: it's a matter of us bearing the consequences of actions. To avoid the pain, whether we like it or not, the best course of action is to learn. Learn to avoid the whip and don't do the bad things. Learn to turn when you should turn instead of being an ass and bucking the system. Learn to be better than our sinful nature would have us be. Maybe John Wayne summed it up best: "life is hard. Life is harder when you're stupid."

Don't be stupid. It's time to put off the ways of the fool and let God retool.

It stinks to be a farm animal, doesn't it? I mean, if you're a horse you get beaten, if you're a donkey you get worked, and if you're a cow, chicken, pig, lamb, you're destined for a dinner plate. The commentary at biblegateway.com said, "Every creature must be dealt with according to its nature, but careless and profligate sinners never will be ruled by reason and persuasion. Man indeed is born like the wild ass's colt; but some, by the grace of God, are changed." Me, I've had enough of feeling like a whipped horse or a controlled donkey. And I've definitely had enough of being a fool. It's time to keep doing better. More to the point, it's time to let God keep making us better. There's no contrast in that.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 16 September 2011

Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly or he will be wise in his own eyes. Proverbs 26, verses 4 and 5.

I'm learning to like Twitter. I've been a Facebook guy for awhile, and you've read about some of my struggles with that. Because I'm verbose, it's hard to condense my thoughts into less than 140 characters. Let's say I'm a work in progress. But let me share a Tweet that I sent yesterday, one that I think is a bit more than half-bad: "There is no such thing as spiritual methadone. God doesn't back us out of our addiction to sin: He cures and heals it."

Methadone works if you're a heroin addict. It replaces the highly addictive drug with a less addictive drug that's easier to control (and eventually stop using). I've known heroin addicts for whom it worked. You initially take the methadone in doses to rival the heroin, then gradually decrease it so as to wean your body off the drug. You can't easily back off heroin alone or go cold turkey off it because the cravings and coming off them are extremely painful. Replacing one drug with another is, therefore, one way to ease off the physical addiction.

That's not the case with our sins. We can't kick the habit of our sins, can't kick the addiction to them, simply by replacing one with another. If we do, we're answering the call of the fool and becoming like him ourselves. In the eyes of the fool, anything but the dysfunction he understands is stupidity. It's that way because it's so hard to see how messed up things are when you're in the middle of it. When you're drinking heavily, even when you know you have a problem, it's hard to kick the habit. When you're in an affair, it's hard to see how destructive that affair can be because you love the feeling of being wanted and you believe you need it. When you're spending yourself into bankruptcy it's hard to see how much of a slave you've become to that debt and how there are better ways to use the gift of money.

Pick your pet sin: it's the same cycle. That's what these 2 verses are saying. If you want to kick your sins, there isn't some sin-methadone you can take to back off the addiction. At some point, you have to stop. At some point, you have to say "no more." And at that point is when you ask for help. Sure, human willpower is a great thing but everyone has a breaking point. Eventually, you and I will reach ours and then it becomes all too tempting to slip back into the same, comfortable habits. We need help. We can't remedy those sins ourselves. We can't stay off them forever. Sisters & brothers, it's a tough thing to do!

Got Jesus?

That's the help the verses are pointing to. The cure for all my sins is the Man from Galilee. A few days ago, a friend of mine told another friend "time doesn't heal hearts. Jesus heals hearts." Amen. Nothing more to say. Jesus is the antidote and the cure, not the replacement drug. He isn't one sin for another: He takes away the burden of it from the inside out.

Is it that simple? Actually, it is. Fighting the temptation isn't easy, though. All my life I've waited for some moment when I felt the rush of redemption and the curing power of faith. I've felt it in fits and starts, but I've always desired feeling the complete rush of forgiveness in the moments I've wanted it most. One time I was very sick; I had an infection while I was TDY to the west coast. Immediately on my return home, my wife took me to the ER and they gave me an antibiotic injection. Almost immediately I felt the rush of the healing medicine going to work in my body. Almost immediately I felt better and started to heal. I've desired that same kind of spiritual rush.

But it hasn't happened. It may never happen, and it really isn't my place anymore to want or expect it. What does happen is that I get healed from my sin-addictions one by one, one battle at a time. Constant prayer is the first line of defense. When I feel weak or when I find myself getting dragged into saying or doing things I shouldn't, I pray. I ask for help because He always answers prayers, even when they aren't the answers we expect. When I'm stuck in the middle of a particular wrong, I pray, asking for guidance and help in turning from it. Same result: I get an answer. When I'm feeling bad about something I've done, I pray for forgiveness. I open up to God the same way I open up in these words.

Notice a trend there? It works. It can be tough to do, but it works. It's between me and God, and He always comes through. Before long, I find myself not just asking for help, but just talking with Him, thanking Him, dreaming with Him, being a friend with Him. It's an amazing thing. I might just look like a fool to some passer-by, yet it's anything but foolish.

Do I hear voices in my head or heart telling me "do this" or "do that"? No, I don't. But the words come from my conscience, and the verses or the advice or the encouragement hit me in such a way as to be helpful in the moment. That's God

speaking. That's His Spirit moving in my life, producing little miracles of strength, forgiveness and encouragement. It's tangible grace at work in me, healing my heart and helping me battle the temptations. Those temptations aren't going away, and they'll constantly try to drag me back. But now I've got a real fighter at my side, fighting for me from the inside out and shielding me from even the worst attacks. And the thing is, He WANTS to do this. He wants to be involved in our lives, be on our side, be with us, fight for us. All we have to do is ask.

It can work for you too. Here's the coolest part: He doesn't give up. You and I will slip and fall, make more mistakes. We won't try to or even want to, but it happens. When it does, He wants us back.

God isn't some replacement drug for our sins. He is the cure for them, and the more we bask in what He offers, the less attractive those vices become. Sure, I like a drink now and then (ok, more than that) but I don't have to tie one on. Sure, I enjoy the company of witty, brilliant and attractive women, but it's better to do things the right way and be a real man instead of some he-man. Sure, I enjoy what my wealth can purchase, but I don't have to keep holding up some Ponzi scheme of 'I'll catch up on the 15th.' How about you? Again, pick your pet sin or vice. God is bigger and He will fight for you because of this remarkable thing called "love."

I'll keep working on condensing my thoughts on Twitter, and (in a shameless plug) if you want to follow me, look for "daveinreallifet." I'm thankful and fortunate to be part of a Twitter community of encouraging, Spirit-guided men & women who use the medium for building each other up and sharpening each other in faith. It doesn't take much to offer that encouragement & sharpening and the proof is this: it takes far less than 140 characters to say "Jesus loves you." Everything starts with that and it's something that even fools like me can understand. (And, if you're counting, this post was 7,207 characters. Guess I need to keep working!)

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 19 September 2011

Sending a message by the hands of a fool is like cutting off one's feet or drinking poison. Proverbs 26, verse 6.

Good Monday everyone and, typical to Monday, I'm a bit slow on the uptake. It took me until today to realize that there is a trend in the first 12 verses of Proverbs 26; some intelligence analyst I was! You see, if you read up on them, you'll notice that the first 12 verses all talk about attributes of a fool. I noticed it while writing down the verse, thinking, "fool again?"

How foolish of me!

Skipping ahead, you'll later notice that verses 13 through 16 talk about the ways of a sluggard, and then the rest of the chapter talks about various other moral observations. It's almost as if God had entrusted the interpretation of His wonderful word to the hands of a fool, which is exactly what He did. You and I are good people, or at least we try & aspire to be. It's not that we intentionally mis-communicate, but I'm afraid something can get lost in the translation.

Now, of course, that's only when we're left to our own devices. The Bible is one of the most widely translated and yet diligently faithful books preserved from antiquity. No, I'm no archeologist, but I've read stories (as you might have too) about how most translations of Scripture we have are cannily faithful to the oldest original texts we have, some dating back thousands of years. Call me foolish – or faithful – but that's where I see God in the machine, influencing the hearts of the translators to stay true to what the original verses say.

That's my hope for these writings too. When I write them, I pray that God will somehow use me to speak through them to you, and that He will use these words to move His purposes in your life. It isn't my place to get you to do what I want you to do, but it is my place to offer up my opinions about what these proverbs mean to me and let that speak to you. After that, if you get anything useful out of them, please credit the original source – God – and not yours truly. I am but the scribe. It's not about me.

Please give Him the glory and credit because He's the one to which it's due. If left to my own ends, I would be all too likely to mess it up and put in what I think it should say instead of what it does. The minute that happens, POW! It's no longer God's word but Dave's word, and that word is like cutting off your feet or drinking poison. My word is nothing more than my opinion and you know what they say about opinions: everybody has one. And just who are 'they' anyway? Whoever 'they' are, they're opinion isn't much better than mine. Whoever 'they' are, their words, if not taken with a grain of salt and more than a few grains of prayer, could just be like mine: like cutting off your feet or drinking poison.

That's pretty harsh, though, right? I mean, the spoken word, an opinion, a thought can be like rendering one's self lame or committing suicide? Most definitely so. If you don't believe me, ask yourself when was the last time somebody said – or didn't say – something and it hurt you? When was the last time that something said to or about you hurt your feelings? Have you ever said something stupid and hurt someone, either deliberately or unintentionally?

Yeah, me too.

That means it wasn't from God. God is all love: everything He does, says, is or is about is about Himself, which is pure love. His pure love isn't hurtful or foolish in any way, though we can be hurt by what it says to us and we can feel like fools in light of what it says. That isn't a reflection of the Word, however: it's us, our flaws. And if we aren't careful, those flaws can get into the translation, sort of like a fly in your soup or a piece of eggshell in your scramble.

So here's a challenge: when you catch me saying something that isn't right or is foolish, untrue to the verse, or just downright stupid, email me and call me on it. That's what friends do for each other, and I will definitely appreciate it. I don't want to be the foolish messenger with such an important message. You might just be the answer to that prayer I mutter, and it might just be that God would be speaking through you too. In that light, it could just be a good Monday after all!

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 20 September 2011

Like the useless legs of one who is lame is a proverb in the mouth of a fool. Proverbs 26, verse 7.

Have you ever felt like a total fool? We've talked about this before, you and I, but let me take it to another level. Have you ever thought you really knew someone and then found out that all you knew about them was a lie? Have you ever invested your heart into a relationship only to have it smashed because the other person was untruthful from the core? Have you had your feelings so destroyed and dashed after counting on them for so long? If you've gone through divorce, you know what I'm talking about. If you've ever lost a best friend because of a falling-out, you know what I'm talking about too, or even if you're estranged from somebody in your family. And if you're God, well, you know it better than anyone. You and I do it to him every day.

It makes me feel like a fool to translate, describe, and talk about what these proverbs mean to me. It really does. Last year, at the hardest time in my life (up until then) God put it on my heart to write about His word and what it meant to me, what I was going through, to maybe help others in similar situations. Since that time, I've gone through even harder times. I had personal, heart-felt friend, someone to whom I became very close, who helped me through those times. In dark hours, she literally kept me alive and encouraged me to believe, to hold on. She helped me through until she herself became the fool and fell into traps of her own making. In doing so, I let myself become ensnared in her problems and dragged my loved ones, my friends, and my faith through them at the behest of someone whose intentions were untrue at best. In doing that, I sullied God's word, sullied the good love of people who actually do love me, and sullied my already tarnished reputation.

If you get anything good out of these messages then it is an answered prayer that God has touched you through them; none of the credit belongs to yours truly. None of it belongs to me because, as I've stated, I'm a fool. I'm a fool because I'm not fit to even open God's word let alone translate it for others to understand.

Now, I'm not going to beat up my emotions here again; that's too tawdry for a Tuesday morning and, besides, I've done it enough without point. My ex-friend was someone I thought I could trust, but then I learned that trust is a product of knowing you're in a loving relationship. My ex-friend did not know what real love was, nor did I apparently for I grew to mistrust her. What friendship we had evaporated in clouds of foolish suspicion.

So do you want to know the twist on all this? It's not about me. Repeat that again for effect: it's not about me.

Yes, I'm a fool and, yes, I made terrible mistakes in life. Who among this readership has not? Who among us has lived a sinless life? When all is done, it doesn't matter because life isn't about you or me or the fools we have been. Life isn't about me or my problems. Life is about Christ. Eternal life is about God seeing His Son clothing us in His purity instead of the foolish things we have said and done. In order for that to happen, God entrusts His wonderful word, his primary means of grace, to sinners who are filthy with indiscretions and misdeeds that should rightly disqualify us from even speaking God's word. Next time you look at your minister in the pulpit, remember that he might as well be naked and filthy standing up there for his (or her) standing before God is just as sinful as yours or mine. Yet God entrusts His amazing word to us that we might grow His perfect love here by building relationships with each other. To do that, we need to acknowledge that we're all broken, lame fools and then, hand in hand with that, selflessly pursue lives that say "it's not about me."

My ex-friend and I recently had a permanent falling-out from which I can't see we will ever recover. We each said things that, while true, were not said in kindness or affection. She no longer wants my companionship or friendship; I no longer want hers, or the toxic way in which I think she uses and poisons those around her. There are some people who use other people for their own purposes; I have done it and now someone did it to me. Without stretching the truth, I'm betting you have done it too. I look at the choices she has recently made with scorn, pity, and sadness...and then I remember that, when I look in the mirror, I see the reflection of my own bad choices and feel ashamed to have judged so quickly. It is moments like this one when I feel like a fool, like a lame fool with useless legs and even more useless words. They are useless, that is, until God calls them to more noble duty and turns my foolishness around into His glory. He does it by using fools like us to live through, love through, teaching us that it's not about ourselves but instead about someone much brighter.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 21 September 2011

As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly. Proverbs 26, verse 11.

Here's a cheery Wednesday verse if ever I saw one. I have a dog at home; I call him "4-Legged Josh" since my daughter's fiancé is named "Josh" (and he is "2-legged Josh"). I got the dog before the son-in-law but didn't have the heart to rename the dog once the man became part of my family. 4-Legged Josh is part pit bull, part Catahoula, and he's sweetest dog I've ever owned. He's very loyal, extremely gentle, and very intimidating given that he looks like the kind of dog Michael Vick might have fancied not too long ago.

And he's also as dumb as a bag of hammers. He runs in circles that have made a huge rut in my backyard. He bites himself even though he has neither fleas nor mange. He will drink out of the pond that is acrid at best. And then he will get sick...and then come back to lap it up.

Ick. Let's say that again: ick.

Nice visual, eh, even though it's of my sweet, black, blue-eyed and very lovable mutt? You've seen it: dogs will eat anything, including what they upchuck. They will retch, walk away from it, and then if the urge so strikes them, they will walk back and eat up what they just threw up. Say it again: ick. Repulsive, gross, sickening, disgusting: take your pick. It's 'ick'.

That's what it is when you and I repeat our sins. It's repulsive, gross, sickening, and disgusting to God when you and I keep repeating our same pet sins. Maybe it's your tendency to swear; maybe it's my desire for companionship; maybe it's spending money; maybe it's hatred. Maybe it's whatever sin you do that you keep doing. You and I are fools for doing the same things over and expecting a different outcome; by Einstein's definition, we're insane; by God's definition too. Yes, we are no different, no more icky, than a dog returning to lick up its own vomit when we, as fools, keep doing the same foolish things over and over.

Paul struggled with this too, you know. The greatest missionary in history, perhaps the greatest hypocrite ever turned for Godly use, was a fool who was just like a dog and its puke. Check out Romans 7: "We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it."

Are you or I any different? I didn't think so. What's the antidote to this? Got Jesus? Any questions? I find it amazing that it was a proverb, written hundreds of years before, that (like the rest of ancient Scripture) served as a reminder to the people of old of why they needed God to redeem them. And it's a proverb today that reminds you and I, modern people of today, of the exact same thing. The verse isn't prophetic; it doesn't forecast the coming of the Messiah. But it is a subtle reminder of why that Messiah is so important and why He was so needed then and now.

So on a cheery Wednesday, I'll think of 4-Legged Josh (and 2-Legged Josh as well) and remember that I'm no different if left to my own devices. The nature at work within me is always trying to get me to repeat my same mistakes, my same common sins. What is also at work within me – and what will always overcome my nature – is the Spirit of God who teaches us to follow Him and put off the old ways. The old ways can tempt, and they do. But they can't overtake us when we're robed in that Spirit, and empowered with its glory and love.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 22 September 2011

Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him. Proverbs 26, verse 12.

A friend of mine posted a Facebook status today that I borrowed for my own: "Seek justice, love mercy, walk humbly with my God." Thank you, Lee, for sharing your words; I hope you don't mind that they're being shared here, too. They are the perfect antidote for the foolishness of one who has seen 'wisdom' staring back at him in the mirror.

There is a lot of work to do in me when it comes to doing anything humbly. You see, I'm weary of not doing things humbly. Three college degrees have taught me very little that I actually value. I'm proud to have earned them, but those and a quarter still won't get you a cup of coffee at Peets, ya know? Staying in fancy hotels and jetting around hasn't satisfied my appetite for more. Indulging myself in my pet sins has left me feeling hollow and sad; letting the memory of them plague me has left me asking "why" and feeling frustrated. Most of the other things that the self-help books tell you to try, well, I've tried them. They bring me back to feeling that feeling of barrenness.

They left me feeling barren because they were all about me, about what I was feeling, or didn't have, or had been hurt by. Remembering that 'hope' isn't just a wish but instead a promise, the verse today promises frustration and anguish for someone who lives his life thinking he's all that and a bag of Fritos. It's saying that even the damndest of fools has more good in store for him than I do if that's how I live my life. That's an empty, hopeless prospect.

My friend's status is a soft-spoken reminder of the way I want to go through my days now. I want to seek, actively seek, God's love in my life. His love is what He is, does, and wants for us. He wants us to share it by walking humbly with Him in every moment, seeking to live out His love in real ways and letting Him live through us so others can know Him too. It really isn't that tough to understand, yet I've walled that off for so many years. In my heart, I put him in an intimidating room labeled "Sunday." I still haven't loved Him fully, trusted Him fully to take the helm in my life. "I can" has still ruled my thoughts." Surrendering my independence to Him has been something I've kept off limits. Sure, to be happy and successful, we humans are at our best when we're self-actualized and independent in our actions.

But to be REALLY happy is to actively love in a different way, letting our self-actualization be in Him and understanding that true freedom comes with giving Him control. That's what God wants. He wants us to be radically different in how we love (and, thus, how we live). He wants us to surrender both control of our actions AND control of the heart and mind that drive them. He knows what He's doing and all He is and does is done out of that pure love. Do you think that He who speaks all creation into existence can't manage to put a smile on your face? Do you believe that He who imparts beauty when you see a magnificent sunset would fail to encourage you when you need it? Do you understand that He who radiates peace through the face of a sleeping child would never fail to solve the inner problems that prevent you or I from knowing peace? He wants us to have that peace.

Where it starts is when I give up seeing myself as wise, as learned, as anything in fact and then start to walk humbly in how He wants me to go. I don't really know what path He will lead me down, but I trust that the walk will be the right one. And I believe it will totally rock. Unless it's where He calls me to go, I probably won't live like a monk...but you know that monasteries are probably not as dull as we think they are! After all, in the Middle Ages when the rest of Europe was moping around in serfdom, monks were practicing walking with God, clean living, and brewing some great beer!

There is this remarkable, supernatural harmony in the Almighty. In all He wrote in His words, there is complete consistency. In the way He imparts peace in our lives, there is real understanding and real hope and real truth. What mucks that up is when I bring "I" back into the equation. His words, His peace and His harmony are not lessened but how I let them rule in my life is. From time to time, I let His beauty shine through the clouds and I get to see how truly, amazingly cool it is. In those moments, I know what I want, and I see that what I want is to put off my burden of self and take up His privilege of love.

So it's time to, once again, put an end to that. If you've noticed, that's something that I've said over & over in the course of writing these 'columns:' that it's time to put an end to X, Y or Z. I'm human just like you. It's not an excuse; it's a fact. We slip and fall, we mess up. I do. I do it so much that I have let the sins of my past haunt me into thinking they will rule tomorrow. Thank God He walks beside me, even when I don't let myself see that He does. Thank God that He is there to take my hand, yet again, and say "I've got you" when I look past those clouds in my life and see His light. Thank God He gives you and I the daily chance to turn from the wrongs we've done and learn to rely on Him, to walk humbly beside Him and go where He leads us.

In other words, thank God for yet one more last chance to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with my God. When we do that, who I am in my own eyes becomes of miniscule importance because who I am in God's eyes is spectacular. Just like you are, who He can lead me into becoming is someone very much worth knowing.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 23 September 2011

Like an archer who wounds at random is one who hires a fool or any passer-by. Proverbs 26, verse 10.

Something interesting happened on my way into work yesterday; please don't take what I say here to be bragging because it isn't. I'm nobody worth bragging about. It's just to illustrate a revelation (of sorts).

I was working in San Francisco, where I've spent the last few weeks working with a city health plan. My career has allowed me to spend considerable time in the Bay Area over the last six years, and I've been fortunate enough to stay at posh hotels. Enough travel nets you high status, and I am privileged to take most of my meals in private concierge or members-only lounges when they're available. This week's hotel had one such lounge, so I had a free breakfast there every day.

If you've ever been to San Francisco, you'll remember that the city is full of homeless people. There are many reasons for this, not the least of them are both the tolerant atmosphere of the town as well as the fact that the city pays people a stipend if they are homeless. But I've been homeless myself, or at least nearly so, and I feel bad that others suffer when I don't. Homelessness is a seriously discouraging condition; who among us would desire it? Some of the homeless are troubled, some down on their luck, some are freeloaders; being Lutheran, I immediately assume the worst possible scenario about their condition.

Following the example of better people, I took to getting extra food from the concierge bar, then finding a homeless person and giving away the food. I have done this for years. By my selfish reckoning, this isn't a bad thing because chances are they are hungry. Besides, the free food would be either eaten by already satisfied customers or just thrown away. God wants us to help our brothers and sisters, and this was a way I could do so. Sometimes it was a cup of coffee, or a sweet roll, or (as in yesterday) a paper Starbucks cup full of fresh fruit.

So there I was, walking down Mission St towards the office when I chanced upon a bedraggled looking woman wearing rags. She was an older woman, holding a cup, asking for money. I walked up to her to do my good deed, and then our conversation went like this:

Woman: "Sir, do you have some change..."

Me: "No, but you can have this," and I offered her the cup of fruit.

Woman: "I don't drink after strangers," she curtly replied, thinking it was just a cup of coffee.

Me: "But it isn't coffee. See," and I took off the lid.

Woman: "I don't want that. I already ate," and she showed me her cup of spare change that others had already dropped into. She then shot me a dirty look from a dirty face.

Me: (shrugging my shoulders) "Good luck"

I walked away and said "so be it" to the wind. I also said a quick "God bless her" in a mostly heartless prayer as I walked down towards 3rd St and my turn to the office. The woman came off as a bit mean, and even a little selfish. I thought she was just a freeloader; there are many of them in the city. The exchange annoyed me, but it's happened before so it didn't annoy me too much. After all, there are plenty of other homeless people in the city and I would just find another one. If she didn't want my free gift, someone else would.

That's when it hit me: I'm her. I'm homeless, I'm lost and I'm troubled. Whether I have a quiet place to lay down my head is moot: I am her. I'm the selfish person who didn't want something wonderful offered to him. I'm the lost soul, begging for what I want but ignoring what's important. I am just like her, holding out my cup for more while turning away something that could help. In my pursuit of doing something to please God (and in reality doing it to please myself) I am both the archer who shoots random arrows and the fool who is hired on the spot to do Godly work. In my spiritual journey (as well as my daily journey on the streets) I am the selfish woman who wants something for nothing. I'm the person who shuns the goodness God offers in favor of pursuing something worthless. What's worse, instead of my heartless prayer, I should have indeed prayed hard for her, doing so with earnest hope instead of some social and meaningless epithet.

She is my sister, and Jesus loves her just as much as He loves you, me, or Fidel Castro. She may be a 'nobody' beggar working the streets of the city for spare change, but she is somebody to Him who created each of us. Her acts and her situation pain God just as much as when I make my own mistakes. Even more than this, she wasn't the self-righteous one walking along in public, looking for somebody on which to bestow his gracious gift of something that cost him nothing. Who is the better person: the shameless beggar or the shameful consultant? I know what I think.

Before I got to work, I did indeed find another homeless person. He was standing on the other side of the Moscone Center. He was a middle aged black man, also dressed in rags and smelling bad. At first, I saw him and started walking away because he was lighting a joint. Then I saw him look into a trash can and pull out a sandwich box – it looked like a Big Mac container – and then throw it away again. That was when I gave up my pretenses and walked up to him. I gave him the cup of strawberries and a banana I had in my coat pocket. He didn't appear to even notice me until I stood right beside him.

You know what he said? "Thank you, brother." He didn't know me from Adam, and maybe it was just a colloquial term, but he called me 'brother.' I responded "you're welcome, brother," I shook his hand and walked away. I realized that I am him too: hungry, cold, dirty, and looking for something to numb the pain I take on as I walk through the streets of this life. I realized that he and I really are brothers after all. Like the woman, He is important to God just as much as you or me.

Sometimes God gives us chances we don't deserve. It's called "grace." Sometimes He speaks to us quite plainly through His Word. Other times it happens through our conscience, or the Sunday preacher, or the kind words of a friend. And other times, God speaks to us through the predicament of strangers, letting us know that He knows what the score is, and that He loves us no matter what. Here's to hoping some careless, selfish and stupid archer doesn't shoot us with his arrows before we each get to share that with other people who may not know it.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 26 September 2011

The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road, a fierce lion roaming the streets!" Proverbs 26, verse 13.

Let's call this 'the Chicken Little verse.' I mean, the verse says that lazy sluggards make mountains out of molehills and seem to cower in fear. Assume the worst and run for cover! Someone call Fox News!

It can be a cowardly thing to live in fear. Take it from me: I know a lot about it. For a very long time, I haven't feared anyone. Call it foolhardy or stupid, what other people can do to me in this world really doesn't faze me much. I've spent years going to new jobs not knowing a soul and it really doesn't bother me. I went to Communist China knowing full well there could be consequences awaiting me there and I went anyway, knowing NOTHING could happen to me to take away my faith with God protecting me. I'm not afraid of new challenges, or even heights anymore; I used to be.

But two things terrify me, leaving me in abject fear. I'm genuinely afraid of being unemployed and I'm genuinely afraid of being alone. I suppose my fear of being unemployed centers on my pride, on my ability (or inability) to provide, to meet my commitments and see to my responsibilities. In my career of 30 years, I've always enjoyed work and have enjoyed being able to work. To have that taken away, justly or unjustly, leaves me in fear. And when you live afraid of what could happen, you become a coward. You become cautious and close yourself off to both the negative things as well as the good things that God could be trying to move in your direction.

Ditto being alone. I was a shy loner as a teenager; I was an Army brat, after all. We quickly learned to leave relationships behind when you moved to new areas. I went from being a social, outgoing nine year old to being a quiet, shy, nerdy loner by the time sixth grade rolled around. I didn't date much, I withheld my emotions, and I stayed alone. But when I joined the military I gradually came out of my shell. I grew to thrive on company, craving being able to share my thoughts, time, and sometimes more (and that caused more troubles than are worth going into on a Monday). These days, I sometimes feel afraid when I feel isolated and alone.

Boil it all down and these are both irrational fears as well as stupid things to be afraid of. In both cases, I have both no control and limited control. I am in a career field where there are a limited number of people with a specialized skill set; if one company doesn't want my skills, chances are I could find another. I am fortunate to have been well-educated and am, in the opinion of a few biased voices, erudite. Unemployment, even now in middle age, need not be something of which I'm afraid. And I am blessed to know people all over the world. If you and I go to a major city, chances are I can find someone I know there, or someone who has been there who can hook us up with a connection of some sort. Despite my tendency to withdraw, when I get into a new situation, I now try to find commonality and strike up conversation. It doesn't take long to get to know people. So, like unemployment, being alone is not something of which I need really need to be afraid.

When I get all wrapped around the axle about my fears, I feel like Chicken Little. "The sky is falling!" "This project is a death march!" "You don't know how it feels to be me!" (Ok, maybe Tom Petty does). "I'm so scared!" Yep, Chicken Little, standing in the street, yelling about how the sky is falling and all is doom and gloom. When I get wrapped up in my fear, my faith seems small.

Isn't that a lazy thing to do? I mean, it takes real courage to stand up to your fears, to trust in God and the abilities He has given you to get you through and persevere. It is so easy to give up and give into your fears, to just say "I can't." Sure, there are times when we might consider stopping our efforts: when we have tried and failed repeatedly, or when we are in no-win relationships, or when the impediments to success are insurmountable or obvious. When that happens, we should prayerfully consider our options. But if it means surrendering to fear, aren't we being lazy? Isn't it the more industrious, courageous, honorable, and Godly thing to do to stand up, face the fear, and then act accordingly? Even if it means defeat, perhaps that defeat means success? Even if it means giving up, maybe giving up means getting ahead?

I think it still boils down to my stupid pride because there is something overriding both of these fears (and the mitigating factors). The single point that renders my fears moot is that God is with me. No matter what a hurting and confused world, or miserable demonic plagues can throw at me, nothing can shake my faith in God. I can get hurt, abused, impoverished, encircled, even killed and NOTHING can make me say "I reject God." Because of that, He is always with me, always keeping my spirit gold and keeping it safe. At the end of my troubles, like the old time Gospel song says, "some glad morning when this life is over I'll fly away." That's one of my very favorite hymns because it's so, so true.

With God all things are possible.

How about you? Have you ever felt like Chicken Little? Are you living in fear of anything? Are you paralyzed by what could, might, or possibly happen? If you are, have you tried praying? I know it helps me. I'm no Pollyanna, but when I take my fears to God I find they're really pretty small and that I can stand up against them. The lion in the street may be an alley cat, and the sluggard may find his strength. That short last paragraph is very much worth repeating: with God, all things are possible.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 27 September 2011

As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed. Proverbs 26, verse 14.

I'll admit: when I first read this verse, I thought, "this is a verse about my teenage son." When I was his age, I didn't sleep much. I just didn't. It's true: many people sleep more than I do; I'm an early riser. I'm usually up by 5 and into my day not long after. Not so my son (and, for that matter, one of his older sisters). Over summer vacation, they slept for hours. Were it not for school, I think my son could sleep until noon every day! Sure, he's a teenager at the end of one of his primary growth spurts. The young man is tired because he's active and his body gets worn out every day. I'm sure staying up late at night to watch online movies or late night TV has nothing to do with it.

And that's why I thought of my son – indeed every teenager – when I first read this verse. As a sometimes-tolerant parent, I find teenagers to be either very industrious or incredibly lazy. Yes, that's painting with a pretty broad brush, but, then again, so is the proverb. It's making a generalization about lazy people. And after raising three teens, I gladly make that generalization! After all, it's inevitable that teenagers will sleep forever. Parents ALWAYS nag them to pick up their dirty clothes, hang up towels, do homework, chew with their mouths closed, put down the cell phone, not text at the table, say "yes m'am" to their mom's, and to put their shoes in their rooms instead of in front of the sofa. Inevitable! Teenagers are lazy! It's like a turning hinge, B following A, and movies with Kris Kristofferson being commercial failures.

That's when I remember to not be a jerk and to put down my broad brush. After all, I was a teenager once and I don't think I exited my adolescence with every answer I needed in life. I know plenty of adults who are less than industrious and I need to remember that I'm looking at life with thirty years of work and life-experience under my belt. My son is looking at life with only half that time behind him and all of it at home. He has learned to read when all conventional reading instruction is stacked against dyslexics like him. Dirty laundry is kind of repulsive but in the long run, when compared to teenagers on crack or teenagers in jail, it isn't even a misdemeanor. I don't think teenagers today have it any tougher than teenagers in any other time, but I do believe the threats & challenges facing them are more complicated and imperative. Knowing that, does it really matter if they give me a little lip or don't put their dirty dishes in the sink?

What's more, my son's two older sisters held jobs at fifteen and were each paying car payments by the time they were 18. Both of them live independently, pay their own bills, and hold down full-time jobs; one of them also goes to college full time and the other will be starting in January. They are hardly sluggards. Indeed, what seems inevitable is that their success today follows hard work and lots of faith in the past. They're using the talents God gave them to start making their ways in a tough world. That's something to be VERY proud of, not ridicule.

Most important of all, I wonder what God thinks of what I do. I KNOW He loves you and me just the way we are. He meets us on our level and doesn't consider us to be insufficient for His wonderful grace. Still, I wonder what He thinks of some of the crazy, stupid things I do. I'm pretty good about keeping the house cleaned and the laundry folded and food in the fridge. I'm also the man who sometimes chooses those mundane tasks over spending time with my young son. God has gifted me with the opportunity to share these words with you, yet I'm the foolish sinner who can relate, from my own experiences, to the sins and things the Proverbs teach us to avoid. I'm the guy with the short fuse and the petty grudges and the anger at good people who did wrong things: just like me. I know God loves me just the way I am, but He surely must shake His holy head at all the really dumb things I've done.

In that light, shame on me. At mid-life, I still act very much like a teenager, but one with more years, more pounds, and more gray hair than your average screamo emo. I work hard and I do my best, but I still sometimes fall short. And my kids learned from me. In that light, yes, shame on me. My teens weren't (and aren't) lazy. They're teenagers. They are anything but sluggards. Indeed, no father could be prouder. I should be privileged to think they learned that at home as well.

So before ending this, I don't want to leave you with the impression that my son is hopeless. He isn't. Just yesterday, he was complaining that he didn't want chicken (or even pizza!) for dinner, so he got a steak out of the freezer and grilled it himself. And lately he has taken to unloading the dishwasher without even being told. Want a dessert? Call my son: he will deep-fry beignets for you! He really isn't lazy (unless you want him to get his laundry done). He's just a teenager. Knowing that, aren't we all?

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 28 September 2011

A sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth. Proverbs 26, verse 15.

In contrast to yesterday's verse, this one definitely is NOT about teenagers. If you don't believe me, let me ask: have you ever seen teenagers eat? In addition to eating meals, teenagers graze! It's kind of like watching a one-person swarm of locusts descending on your pantry, especially if there are honey buns, Swiss rolls or Pringles sitting on the shelves. Teenagers (or at least those in my experience) are not sluggardly or lazy in how they bury their hands in the food bowl. With high octane appetites, most teenagers I've known have been anything but lazy in that whole hand-to-mouth action.

Let's take this beyond food. What is this verse really about? I mean, the Almighty is free to give us advice about laziness and eating, but it's eating at me that I don't quite think that's what it's really about.

First off, it's about giving up. I'll admit it: I've been lazy. A look around my house shows both industriousness and utter laziness. I loathe ironing, filing things on the desk, yardwork in 95 degree heat, dusting, and cleaning windows. Looking a bit deeper, I'm also averse to confrontation, calling Time Warner to find out why they charged me an extra connect fee, doing a work document on spreadsheet data comparisons, deleting old recordings off the DVR, talking deeply about some things that have recently hurt me, and prayer. I pray quite a lot, but there are some things that I only pray about around the edges; I avoid them because the wounds hurt. So what's my reaction? Like the man too lazy to bring his hand to his mouth, I give up. I just give up on them and walk away thinking that they'll take care of themselves. You and I both know how that usually turns out. And we both know that I – and you too, when you do these same kinds of things – would be much better off to not give up, to keep in the game, and to open my heart and handle the hurts. More than that, if I open my heart and let God handle the hurts, then healing begins in earnest. If I do that, more than the furniture might get dusted.

Another thing that the verse is about is having blessings in front of you and taking them for granted. I see a pile of filing on my desk, but I don't always see the blessing to pay the bills, have the desk, and address my responsibilities. The ironing piles up every week, but I tend to forget to be glad I have a washer & dryer (that are currently functional) that enable me to have clean clothes in good repair. Daily I let myself get wrapped around the axle of living in angst, but I quickly ignore the fact that God blesses me through my family, and that He blesses me by allowing challenges, situations, and even the hurt in my life so that I might learn to better rely on Him. He isn't arrogant: He's loving. I take that love, and I take all these things and more, for granted, assuming it will always be there. Mind you, nothing can take His love away; it IS always there. What may not be is someone's acceptance of it. Nothing, not even Satan himself, can take God's love & presence away from you or me...but we can reject them. That thought is too terrible to contemplate. I may not reject God in my life, but I do take Him and his grace for granted.

Finally, I read the verse to be about being at the table but not being in the game. Come on now, you know about this one too. You eat but you don't enjoy the meal. You're at work but you really aren't 'into it' today. You're sitting on the sofa, listening to your significant other but not really engaged in the conversation. You feel like you're drifting, you daydream more than usual, you find yourself spending more time on Facebook and less time with your kids or your in-person friends or others. Shall I stop harping? Has one of these things resonated with you? They're all examples of my life in just the last 48 hours; how about you? Could it be that you and I have been a bit lazy? Could we do with a little "High School Musical" advice and "getcha getcha getcha head in the game?" Or maybe some Shug Avery: "maybe God is trying to tell you something."

Truth is, I believe He is.

I read this verse to be all these reminders and more. My Wednesday take on this verse is that God is indeed trying to tell us something: shake it off and walk with me. Shake off the laziness and follow. Be mine in the world by using those wonderful talents I gave to you! Don't give up because I don't give up on you! And, yes, getcha head in the game.

I'll also read it as a reminder to put some more snacks in the pantry in preparation for the inevitable graze that happens when your teenage son comes home from school. In reality, there are quite a few good things in the pantry, despite the pleas of "there's nothing to eat in this house." In fact, I just bought a few more yesterday. My head was in the game for that; here's to working daily to keep it in the game in better and more important ways.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 29 September 2011

A sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven people who answer discreetly. Proverbs 26, verse 16.

Please walk with me for a moment. Instead of just talking about this verse, let's look at what other Bible translations say about it. The King James version of it says, "The sluggard is wiser in his own conceit than seven men that can render a reason." The Good News, another common translation, says, "A lazy person will think he is smarter than seven men who can give good reasons for their opinions."

In the New Oxford Annotated Bible, the verse reads, "the lazy person is wiser in self-esteem than seven who can answer discreetly." The Book says, "lazy people consider themselves smarter than seven wise counselors." And The Living Bible translates the verse as, "Yet in his own opinion he is smarter than seven wise men."

What's the point in reading all these translations? I present them because I think it's interesting how "sluggard" universally translates to "lazy," which is no surprise. But what does surprise me is how "conceit" becomes "smarter" which equals "wiser in self-esteem." It's true that these are all synonymous words and phrases, but it interests me how they all eloquently describe the concept of self-centered vanity.

Point? You don't have to be a know-it-all to learn things like this. And being a know-it-all DOESN'T help, you know. I'm one; I should know. I'm a vain, conceited, smart aleck know-it-all who sometimes loses the forest for the trees in thinking he's always right and that he's wiser in his self esteem than a room full of Stephen Hawking's. All I did was look up a few different translations from Biblegateway.com or from the books on my shelves; anybody can do that. I've worked in rocket science and this isn't rocket science! What it is, I hope, is an object lesson in a few simple points.

First, that the same thing can be said well in different ways. Then, that it doesn't take anyone special (even a know-it-all) to sound smart or analyze universal concepts. Another lesson is that, no matter how you describe selfishness, whether it is described as conceit, being smarter than other people in the room, or a wiseacre, selfishness is still selfishness. That rose, by any other name, would still not smell too sweet.

Finally, there is something to be said for the cool, calm quiet of confidence. I admire such people. I admire people who keep their cool, who speak calmly and quietly. People I know have rightfully said that drama hugs me; that's true. Making bold statements seems to come natural to me. That isn't how I want to be, though. If I could change myself, I would become quieter, maybe a bit more contemplative, maybe less vocal. The opinions of a cool, calm, collected man hold more weight with me than those of a loud, overactive, boisterous know-it-all whose insecurities seem to outweigh his good sense.

The good news is that we can change. The over-eager overachiever can learn to cool his jets. The know-it-all can begin to listen instead of responding. The vocal man can learn to hold his tongue, and the boisterous loudmouth can become more cool, calm and collected. What is the common denominator? You know: God. Time doesn't heal hearts: God heals hearts. Time makes the hurt lessen and fade; time teaches the know-it-all to use his words sparingly; time teaches the loud man to become quiet. Through that, however, it is God who heals the heart. It is God who changes us from the outside in. He inspires us to think differently, speak in new ways, act in new ways. Before we know it, we change. That means we can change for the better.

No matter how you translate that, it can be a good thing. And it doesn't take a know-it-all to see it.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 30 September 2011

Like one who grabs a stray dog by the ears is someone who rushes into a quarrel not their own. Proverbs 26, verse 17.

I've been blessed to learn much in my forty-five trips around the sun. My journey has led me to be father to three of the greatest kids you'll ever know. Life's path has taken me to 49 of the 50 states (the straggler: Vermont) and twenty foreign countries. Three college degrees have certified me to be a true educated idiot; roll Tide, Forrest. And while I was at my weight minimum on entering the Air Force in 1985 (118 pounds), I currently top the scales at 190 pounds (though I did see 189 just the other day).

Know what? Much of those things mean a whole lot of nothing. After battles of depression, financial woes, job struggles, personal battles, identity crises, and a sometimes troubled spirit, the only real, lasting, and true wisdom I've found in this world comes from Scripture. That should be no surprise to you since you've been reading these proverbial these months together. Brooks and Dunn sang it best: "I'm finding more and more truth in the words written in red." So am I, guys. So am I. Thank God for that.

And today's words aren't even written in red; they were written centuries before that time, yet aren't they still good advice today? I mean, please tell me what good came out of the last time you got into somebody else's fight? I'll admit: I've done it. I've stuck my nose into other peoples' fights and all it did was cause more trouble. It really is like grabbing a stray by the ears. That dog might be a gentle lap dog or it might just be an angry mutt gnarling to take a chunk out of your hand!

Besides, let's admit another thing: do you really want someone else solving your problems for you? I don't. I resent it when people butt into my life and try to fix me. An old friend of mine was someone like that, always telling me what was wrong with me and how I should fix myself. It left me feeling foolish, and a little ticked off. After all, didn't she have problems of her own, proving she was less than perfect? And who was she to go along and judge me anyway?

In truth, she was just like me. Like it or not, though, we do judge each other. It happens, and too often we think we know the answers for the other guy's questions. How else can we account for gossip and know-it-all's? Again, I resent it when other people try to tell me what to do. I'm a big boy and I'd like to figure it out on my own. I don't like it when other people try to rush into my quarrels; I can hold my own in an argument. I'm independent, I'm stubborn, I'm resourceful, I'm smart, and I'm talented...

...And I'm thinking that this is another good time to remember that I'm also finding more and more truth in those words written in red, that "I" is a risky pronoun. I'm finding more and more truth in realizing that, sometimes, people try to involve themselves in our quarrels because they love us. True, some people are indeed busybodies and, like my old friend, people who will gladly try to fix us while they themselves are still badly broken. In the end, we both need the Savior to do the fixing because His is an example of a situation where we couldn't fix ourselves – we couldn't resolve the quarrels – and we needed someone's help to set things right. Without Him, we would be lost; without Him, we'd be holding the stray dog by the ears.

So, a life of learning, travel, experience, and even family has been a blessing. When compared to the wisdom of the ages that is God's word, my earthly wisdom is meaningless. Yet every day here I consider to be a gift. Every day is something new and something to be thankful for, enjoyed, and celebrated. There is enough hardship in the world – there are enough angry dogs and selfish quarrels – that it would be all too easy to sidestep the real joy. During my next trip around the sun, I'll remember more of those words written in red, and I'll dance more in the music of His joy.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 3 October 2011

Like a maniac shooting flaming arrows of death is one who deceives their neighbor and says, "I was only joking!" Proverbs 26, verse 18 and 19.

This one kind of bothers me. Yesterday, I was talking with a friend at a men's retreat I attended and we were talking about this. I asked him "what do you make of these verses" and he said what I was feeling: "man, I don't know but it sure sounds like me. I do that all the time and my kids are even picking it up." It hit me that I do it too. I mean, sometimes it's a matter of pulling their legs. Lots of people do that with their kids; it's a part of parenting. The kidder kids his kids, right? We play jokes and kid around, and a good sense of humor is important; my friend and I both agreed on this. But then, with some contemplation, the verse seemed to be saying a little bit more.

Instead, I think it's a case of deliberate deceivers. Do you do that all the time too? Do you cut down other people, or say and do things that deliberately deceive them and then come along and say "I was just kidding?" I hope not. That's because there really are people who will say one thing and deliberately mean another. When you confront them, they'll tell you that they were only joking, or that they never meant any harm, or that they didn't really mean what they said. They'll do it with a wink and a smile, or maybe by staring you down. I'm sure that's happened to you; it has to me, even from people I trusted implicitly. When it happens, it hurts deeply, like I've shot with a flaming arrow, and we can be left emotionally wounded and without recourse. Do you know what I've found works best to heal that wound? Prayer; prayer for them and where they are and what they became. I find that, the more I meet people who hurt me, the better is that privilege: to pray for them. That beats any joke.

Sometimes the prayers come very late. I remember once in 8th grade. I was, well, naïve. I remember several of the cooler kids in the class played a prank on me involving one of the prettier girls in school. At that age I was not very handsome, and I was socially awkward. I had a crush on this same girl, whose name was Mary. She and several of 'the clique' played the prank that she also had a crush on me. Like an idiot, I didn't catch on to it until later, and I decided that I would go to Mary's house and confront her and say I wasn't interested; real slick and cool, you know. I rode up there on my bike, rehearsing my speech, feeling all confident. I felt pretty stupid when she sat on her front porch and listened to me, then shook her head and walked inside. Being naïve, awkward, and inept in the ways of the heart, it took me awhile to catch on that it had all been a ploy, a joke to make the new kid look small.

Know what? Thirty-plus years later, long after the cool kids of eighth grade have grown into whoever they are today, it really doesn't matter. Occasionally I think of the incident, and I'll admit: occasionally it still stings, if only a little. That's where I learn to do that prayer thing again. It helps to pray for them, wherever they are, and trust that their lives, that Mary the cutie's life, have turned out well.

Yes, Virginia, there really is a Santa Claus but, yes, Virginia, there also are some really bad rats in this world who (as the Chairman of the Board sang) "get their kicks stompin on a dream." There really are people who will use you for their own purposes. There really are people who will excise you from their lives because you don't do what they want and they'll tell you that they meant no harm, that it was all just a joke. We don't want to think about it but there really are people in the world who will shoot flaming arrows at our hearts and mean to do it. Then, when something exposes them, they will say "just kidding" or "that's not what I meant."

And when that happens, we get to pray for them. Go all Matthew 5 on them and pray for them. Do it not because you have to, or not even because you should but, instead, do it because you can and because it's the right thing to do. The people who would use and abuse us are children of the Most High just like you and I are. In our lives, they may cause torment but to Him they matter. That means their welfare should matter to us too. I'm not saying forgive and ask them into your home and pretend every day is Christmas morning (but if that's where you're led then knock yourself out). But I am saying spread a little mercy and pray. Doing that shows His love and it's always the right thing to do.

This weekend, I attended that men's retreat and one of the things the lead speaker challenged us to think about was "are you a fan or a follower?" Are you a fan or a follower of the Savior? Are you in the bleachers, or in a comfortable corporate hospitality box, or on the sidelines, or are you someone on the field, cleaning towels, or coaching? Are you in the parade or are you waiting for someone in the parade to throw candy to you? If you're going to be just a fan, then enjoy the game and enjoy the periphery. That's not what He calls us to do, but if it works for you, then go ahead and enjoy the show. When your life is over, I hope it was the right choice.

No, He calls us to be followers, to give our lives our all by loving the way He loves. He says, "I love you SO MUCH exactly the way you are, despite all you've done, because I made you as you." Then he says, "you know how I love you? Go do the same with other people." He wants us to love selflessly and we get to do that, or at least try. In my experience, the first step in doing that is to pray for the people who throw those flaming arrows at you. When you do that, the arrows can't penetrate down deep where they were supposed to hurt. When you do that, the fact that people use and abuse you doesn't matter as much, and it doesn't bother you the way it used to. I challenge you to try it today.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 4 October 2011

Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down. Proverbs 26, verse 20.

I'd like to talk about two sides to this verse. The most obvious is about fighting. The writer sure does seem to say that quarrels start over some kind of trivial thing. And let's be real: all gossip is trivial. The motive behind the gossip may not be, but the gossip itself, the content, usually is. Sometimes you argue over real issues; sometimes you just fight over pride or, as mentioned, gossip. One side is slighted and the other responds. Usually, gossip leads to conflict, so it only stands to reason that, without the gossip, the conflict can die down. Just like a fire that is denied fuel.

Then there is the other side of it, a side that has nothing to do with quarrels but, instead, with relationships. A friend of mine once told me that people come into our lives for seasons or reasons. We make friends and acquaintances for a time being or for forever. When they are for the time being, we have common purposes and common mission, sort of like a project team. When they are forever, they are people with whom we share everything, open ourselves to vulnerability, and become true friends. With chemistry and time, we love. These are the kind of friends we can count on to 'be there for us' when we need them. Years can come and go between our times together, but we always have a connection. We're friends for a reason.

With 'season people,' when the fuel or need goes away, the relationship does too. Just like a fire that goes down, so do relationships. It doesn't mean it will be forever; only God knows whether it will or not. But the primary reason is satisfied and the relationship ebbs. Whatever it was that drew you together is done or gone and the relationship wanes. Maybe it is circumstances, or you drift apart, or there could even be a fight: the fire dies out and so does the friendship.

The reason for contrasting these two obvious differences is to ask the question: what could make both common? You know the answer. God can bridge the gaps in an argument, and God can bind friendships and relationships when nothing else will. Especially between men and women, when quarrels come and lead to an impasse, our human ability to heal usually breaks down. We break up, we fall apart, we leave; we drift apart, we come back together, we reunite. The glue that can hold all those things together is supernatural. It is love. It is the author of love.

Knowing that, I think it's amazing to note that, if you rewrote the verse as "With God a fire never goes out; with God a quarrel never starts up" that it makes just as much sense (and is just as instructive) as if you'd left it alone in the first place. Try putting your name (or mine) where "God" is and see if it would hold true. You know the answer to that one as well.

It doesn't work because we aren't God. Try as we might, we can't even play God. We bicker, we quarrel, we are ourselves. That isn't what He does. If we hope to be happy, to repair hope from hopelessness, to find love in a world hostile to it, we need His help. It just doesn't work any other way. Fans try it on their own; followers try God. Fans see the fire go out when hope wanes; followers see opportunity when hope wanes by calling on Him for help. Me, I choose to follow, even when I don't always do a good job at it. I don't like gossip and I don't like it when the fire goes out. How about you? How about let's avoid the former and stoke the latter by fueling our inner fire with He who was in the burning bush?

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 5 October 2011

As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife. Proverbs 26, verse 21.

I'm a drama king. That's what I've been told. Ask my high school English teacher: I was the lead in our senior class play. All my life I have been drawn to drama. I love old movies, compelling TV shows, and great theater. Very often, I have a flair for the flashy, and like to arrange time, meetings, schedules, even work to be memorable. Quick with a joke, pausing for effect, and bracing for impact: some of that can be good because effect helps your fellow 'walkers' to remember points. I'm fond of saying to classes I've taught that I would do anything, say anything, be anything to get them to remember the important points of our lessons. That comes easy when an itch for the spotlight is etched into your soul.

What's more, I used to like to argue a lot. Of late, I've grown quite weary of arguing, fighting, and even debating. That's not the case through most of my life. Up until just the last year or so, I would debate you about anything. Too often, I wanted to be right, not seeing how destructive that desire could be. Sometimes it was more than just standing up for something I believed in: sometimes I just liked to talk, to parry points back and forth. That can be good and that can be bad. Even today, several friends and I have long, rambling debates online from opposite ends of the political spectrum. I enjoy debating these people because, for the most part, they present good, solid arguments for things they believe in (even when they're wrong...) and so do I. We discuss without demeaning, take stands without having a 'take no prisoners' attitude. To me, that's healthy and good. It wouldn't take much, however, to take it the extra few words and twist it into something unhealthy. God keep me from doing that.

Still, just ask anyone who's ever really loved me: me and the Black Crowes, we can be hard to handle.

But I'm not quarrelsome. In fact, I detest fighting. When pushed, I'll fight, and I warn potential opponents that I fight hard. After all, some things – faith, hope and love chief among them – are worth fighting for; ditto for family, friends and liberty. Anything else, however, may not be worth the effort. I detest fighting with people, especially over petty things. Nowadays, I would rather walk away from a fight looking weak than get down and dirty over things that, in the long run, really don't matter. It isn't hard to do, especially when (as a child) I wasn't known for being very tough or even standing up for myself. Today, I'm hoping this is a fruit of faith and middle age and experience, of seeing things more as they are than as I wish they would be. The lens of belief in God and what He does in our lives helps to quell any quarrelsome response.

I'm thankful for that; really am. I'm thankful for it because I never want to be the man who kindles strife anymore. Followers of God don't do that. Followers ask themselves "what would He want us to do" instead of just "what should I do." It would be too easy to be all dramatic and argumentative and quarrelsome when even small things happen. That's not what God would do, though, and it isn't what He wants for you, me or any of us. Instead, he counsels patience and caring. That starts with listening, backing away from the computer, putting down the cell phone, biting my lip and repeating to myself what's been said. After listening comes prayer, sometimes quickly and sometimes longer and more deliberate. Following that comes the real following, namely asking myself "what's my motivation" and "what do You want me to do here, Lord?"

Sometimes these things all happen in milliseconds and sometimes it's a process that takes hours. I'd much rather have it take whatever time it needs to fuel me and fire my life right than be the kindling wood to feed some useless argument, stupid drama, or petty reaction. When you get to know me, I think you'll find my love and caring are strong, quiet, and deep. Those are the qualities for which I want to be known. Those are qualities from Him, and are built up by taking this better approach.

Mind you, I also don't want to be the doormat that stronger souls can walk on. That, too, would be easy, seeming to surrender in everything and letting people have their way with me. Here is another place where the example of Christ fits, or His apostle Paul. They stood up and proclaimed, but they also let small things roll off them. Not compromising on principle or matters of faith, they used their words and actions for effect as the Spirit led them to do so. If you think about it, that's a pretty good precedent to follow.

So follow I will, and as the king of drama I'll keep working to minimize my responses and maximize His intentions. That isn't easy; got skin, got sin, and it's always prowling around looking for ways to trip me up. But it's powerless against abiding faith in Him. That faith is a shield, a sword, a pen, and soothing medicine for all of life's woes and gut-wrenching challenges.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 6 October 2011

Like a coating of glaze over earthenware are fervent lips with an evil heart. Proverbs 26, verse 23.

We used to live in Colorado Springs. In that city, there is a company called Van Briggles Pottery, where they produce some of the most beautiful pottery you'll ever see. Van Briggles has been around since 1899, and is famous for producing pots, vases, and designs in very subtle shades of earth tones, turquoise, and even a light purple. The company's founder, a man named Artus Van Briggles, perfected a glazing method similar to that used in ancient China, producing pottery with a satin finish that is protective, silky to the touch, and almost mysterious in how it reflects light while enhancing the color of the clay.

Such things don't last forever, you know. They are of the earth and will, in God's good time, return to the earth; just things, not permanent. Pottery artisans design, mold, and fire for permanence, seeking to make things that will last a long time. In doing that, they use olden-times techniques to protect the clay they shape for years of heavy duty use. The next time you pick up your dinner dishes, or buy a new flower pot at Lowes, remember that the process to make those modern day goods is little different from that used four thousand years ago in Mesopotamia. The potter selects clay, then colors and molds it on a wheel using primarily tools and water to achieve a shape. The molded clay is allowed to dry, then colored or painted further. A glaze is applied to protect the clay, then it is fired in a kiln to transform the translucent glaze into a protective shield. Once cooled, voila: pottery.

It's that glaze that can be deceptive. Like the Van Briggles pottery, it is the glaze that protects, shields, deflects water and light, and has feel to it. No wonder the author of the proverb used it as a metaphor for what we say and why we say it. Like that mysterious finish the Colorado artists produce, warm, feeling, intense words can protect and shield what lies beneath...or what lies are beneath. The words can feel smooth on the surface, silky and magical, tempting to hear. Beneath that is what they mean. That's where the proverb is urging caution.

You know the maxim; it may be as old as the proverbs: if it sounds too good to be true, then it probably is. Some healthy skepticism is in order for everything we hear and read, even these messages. "What does that mean, Lord" and "what are they really saying" are, in my opinion, the first, best questions we can ask to discern meaning. What is he saying, Lord? Do words and actions line up? Is the speaker saying one thing but meaning another? What about those non-verbal signs that contain 80% of our communication? Could what's being said contain a mixed message, sounding good when it hits the eyes or ears, but also containing subtle poison for our souls? If we don't ask these things, what we take in through those eyes and ears could make us sick deep inside.

The cure? Let your yes mean yes and your no mean no. Christ said that. Words written, said, or spoken always pass His litmus test, revealing their nature. When His Spirit discerns intent, it always does so honestly, exposing the nature of words so that we can understand what He wants us to do with them. Those two questions can help us cut to the chase and cut through the fluff. What looks or sounds beautiful on the surface may indeed be beautiful underneath. Or what looks or sounds good on the surface may just be a mask to hide evil intent so that said intent might take root in your heart. Yes, skepticism is in order but, in this case, it's a healthy skepticism placed at God's feet and asking Him for His help so that we might say and do what is right.

If you enjoy such artwork, then take a trip to Colorado Springs and visit the Van Briggles gallery. Or, check for them online at <http://www.vanbriggles.com>. My mom has several of their pieces; when we lived in town, the Van Briggles factory store was a regular stop during her visits. A few weeks back, we were in town and drove by the old shop, which was closed down. That made me sad, but then some research showed they simply moved to a new location; gotta love living in a recession, you know? I like the look and feel of their pottery, and if you come to my house, you'll find a few pieces here as well. When I look at them today, I'll remember God's verse and think about how that coating on the surface protects the time and love put into the craft. And when I read or listen or hear words today, I'll try to be a bit more skeptical, asking Him to reveal what He's telling me, then following along where He wants me to go.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 7 October 2011

A malicious man disguises himself with his lips, but in his heart he harbors deceit. Though his speech is charming, do not believe him, for seven abominations fill his heart. His malice may be concealed by deception, but his wickedness will be exposed in the assembly. Proverbs 26, verses 24 – 26.

Yesterday, I was talking with a friend about being polite. We were chatting while both of us were at separate car dealerships, and our conversation turned to being polite. I said that, these days, I prefer to be polite in most things. The problem with being polite is that people can easily walk on you. My friend said she used to be timid, shy, easily walked-on. Not so anymore: she now boldly proclaims her faith. That's an admirable trait to me, to be able to proudly, boldly express what you believe, especially after you've spent time being the submissive person. In many ways she could have been telling my own story, for I have been both quiet and submissive followed by being bold and assertive. It's like a yin/yang dynamic has played out in me throughout most of my adult life.

No matter, it's hard to be polite when staring down car salesmen, who epitomize slick persuasion. At a used car dealership, smooth talkers are everywhere; I always feel like I need a shower when I leave the car dealer. The salesmen are bold and confident, assertive and amiable, and yet it also seems like there's this sleazy aspect running like an undercurrent just beneath the smiling surface. Being there made me think about the times people have seen me as a smooth talking used car salesman. It's easy to talk smooth when you're bold and assertive; it becomes even easier if you let yourself be a little cocky. Polite can become pandering; flattery can turn into flirting. If you aren't careful, you can find yourself sliding down the slippery slope from good intentions into good and deep. But the worst part about being a smooth talker is that people may think you have an agenda. The real you may be someone who wants only to do their best, live your faith, be a good father, friend and mate. That real you, however, may get wrapped up in a blanket of bad intentions and selfish motives. What's goofy about this is that this selfish outer core gets wrapped in someone who looks a lot like who you are on the inside.

If you're a smooth talker, others may see those good qualities and think that they're getting what they see. That's where the proverb is counseling caution. I believe most people in the world want to be good, and live their lives striving to do and be good. However, there are also people out there who will tell you one thing but mean another. There really are people in the world who have agendas, who want things, who hide their intentions in smooth words of affection and then pull the rug out from under you when you don't expect it. The proverb says this; your own experience probably testifies to it. When you meet such people, they can wreak havoc in your world if you aren't careful. I honestly believe there are very few people in the world with a truly malicious nature, but their counterparts are also out there. They're unhappy and won't let themselves feel happiness unless you're as miserable as they are. If we don't watch ourselves, they can drag us down.

Of course there's good news, of course there is an antidote to this. One bit of good news is that there is justice. In the end, everything is exposed. We think we can hide things, but we are really fooling ourselves. In time, our secrets are revealed, either now or at the end of all things. Scripture promises this in various places; common sense speaks to it as well in that, usually, bad rats get what's coming to them. Steal and someone will steal from you; lie and you'll be lied to; if they'll cheat with you, they'll cheat on you. I've seen these things and so have you. And we've also seen that God is just and He doesn't wait forever.

The other thing to remember is that faith also counsels us to be faithfully skeptical. We shouldn't mistrust each other, but we should be cautious. Yesterday I wrote that, if it sounds too good to be true, then it may be, and we should ask ourselves, "What does that mean, Lord" and "what are they really saying?" In our journey of following, those questions help to identify the markers on the road through discerning intentions. They give us guidance on where we should go, what we should do. They remind us to submit ourselves and our lives to God's higher purposes, seeing that it's not about us so we don't need to become smooth or slick.. And they help us see past the words of the smooth talkers.

At the end of the day, after spending an hour or two at the dealer, I walked away without a car; we couldn't agree on financing. Ditto my friend; I don't believe she got one either. But I think we were each able to walk away with our heads held high. We were each polite and patient despite the best efforts of smooth, pressuring salesmen to have us part with those qualities. God works through patience, serving as a shield against the petty attacks of small-fry smoothies. A few hours later, at the end of the day, she passed a quote to me: refuse to look at the wind. When you think of it, people of deceit are full of wind. Their words are the wind, blowing shiftless, aimless and elusively. Politely refuse to look at them, saying "no thanks" while relying on divine strength to put those words in your mouth. The words of the Spirit are more eloquent and simply powerful than anything you or I could conjure up in our smoothest, wildest dreams.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 10 October 2011

If a man digs a pit, he will fall into it; if a man rolls a stones, it will roll back on him. Proverbs 26, verse 27.

This one isn't too hard to figure out: it's consequences. Specifically, it's about negative consequences. A few days ago we talked about justice and how what goes around comes around. Sow evil and you'll reap evil. Be dramatic and others will be dramatic to you. Cause trouble and you'll end up with trouble. That just makes sense.

Haven't we all done it? I mean, haven't you caused your share of drama only to have it backfire on you? I know I have. At forty-five, it's a habit I'm blessed but hard-pressed to break (but it's way overdue). We have all gotten into situations, willingly or unwillingly, that have come back to bite us. Break the law and, eventually, you'll be caught. Cover up something and, in time, it will be uncovered. Cheat and you'll be cheated on; lie and you'll be lied to. The list goes on and on.

This rather pessimistic verse says that, for every x, there is a y. It's an Isaac Newton verse about actions and reactions. To me, it's just one more reminder of how Scripture is both common sense and the basis for common sense. Long before Sir Isaac discerned the basics of gravity, Scripture ordained things to be so. If you mess up, you'll pay for it. If you throw a ball through a window, someone is going to be angry. If you do one thing, something else will happen.

Here's the equal and opposite reaction: grace. Grace is an amazing concept if you think about it. Grace is mercy, favor, forgiveness, goodwill, kindness, beauty, motion, a delay in consequences, undeserved, and free. It isn't just the forgiveness: it's the motivation behind the forgiveness. We don't deserve grace, but for every transgression we can do to each other, we have the option to respond in grace, to give mercy and forgiveness where just the opposite would be expected. Grace is faith put into practice. It is responding to a wrong with benefit to the party that wronged you. Instead of the consequences that our actions deserve, grace responds by saying "let me help you." Instead of an eye for an eye, grace says, "I care."

It flows down from God like Niagara Falls. Grace is the tool He uses to show who He really is. And behind the grace, supporting it and feeding it, is that undeniable and all fulfilling love. Amazing thing. My neighbor cusses me out and I should have pity on him. Love replaces sin. That's simply not of this world.

Paying that forward and passing it on is no easy task. You've probably been hurt as much as I have, and (this is going to sting) you've probably hurt other people as much as I have. Yes, we've done it in different ways, but we're both hurting and hurt-causers. THAT is the condition of a fallen nature; it's natural to dig pits and then fall into them. In a fallen world, it's natural to roll big stones that roll back on us. What is unnatural – supernatural actually – is divine grace. He gives it to us and wants us to pass it around. We don't deserve the mercy; we deserve the nails. He chose the nails because He gave freely of that mercy. When we follow God, we discover that mercy is the consequence of grace, and that grace is His chosen consequence for the things that we do to wrong Him and each other. Personally, I'd rather have that than someone whacking me upside the head with all of my faults.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 12 October 2011

A lying tongue hates those it hurts, and a flattering mouth works ruin. Proverbs 26, verse 28.

Call me slow but, until I read this verse, I never realized that flattery could be considered lying. Last week we talked about smooth talkers, and I acknowledged that I've been known as one. Part of smooth talking is flattery. Now, I'll confess that I didn't do it for sex, or dates, or vices, or anything like that. I simply found – and still find – that it's better to be nice, and to say kind things, than to tear someone down or transfer your own junk to them. That's not to say I'm a nice guy. I haven't always been a very nice guy; really haven't. Peel back the veneer of my life and you'll see some seedy things. Today, I'm a work in progress, and God works overtime righting my ship, and making me right. Part of His doing that is seeing things for how they are.

Seeing things for how they are includes seeing that flattery is a subtle form of lying. It is piling selfish embellishment on top of simple truth. A flatterer doesn't really trust that the truth can stand on its own, so she or he dog-piles on with extra compliments, extra adjectives, extra something. Maybe it is withholding truth because you don't want to hear the reaction; maybe it is saying something is different than it really is; maybe it's lying about someone's appearance, maybe it is overreacting.

Yep, lies. And those work ruin. They work ruin because to work something means to intentionally do it. That requires forethought and effort. But here's the sticky part of it: you don't realize these things when you're being smooth or flattering. You don't realize that the tongue lies and that, in doing so, it quietly spreads soft forms of hatred. Hatred? That's a pretty strong word, but if you think about it, a lie is a pretty strong thing, even a white lie or a lie of conscious omission. Lies are hatred of the truth; lies are hatred of God.

Lies ruin. And if flattery is a kind of lying, then flattery is actually a form of smooth hatred. You don't even need to be a believer to see the simple truth in this. The tongue speaks what is inside or, as Zac Brown sings it, "my heart won't tell my mind to tell my mouth what it should say." Do you think Christ flattered anyone? Can you picture Him saying, "Nice job in the synagogue last Saturday, Mr. Pharisee. Really liked your commentary so much!" When God Himself walked through the Garden of Eden, do you think He flattered Adam and Eve? "Really like what you've done with your hair Eve...it's very trendsetting." Do you think it is the Spirit moving in you that motivates you to pile on with the compliments?

Me neither.

No, I think that God gave good enough advice on His own when He left it at "let your yes mean yes and your no mean no." In other words, He said "be honest and say it right the first time." Trust that His Spirit will fill your mouth with the right words to say. For a flatterer, that's hard to do. It's hard to first admit that your smooth talk may not be what you intend it to be, then to simply give honest compliments when they're needed and leave it at that. I can still be nice – or try to be at least – without making it sugary sweet. It's a good and kind to be good and kind, and even to generously hand out compliments when they are deserved. It can be an honor and a pleasure to encourage other people, and it is a Godly thing to give genuine love. But then let's leave it at that, because Godly love doesn't need my two cents for it to greatly multiply. It simply needs you and I to share it as is.

Yes, I may be a bit slow in that it's taken me forty-five years to reach a conclusion that a better, quicker, and smarter man might have reached much sooner. Thank God it didn't take eighty. Thank God for His wisdom to see things as they are, especially as it happens a little bit at a time, and with the realization that healing can always begin anew. Thank God for realizing that flattery may get you everywhere, but when you get there you may find it really isn't where you want to be.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 13 October 2011

Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth. Proverbs 27, verse 1.

Here's another verse that even unbelievers can grasp. I mean, it's really common sense, and if it isn't quoted directly later in Scripture, the concept of it is. Later on, Matthew 6 talks about worrying, and about how through worry none of us can even add an hour to our lives. A good friend of mine sums it up differently by saying "refuse to look at the wind." Don't dwell on what was, or who you were, or even what might happen. Those things are blowing in the wind, gone with the wind; thank you Bob Dylan and Margaret Mitchell, and thank you Karen for the quote! When you think about it, it's really another way of saying "don't worry." Let God into your life and he will steady your heart on what matters, instead of what was or what could be.

That isn't to say we shouldn't dream or make plans. Our God is a god of big plans and of making His dreams come true in our lives. I think it's good and healthy to dream of who we want to be, places we want to go, and such. Said Cinderella: a dream is a wish your heart makes. It becomes a Godly thing when we let Him work His way in our lives and move in a direction that may or may not take us to those dreams coming true. The dreaming matters because it helps us refine what we believe. As long as we are content and thankful for that, whether the dream comes true or not becomes a moot point as our lives have happiness, meaning and purpose when lived through Him.

And it's a good and healthy thing to make plans, for God is a god of order. With apologies to physicists who understand the mechanics of space and time much better than yours truly, I say the universe is actually a place of Godly order. It was planned and made that way. As a certified project manager, I say that the six-day creation was the best-executed project ever. That is, of course, until you get to that whole "He died on the cross thing." That could just be a trump card.

Project or not, God is a god of order and order means planning. It's a good thing to make plans for our lives. It's a good thing to plan to ride rollercoasters at Disneyworld. It's a good thing to plan for a wedding (even when it's many months away). It's a good thing to write your daily tasks on a calendar, or to plan to pay your bills every week, or to buy Christmas gifts gradually over time even if you start 'elfing' in March. These are all good things to plan.

Where our dreams and plans hit reality, though, is when we lay too much worry onto them. If we worry about what could happen, or if we place all our emotions, trust, and aspirations on the future, we miss today. God has us live in today, in each moment, living for Him. Yes, what could happen tomorrow could be good and could produce good, but "could" is a weighty word. It could also fall apart in a second; it could also hurt a lot; it could also become a disaster.

So God gives us His trust that we might rely on it to let Him work in our lives today, here in each moment. It's today when He reshapes us and blesses us that we might live today to bring many sons to glory. I'll even nod to Joel Osteen and say that the phrase of living 'your best life now' is meaningful, namely allowing God to live through us and in us because that's how we live our best life now. Whether that leads to fancy houses, great wealth, or even secure happiness isn't the point. Letting God live through us now means that we don't have to boast about tomorrow because we have what is best today.

Tomorrow is Friday. I just received an update from a friend of mine who, like me, is glad it is because it's been a busy week. At work, I'm nearing the end of a project and undertaking another. At home, it's been a week of contention, stress, and hectic times. At church, my body is more sore than it's been in months after moving hundreds of pumpkins off the soggy Waters Edge ground yesterday so that they don't rot. It's been a long, hard week...just like other long, hard weeks. I'm looking forward to Friday, and to the weekend, when I can recharge my spirit, fry some chicken in the skillet, and spend some time relaxing away from the work week.

Know what? If tomorrow never comes, I'll be just fine with that. Tomorrow may never come, and if it doesn't then greater things are yet to come in the eternity when time becomes moot. But more than that, today is the real time when we get to see what the day may bring forth. Certainly it will bring forth challenges, stresses, temptations, and even sins. It could bring great change, much hurt, or even pain or death. In each of those things, it can bring forth an opportunity to revel in God's grace, mercy and abundance, then let those things work their supernatural power through little mortal me. Instead of just the negatives, today can bring forth love and understanding. All of us – even unbelievers – look for meaning in our lives, something good to grasp. I say here it is, here and now, instead of just tomorrow.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 14 October 2011

Let someone else praise you, and not your own mouth; an outsider, and not your own lips. Proverbs 27, verse 2.

True confession time: I both love and loathe praise. The longer you know me, the more you'll see this schizophrenic aspect to my nature. There are not enough hours in the day for me to stand in the spotlight, yet when I'm standing there the adulation is uncomfortable to me. I can recite lines or act; that's something 'to do' that occupies my thinking. In a speech competition, I once gave a twenty-minute memorized speech followed by a five-minute extemporaneous response; piece of cake, and I didn't need a teleprompter. If you need someone to teach a subject (with which I'm familiar), I'm your guy. You've witnessed an informative and entertaining class if you've witnessed the wonder that is me in front of a group; yes, I know I need to keep working on humility.

Here's where I get uncomfortable: when people say 'thank you' or want to recognize me in front of a group, it makes me uneasy to have people acknowledge things that I have said or done. During my stint in the military, it made me uneasy to receive awards, medals and plaques...even though I secretly craved doing things to earn them. It's like I want the praise, but I want it on my own terms; hold that thought for a moment. At work, I strive to be acknowledged and rewarded, yet I also live in covert dread of the moment when that actually happens. After all, you never want the boss to know you TOO well. And in my personal life, I constantly made lists or did things to earn favor as if I was saying "look at all I've done!" Then, when the inevitable argument came, I turned that around and used that vicious word "but." It's hard to walk the walk while talking the talk. We need both, and neither.

What's hard about this is that it's a right thing to be motivated to do your best, and even to want to be rewarded for work you do or even the position you earn. Today's verse seems to obliquely command this, stating that it's ok to be praised by others. It is a proper thing to merit reward, to earn commendation, and to receive accolades for good and Godly things that we do. What isn't proper is to do so out of an unhealthy sense of pride, or out of vanity or selfishness. When we do things well, it's reasonable to want praise for them. What wouldn't be reasonable is to constantly toot our own horn. We all know people who do that, don't we? Me, I find that they too seem to think there aren't enough hours to spend in that old spotlight. Imagine that.

Therefore, the heart of this confession is to acknowledge I'm guilty of some things and misplaced in others. That it's a sin to get the big head by craving the spotlight, and it's a sin to feel uneasy about receiving praise if praise is due, but that it isn't a sin to have others praise you for things you think, say or do when good praise is in order. Perhaps the difference is thankfulness. Wrongful pride tells us to take healthy satisfaction in our work and then turn it into unhealthy pride that demands recognition. Selfishness tells us that we should feel more comfortable in our self-centered blanket of insecurities than we should in receiving the admiration or kudos from another.

But a grateful heart will receive praise for a job well done, saying 'thank you' and submitting gratitude to God for the way He blesses us with our abilities. To paraphrase the man on the radio, yours and mine are 'talents on loan from God.' What we do well we should be thankful for: for the opportunity to serve, for the emotional and physical equipment to do so, for abilities needed in the moment, and for God blessing us with the life that allows such things. He provides for us; it's a good thing to feel thankful for that provision. I find that focusing on these thoughts helps me fight off the uneasiness of receiving praise. When the accolades come, as I both anticipate and dread that they will, if I can say "thank you, Lord" quietly or even in voice, I can get through the moment and put it in its proper perspective. In this way, "well done, Dave" can really mean "glory to God." Imagine that too.

Doing that also helps to combat the selfish aspect of that uneasiness. If you think about it, being uneasy, or submitting to a fear, is a form of selfishness, even idolatry. It's like I'm saying to God "this fear is bigger than you." That's a sin. Last night I was in a men's group and we talked about this very thing. Our fears are ways of submitting to the subtle, cowardly attacks on our Godly character because the accuser will try to use our fears as a way to make us feel like we're either in over our head or too big for our head. For me, feeling uneasy in receiving praise is a way of saying to God, "I reject what you've given to me." It's a way of focusing on those insecurities instead of receiving genuine praise or gratitude from people who may just genuinely give it. Lord please help me help my stupid self.

Yes, I both love and loathe public praise. The vanity of my flesh craves the satisfaction of adulation, but the trepidation of receiving that adulation seems to pin-prick my conscience and grow a healthy wariness into unhealthy sin. The cure for the common uneasiness? Thankfulness: being thankful to Him for what I've been given and grateful for the opportunity to use those gifts in some kind of service. Whether it's praying on my knees or praying through self-talk in the car – or in the

spotlight – a word of thanks is a word just in time. It's the start of keeping my actions in perspective and my eye on the ball.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 17 October 2011

Stone is heavy and sand a burden, but provocation by a fool is heavier than both. Proverbs 27, verse 3.

When I write these commentaries, the first thing I usually do is pray about it. I pray for guidance on what to say, that if you get anything good out of them you would know it's not my voice but the Spirit's, and that I write boldly and well. Sometimes that's enough to get started, but sometimes I feel moved to dig deeper. Thank the Almighty for the Internet when this becomes the case. True, in my bedroom there is a shelf full of different Bible translations, commentaries, and studies, but it often becomes quicker to simply search the Net for help with the verses that perplex me. Usually I will consult biblegateway.com or sometimes bible.cc.

That's where I went for today's verse. Stone is heavy and sand a burden; that part I get because it's a metaphor about lugging around earth. "But provocation by a fool is heavier than both:" here I needed some help. I think it's the 'provocation' part that got me stuck because, when I think of provocation, I think of someone trying to pick a fight. Perhaps that was indeed the intended meaning, but I felt moved to dig a little deeper.

In that vein, for 'provocation' the King James and the Aramaic Bible in English use "wrath;" in fact, this word is the most common translation I found. The New Living Translation uses "resentment" and the GOD'S WORD translation uses "annoyance" while the American Standard Version uses "vexation" (as do the English Revised and Darby versions). Finally, the Douay-Rheims translation simply says "anger." I never knew there could be so many translations of the same intended meaning. Maybe some day I will learn enough Hebrew to read copies of original texts and understand it for myself.

Whether or not that happens, different translations talk about provocation, wrath, resentment, annoyance, vexation and anger: all of them caused by a fool and all of them being heavier than the heavy elements of sand and stone. Is it because the fool does things to provoke anger and resentment? Yes. Or is it because the consequences of what fools do bring annoyance, wrath and vexation? Yes again. And maybe it is because fools know better but still act foolishly anyway? Yes yet again. Finally, perhaps it is because one person's actions impact others. Game, set, and match on that point.

That's when I begin to get the message and, to be honest, it irritates me. It irritates me because, yes once again, I'm that darn fool. I regularly do things that (to quote my fifteen year old) "annoy the crap" out of my family, my friends, and those around me. The sins of the past can't mire me in guilt anymore. Dwelling on them would be looking at the wind...but memories of them bubble up now and then, even when they've been buried for months or years. Or I have a bad day and, instead of confronting that fact, I repress it and don't talk it through. The result: annoyance, resentment, anger, and too often spoiling for a fight, even if the 'fight' is only a bad attitude or sniping. It's still a fight.

It can even happen on good days because even good, busy, fulfilling days can tire you out. When I'm tired I get irritable and am more apt to say, do, post, quip, remark, or joke with an edge. When I'm worn down, I'm more likely to react in annoyance, vexation, anger, resentment, or provocation. And when that happens, my attitude and my actions become a burden for the people around me. They can even be wrathful.

Are you the same? I think I know the answer.

Not long ago, I read a book called "Leadership and Self-Deception." I think I might have mentioned it in an earlier Proverbial. In this book, the authors talk about how we can each be 'in the box' when we negatively act towards other people. This is usually unhealthy and leads to unhealthy or negative consequences. On reading today's verse, I thought of being in the box, how I let foolish provocation and annoyance and anger keep me 'in the box,' and I immediately knew the cure. It's the same cure that I consulted when seeking the wisdom on what to say before I started.

It's what I do to start these writings. God grant me patience, understanding, wisdom and love to not be such a fool to the people around me. God grant me the patience, understanding, wisdom and love when the people around me are fools just like I tend to be. I'm a big believer that all prayers are answered, even when we don't always see immediate results or the results we desire. This is one of the times when I tend to see immediate results, however, because I usually feel some kind of inspiration to write these things. As mentioned, I also believe that if you get a positive, good or helpful message from reading them, it isn't because of anything I've written. Maybe God is trying to tell you something. To me, that's an answer to my prayer in more ways than just one.

And it's that cure for the weighty consequences of foolishness for which I prayed anyway. Think of how much easier it would be to live in our world if we were each a bit less foolish. You and I might get annoyed less with each other and the things we say or do. We might have less of a hard edge on our attitudes on a Monday morning at the start of a busy work-week. It might make driving less stressful, and dealing with coworkers, noisy children, and stubborn husbands or wives. It might even make it easier when someone's intention really is to pick a fight and dispense wrath. Prayer can do that because God acts on those prayers. I don't even need a translator to help me understand it.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 18 October 2011

Anger is cruel and fury overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy? Proverbs 27, verse 4.

This won't be pretty, my friend. It's easy to be upbeat about some of these verses, but this one won't be one of them. I hope it challenges you.

Anger is cruel. It really is, and you are guilty of that cruelty. Righteous anger is understandable, and it can even be justified; we've talked here about it. It's even healthy to vent anger constructively and lovingly that others might understand your real love and good boundaries. However, anger outside the confines of love can be cruel. When relationships end, when people do us wrong, when the world just hurts too much, it can be just damn cruel. What's cruelest to me is that anger, when turned inward, can turn into depression. That simply prolongs the hurt and turns it on yourself, probably long beyond the point of accepting your own guilt. It is an attack from the supernatural; don't ever be fooled to think it isn't. I've been there too many times, my friend. Perhaps you have too. Anger is cruel.

Fury is overwhelming. It really is. Anger vented in truly astounding ways can be overwhelming. I'm betting you've had times in your life when you vented your anger in spectacular ways, in ways that simply took on lives of their own. Or maybe your anger was so bitter that you let it become cold; that can be even worse because when cold anger is released, it can become truly vicious. Fury unhinged is like a thunderstorm, powerful and potentially destructive. While scouring and venting out burning anger, that storm can also greatly damage those around us in unintended ways. You are guilty of this too. So am I.

Both anger and fury are powerless compared to jealousy.

Human jealousy is a form of idolatry. Human jealousy attacks trust. If God's love is the foundation and faith in Him is the bricks of our allegorical church of the heart, then trust is the mortar that binds faith to love. Jealousy attacks and undermines that mortar. It chips away at trust to bore holes through which to breach the wall. And it does that because jealousy says "me first." Someone very close to me said just today that "jealousy is nothing more than a fear of abandonment." I agree with that because this can be a consuming fear, one that displaces our perception of whether or not we are really alone. It's a way of letting yourself believe you're most important, and that what you want, feel or perceive matters more than anyone around you. Jealousy thus attacks the trust we build up with others, putting our wants above theirs in unhealthy and potentially destructive ways.

The verse says that's harder than being angry or furious. Before reading it today, I hadn't ever considered this fact, but now I see it's so true. It's true because Scripture, especially in the early books of the Law, repeatedly says how God is a jealous god. He is jealous because His motive is pure love, rendering that jealousy an act of service for the people He cherishes so dearly. You and I are incapable of that because our motives, even when we think they have the best of intentions, are not pure love. If they're self-centered, they may not be love at all. That's an important point to remember and if you're stuck in any relationship where you're jealous of someone, I hope it's a gut-check, a real hard punch in the kidneys, for you to evaluate what your motive is.

So brace yourself: what that means is that you're an idol worshipper. You may not even realize it, but when you've succumbed to jealousy, it wasn't just because you were wronged. It was because of YOU. It was all about you. You and I have each been there. It hurts to watch the woman you love lose herself in a cause bigger than you and be jealous of her for it. It hurts to watch your family leave you behind and be jealous of the love and bond they share. It hurts to be rejected by someone you love who leaves you to be with another the way they said they wanted to always be with you and be jealous of them because of it. It hurts to see someone you care for have something you want so bad, something you have wanted for years, and be jealous of them because of it. It hurts to be rejected by friends who maintain the bonds you once had but now with other people while you remain jealous of that, left in the ashes of what once was.

Had enough my friend? Take some heart: I wouldn't accuse you of those things if I also wasn't guilty of them. If you feel angry enough, send me an email and accuse me at will of things I've done to wrong you, or petty jealousies of mine that I left out; it's fair and I'll keep it in confidence. But whether you do that or not, take heart. If you've felt these jealousies, or the anger and fury, it hurts to realize that you've worshipped at the altar of you, even when you've been wronged. Realization is an important step, maybe the first one, on the road to repentance and healing. You know what to do next.

But don't take too long. Don't dally here and dwell on a bunch of feel-good pabulum. To paraphrase a saying posted yesterday, every second you spend angry, furious or jealous is a second you can never get back. You and I are fallen and we screw things up. Maybe it's a good thing to let this verse sting a little. Realize you've been angry, then ask yourself why. Admit when you let your fury rage, then ask what you can do to make amends. Scrutinize your jealousies and lay your idolatry at His feet, then be open to where the Spirit leads your heart. The news you hear, my friend, is that it's not about you, that eternity really does matter most of all, and that it ought to matter to you because you do indeed matter to Him and people who love you. But 'it' still isn't about you. Much as you and I may want it to be, it isn't and never will be. Skull on that awhile, and then let's let prayers about it lead us as we follow on our journeys of faith in Him. Lace up your boots and start walking in that journey again, and leave the anger, fury and jealousy back where they belong.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 19 October 2011

Better is an open rebuke than hidden love. Proverbs 27, verse 5.

Let me ask you a personal question: have you ever had a crush on someone but didn't tell them? It's tough, isn't it? I mean, it can really be agony, to care, to want someone, to know you two could be electric, to be in love with them and to keep it a secret, to keep it hidden.

We've all had crushes, haven't we? Let's take that a step further: we've all been in love, really in love, and sometimes it hasn't been with who we thought it would be. Maybe the timing wasn't right; perhaps it was unrequited (or like the verse implies, unknown); it could have been just circumstances and choices that prevented it from growing into more. Tennyson was right, you know: it really is "better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." He was right because to have not loved at all would be to miss out on the greatest feeling in the universe.

Imagine how it would feel to possess that feeling and not be able to share it, either by choice or because of fears. Even more, don't just imagine it: remember it from when it has happened to you. Chances are it has, whether it was a school-kid crush or hidden love you kept secret from the other person. It is real, and it really can hurt to not share it. Love will expand and grow only so much if it isn't given to another being, and to love is a choice, an action. To love and be loved is our strongest desire. It's why we're made because we were made from and by true love Himself.

Perhaps that's one reason why God's love is so compelling. It's so powerful, life-changing, fulfilling and deep that we can't keep it hidden. At any cost, at any price, we are simply moved to share it with others, even with total strangers. The other night I watched a movie, "The Mission," about Catholic missionaries in 1700s South America. They risked harm and death and all they had just to share God's love with strangers. That's compelling. They simply couldn't keep it hidden.

So is the verse saying we should always go for broke and confess our hidden love? Actually, I don't read it that way. Is it saying that we should freely rebuke someone when we see they are about to get hurt? No. Is the verse telling us that we should never keep love hidden? No, it isn't saying that either. Just what is this cryptic verse really saying we should do about the most important feeling, emotion, and force in our lives?

Ready for the answer? Nothing. The verse says nothing about what we should do, gives no command or directive. It's simply making an observation. I picture Solomon standing on a portico, overlooking Jerusalem at sunset, his heart heavy with responsibility and love. I picture him saying these words to a scribe, making a wise observation about the feeling he knows can only originate from God. He is stating a truth, and an undeniably painful one at that.

What's more is that he is contrasting real love with how it is better to have a loving rebuke, a purposeful hurt, than to keep that true love a secret. My study Bible adds a comment about this verse, saying that the original version of the "open rebuke" was called a "life-giving rebuke." People who rebuke us don't do so for revenge or to inflict hurt. They do so to correct, to make us better so that we might live fully. I imagine the rebuke to which the verse alludes to be a sharp, stinging rebuke from someone very dear. I think of it as a good friend bringing us up short, or a loved one standing toe to toe with me firing back responses to my charges. It is the best friend who tells you "they aren't interested." It is Nathan telling David, "you have sinned."

It's better to have such life-giving rebukes, given in the discipline of love, than to live with the pain of not sharing real love with someone. That's what Solomon knew, and that's what the Spirit motivated his heart to record for all time in a verse that holds just as true now as it did 3000 years ago when it was first revealed. Solomon knew real wisdom, and he knew the story of Nathan rebuking his own father. Don't forget too that, in a later book, Solomon was also inspired to say "there is nothing new under the sun." Amen to that.

I remember my very first crush. I was in first grade and her name was Ellen. We were in a blended first and second grade classroom, and Ellen was a second grader who befriended me on the Fuller playground. We talked and bounced the four-square ball; we played after school and she egged me on one day to even break the window in the door of her house because she was teasing me about something I don't even remember. I didn't ever get a kiss from my friend on whom I had a hopeless young romantic crush; a few months later I switched schools. But I remember well the feeling of keeping my feelings hidden, how I used to look across the room at her long, pretty brown hair and her fair skin and blue eyes and thought she was just an angel. I never told her how I felt; in fact, in nearly forty years, this is the first time I have even mentioned it.

But the feeling was real. It felt like love to a seven year old boy who didn't know whether it was, but only knew that he thought the girl was a dream come true. In the ensuing years, I've felt other crushes, some powerful, and some that grew into real love. Some I confessed; others I kept hidden. In those hiding times, I would rather have felt the stinging rebuke of my closest friend – and sometimes I did – than keep the feeling hidden any longer, knowing my fear kept it from sharing, knowing my fear sentenced it to lonely desolation. To become something of meaning, love must be shared. It must be shared as God would share it, properly in His ways without agenda, or sin, and with purpose. Going forward, I choose love.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 20 October 2011

Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses. Proverbs 27, verse 6.

Who would you rather have do you in: someone you trust or someone you don't? I'll admit, I'm on the fence about this one. Part of me would want someone I know and cherish to break bad news to me, or to administer hurt when hurt is needed for healing. And yet another part of me thinks that a real friend wouldn't want to hurt you, even if it is 'for your own good.' I don't really want anyone other than God telling me what is for my own good; I'm a grown man and I can figure it out on my own.

But that's not really the case here, is it? That isn't what the verse is talking about. After all, a friend will be square with you, will tell you the truth. They may tell you truths that hurt, and they may even do things that will hurt you. But when a friend has been honest with you and yet you've been hurt by it, you can generally trust that they did so with good intentions, taking your interests into mind.

Contrast that with the friend who will flatter you with kisses, or butter you up with kindness, then leave you high and dry. There really are people in the world who will use us. I like to think most of them are people just like me or you: good folks who make bad choices because you and I do that too. But the sad fact is that there really are some people who are so hurting, confused, selfish, or whatever that they will deliberately use you for their own ends, then walk away to declare themselves happy and at peace.

Thus, I read today's verse to be another commentary, another Solomonic observation about a truth in life. It hurts to get hurt by a friend, but it generally won't destroy your soul. It hurts to be hurt by an enemy who you thought was your friend, and such things are a direct assault on your soul. They assault your sense of right and wrong; they assault love in your life. Faith and forgiveness are the antidotes to such attacks, but all too often the worries of the world muddle our ability to forgive and we instead continue to hurt. That's what the attacker wants: to have us hurting, make us feel as bad as they do. That isn't love, and it isn't a wound from a friend.

You know that "a kiss of death" is a popular colloquialism traced back to how Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss. Kissing is intimate, personal, and you don't let someone kiss you unless you trust them to be in your most personal space. I think that's the kind of kiss the verse is talking about. Flattery, building up, lies: they are the kisses of an enemy who wants something from you. We let them get in close, thinking they are attractive and love us, then ZAP! They kiss you, they bite, and they retreat in cowardice to fight in another way, another day, another small petty victory under their belt. They are like black widow spiders, spindly but powerfully beautiful and enchanting...until they bite and poison you. If they mate with you, you might just end up dead.

Last night I killed a rattlesnake. I know they are here in North Texas, but I had never seen one here until last night, when I found a small one resting on the warm concrete next to my garage door. After brushing it away with a broom, I smashed its head with a sledge and my boot, then took pictures to send to my daughters (who hate snakes). Naturally, my son thought it was too cool. At first, I didn't recognize what kind of snake it was. I actually thought of just picking it up and throwing it out into the adjacent field BEFORE killing it. Yeah, I know: stupid idea.

Fortunately I thought better of the idea before following through with it. It was only a baby snake, but the venom would have been just as powerful had it snapped around to bite me. This morning, in the sunlight, I looked at the dead snake and thought it was actually a beautiful creature. Sleek, smooth, attractive in the way it could blend in. It's an enemy that could sneak up on you, prey on you, tempt you until it got in close enough to bite and poison you. I think it's no coincidence that Satan, in Eden, took the form of a snake, tempting Adam and Eve with kisses of doubt and knowledge until it could wheel around and bite them with the stinging lure of sin. Today I'm thanking God for the ability to fore-think a bad idea. It's a good lesson to have learned.

When you've battled with a friend, you've battled over common beliefs, something shared. And, yes, sometimes that hurts. But at least it's done out of love by someone who cares for you. If something isn't done from love, there aren't many alternatives as to what the motivation really is. When that is the case, maybe we should ask ourselves why we would want that in the first place. That's not something I need to be on the fence to decide.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 21 October 2011

One who is full loathes honey from the comb, but to the hungry even what is bitter tastes sweet. Proverbs 27, verse 7.

My son and I are the only people in my house who like honey. Everyone else has no use for it. Dillon and I, however, can't get enough of it. I sweeten my tea with it; we each like honey sandwiches; he pours fresh honey over the beignets that he makes every other week or so. And fresh honey is so good. Usually, I buy honey at the store, but I'll occasionally get it from a vegetable stand. I prefer that because, like any fresh food, it just tastes better. It's a food I could eat any time of day, so much so that I'd resemble Pooh Bear with an empty hunny pot sitting beside me; "but Rabbit, I don't wanna eat it. I only wanna to taste it." Yep, that's me.

Kind of makes me sound like a glutton, you know? When I think of it in those terms, I'm ashamed. I'm ashamed and then I think of the kids I saw ten months ago in Africa. What they wouldn't give for a honey sandwich whenever they want one! And you're fooling yourself if you think you don't have to go very far here in America to find hungry people. I don't believe most statistics from the government; they're far too politicized. I do believe, however, that there are people struggling to keep food in the house when one or more parents are out of work, or fighting to pay their bills. When I think of people I know who may not be starving but may very well be hungry tonight, I'm ashamed. Even the oldest canned goods in my pantry might be a good meal to someone I know. They might even like a bottle of honey.

So let me ask you: with all this talk of honey and food, is the verse talking just about things to eat? I mean, what is 'honey from the comb'? Do you think it might mean love straight from the source? And the sweet food that is honey, something that gives energy, satisfies, sweetens, never spoils, and is completely natural: do you think that might be something else too?

What about 'the hungry'? Have you ever hungered for satisfaction, peace, or contentment? Have you ever just wanted to love and be loved? Such a hunger leaves a hole inside of you, sapping your strength and always leaving you feeling unsatisfied. It's a deep need you would feel almost desperate to satisfy. Are you hungry?

Have you ever felt so desperate, so needy, for something that it didn't matter if you suffered to have it? You would endure even the most bitter hurt or taste. I think that many of the relationship problems in the world are because of people feeling needy, wanting to be wanted and needed by someone that they would do anything to have them. You don't know it at the time but this is a sly attack by the enemy, a way he uses to take your eye off the ball. I know this was true in my case, with the relationship problems I caused or found. Would you be willing to taste bitterness just to satisfy your hungry needs?

And thirsty: do you remember the last time you felt so thirsty that you were desperate for something to drink? Do you recall the pasty-mouthed feeling, feeling your skin become clammy, feeling disoriented? Even warm, black, brackish water would have been better than the feeling of dehydration that gradually leaches the life from your pores. Have you ever felt that way in your spirit? Have you ever felt so much like a sponge that you couldn't soak up the knowledge, the joy, the understanding and peace fast enough, that you could never get enough?

So I'll ask you again: what kind of food is this verse talking about?

Last week we went out for steak; took my son and his friend out for a really good steak. When we rolled out of the restaurant, I felt extremely full. If you had put a pound of USDA medium rare choice (with those buttery mushrooms on top) in front of me I probably would have groaned. Even last night, I had dinner and felt completely full on a smaller portion; I guess the exercise is starting to pay off again. It's funny to say, though, but I can't tell you that I remember ever feeling full of God's word. And I can't tell you about anyone I know saying "yeah, I've had enough of it" because the more you dive into it, the more fulfilled – and yet both thirsty & hungry – you feel. You can never get enough of the understanding, contentment, thrill, and supernatural loving peace that you feel from the presence of the Almighty. Even the smallest verse is but a taste of so much sweeter ones to come. This is a satisfying hunger, though, yet it still leaves you panting for more. I challenge you to find out for yourself.

This morning, my son and I are going to the gym before he goes to school. All week he has been pushing me to go to the gym; my sore muscles are proof that we went. Part of the routine is that we go, then we come home, then we have breakfast. I'm thinking that, this morning, I may have bread and honey. Sweet food sounds pretty good to me. And after I take him to school, I think I'm going to spend some more time in the Word. I try to every day, but you know that some days I spend more time than others. This morning, at the start of another weekend, I find that I'm hungry in a good way.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 24 October 2011

Like a bird that flees its nest is anyone who flees from home. Proverbs 27, verse 8.

It's fall in North Texas, just like it's fall wherever you are. These days, there aren't any birds nesting in the area around my house but there are many birds all the same. In fact, where we live, there are usually thousands, maybe even millions, of migrating birds. They flock (literally) to the warmth of our area from environs well north of the Red River. Blackbirds, jays, crows, finches, you name it: they're all here this time of year. You can drive up on a corner and see thousands of birds sitting on the ground, in the trees, or making the electrical wires sag there are so many. It's very Alfred Hitchcock. They chirp and coo and flutter around, looking for food and a place to stay. All of them are fleeing the coming cold in Yankee territory.

Come spring time they will leave, except for a few who will stay behind to nest. Maybe they don't get the message that this place will be 110 degrees in August (all of August in fact, with June, July and September thrown in for good measure). Or maybe they are avian renegades, outcasts determined to fly against the flock and make their own way in a new place. Maybe they are sick, or maybe God whispered in their ears "stay here" and they didn't know any better than to simply obey. I guess birds aren't as dumb as we think they could be.

I'm glad to have them, you know. I like to feed the birds. In my backyard you'll find a feeder that, during the winter especially, I like to keep full. When my dog allows them in the yard, they flutter and land and gobble up the millet and seed from that feeder. I fancy that they post sentry-birds (Angry Birds even?) on the light post by my fence, watching for when I fill the feeder, then sending off news to the flock when the coast is clear. Birds eat like pigs, you know. They can empty a gallon feeder in a few hours, but I like to feed them anyway. Watching them interests me. It's kind of relaxing, and I like to think I'm the vessel God is using to feed some of his creatures so they don't starve so far away from home. Sure, it's kind of a sappy thought, but it makes me feel better to think it. I'm glad to have them around because they make this place that is my home a little more interesting, even if they do mess up the car now and then.

And I suppose I sort of identify with the bird that leaves its home to strike out a path on its own. It's not an easy thing to do, you know, leaving and starting over. I've done it a few times, both with good reasons and without them too. One time, my wife and I decided we would move to Tennessee. We packed up a trailer full of belongings, put the kids and dog in the car, and headed out. We had become unhappy in Colorado and disillusioned with our lives, church, and some friendships there, and we felt a change would do us good. After looking in middle Tennessee, we decided God wasn't calling us there after all and we headed home. It's hard to plant roots again once you've pulled them up, but we did our best to go home and live where we felt God was telling us He wanted us to be. The next few years were hard ones, but there were good times as well. Looking back, I felt like we were little birds leaving the nest, fleeing our problems instead of having the faith to face them.

That's an important lesson to learn, you know, and if it took carting our junk across country to learn it then so much the better. God puts you where we are for a reason and it isn't so we can be miserable. Sometimes we are like the tiny bird, still growing, still maturing, still learning, and still in need of the protection and happiness of the home. In time, the right time will indeed present itself to leave for freedom is the yearning of the spirit whether it's the spirit of man or that of a sparrow. Nature tells birds when it is the right time to go just as it tells them how long they need to stay. We are obviously more complex even though we too are creatures of God's natural order. I may not need a season of the year to tell me where I need to be, but I do need prayer, guidance and love to encourage me wherever I am. Home, I have learned, is wherever you can make it for God gives us the strength and talent to succeed wherever He leads us. But the key is relying on Him for those things, listening to His voice in the Word and in conscience, and discerning His signs in the miracles of life as they unfold around us.

Several months ago, I left home again; I've discussed it here before. Things grew too tough at home for me to feel like it was where I belonged. That's a hard and lonely feeling to own, and it leaves you living in a harder, lonelier place. I again felt like a bird leaving the nest, fleeing something that had been familiar but had become unfamiliar as well. It didn't take long, though, for me to see that God wasn't yet done with me where I was. The issues of abandonment, trust, control, and the past wouldn't go away no matter what address I called "home." They only go away (and forever) when we let God take them away. Home may not always be in the place it once was but can always be better too. Again, we can make ours anywhere so long as we listen to the natural voice of God as He leads us where He will.

That's what the birds do, and it's why they call North Texas "home" for the winter. This week, I'm working in Michigan, perhaps in an area some of those birds won't see until next spring. When I got here last night, I found it was cold, so I'll be

thankful to migrate south again later in the week. I think that, when I get home, I'll fill the feeder and let "the pigs" come calling. After all, my home is their home too, at least for a little while.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 25 October 2011

Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart, and the pleasantness of a friend springs from their heartfelt advice. Proverbs 27, verse 9.

You may not have known it but this is the four hundredth Proverbial 'column' that I've been privileged to post here. WordPress has a counter feature that tells me how many posts I've submitted, and this one officially marks number 400. These started out as a coping mechanism I believe I was led to. For years I had wanted to write something meaty, some thoughts about verses or sections of Scripture that meant something to me. I'll admit: it was a vain thought, and I learned how vain the more I read my Bible and discovered it's not about me, that there is exactly zero I could or should try to ever add to what God already perfectly penned.

And yet, in the middle of great personal turmoil, I needed something. I needed to share feelings of anguish, longing, learning, joy, pain, and rejoicing that were on my heart at that particular time in my life. More than that, I needed God moving in my life. I needed to let Him lead me, let Him guide me out of the turmoil, let Him remold me into someone better than I was. Someone suggested that, for encouragement, they read a little bit of the Proverbs every day, then prayed & mulled on it the rest of that day. I thought that was a good idea, and I was given the inspiration to do the same plus talk about what it meant to me at that point in time.

In doing that, a wonderful thing happened, and whether you know it or not you blessed me richly. I started writing what God put on my heart, and the realization quickly came to me that when you got encouragement, enjoyment, or something good out of the words, it was because God spoke to you through them. No, I'm no prophet nor am I blessed to have knowledge someone else doesn't. All I have is my own view and what God blesses to put on my word processor. You saw that, and you read. You read the words I recorded here, and it's been a blessing that brought me out of deep despair and hopeless wandering.

I knew you had been reading from the emails, phone calls, messages, and discussions I had with many who receive the emails or peruse WordPress and Facebook. 400 messages later, they keep coming, that that is always a blessing. Sometimes they take me to task, sometimes they offer views, sometimes their own commentaries, and sometimes they start a whole different discussion. Always they are the advice and consent of a good friend, and in that, your words become like perfume and incense that bring joy to the heart. Your words are the pleasantness of a friend that springs from their heartfelt advice.

What's more, you might not have even realized that is what you were doing, but it is. Your words, your reading, your friendship, and your letting my (hopefully) inspired words become a part of your day have been something I look forward to now. Have you ever smelled a kind of incense that is so pleasant, that brings back good memories or plants good ones in your heart? Or have you ever smelled a particular perfume that is hypnotic, that seems to reach your very soul and make it happy? Men in the audience, admit it: there are just some perfumes that render us powerless and bring us joy. That's what your words and your friendship do for me.

When I receive messages discussing these words here, I'm happy knowing that your heart has been opened a little today to the miracles that God can do in it. I feel privileged to be a part of that process, to be the vehicle He uses to touch you. God is alive, and He wants to share His love and his effervescent life through you and me. When we let that happen, and when you get a glimpse of His love or beauty through my meager words, well, it makes me happier than most anything else I know. I love to hear what you think, especially when it challenges or disagrees with me, because in those times I learn to think in ways I might not otherwise have thought. When that happens, you make both of our worlds better, and teach me to be the kind of man I want to be. When that happens, perhaps God is speaking through you too.

So on this occasion of this four hundredth of these Practical Proverbs, I want to thank you for bearing with me through my tedious ups and downs, through the airing of my sins and frustrations, and through the sappy times when I've cried and shared in joy with you. More than that, I want to thank you for your friendship and love. It's my privilege to do these for others, and as long as God gives me His ability to do so, I intend to write through the rest of the Proverbs. After that, who knows? Maybe Ecclesiastes, or perhaps something in the New Testament. Or maybe something different altogether. To be perfectly frank, I don't really know right now, but I've been praying on it and I know He will reveal His intention for me in His time, not mine. We have three and a half more chapters to go, maybe another hundred or more of these columns before we close out the Book of Proverbs. If God blesses us with that time together, may it be a blessing to you as you and your friendship are to me.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 26 October 2011

Do not forsake your friend or a friend of your father, and do not go to your brother's house when disaster strikes you—better a neighbor nearby than a brother far away. Proverbs 27, verse 10.

The past does not rule us. Read today's verse, then repeat this to yourself: the past does not rule me. In the past, maybe you had friends or family who let you down, or abandoned you or hurt you. Maybe disaster struck you and you felt you had nobody to turn to and oh did that hurt! Yes it did indeed, and chances are you didn't deserve all that hurt but it happened anyway.

Repeat it again: the past does not rule me. The past made you into who you are today and thank God for who you are today! You're my friend, you're my reader-customer, and you're someone valuable to God, to me, and to other people whether you know them or not. You are blessed to be here today to learn from the past, and to not let it rule you, to not carry around the hurt of what other people did to you, or didn't do. It's done, over with, and buried. When you have the Savior ruling your heart, God doesn't even see your past because all He sees is the perfection of His grace and love shining through you.

Now read the verse again.

Don't let the past rule you. Put down the guilt and read the part about not forsaking a friend or neighbor. Don't let it rule you as much for yourself as for other people because (don't forget) other people have a past too. At first read, this verse seemed to be about me, about you. Then I remember that NOTHING in Scripture is 'about me.' I read it again and see that it talks about serving, about supporting other people, and about friendship. Then I remember that friendship is about love. Friendship is about listening and sometimes offering hard words. It is about support, and agape giving, and about understanding. Friendships were formed in the past and reinforced in this present.

Real friendships remind us to not let the past rule us. Our friends and family who care about us know about our past and don't hold it against us. They probably don't approve of many things we've done (and vice versa) but they care for us anyway. We should listen to, understand and support them, and we should listen to, understand and support those who were friends to our forbears, to our parents. They helped make us into who we are, good and bad, and I would think our conscience should tell us that unless they're killing us, we should remember and honor them with our friendship.

Yet even with technology, distance is still relevant. Today, with Facebook and email and Twitter and blogs and cell phones and texting, you and I can reach out instantly to each other from across great distances. But that only goes so far. We can engage each other, talk, catch up, learn, even fall in love or preserve that love but that only goes so far. At some point, we humans need presence, real physical presence. We need touch and to hold and be with each other. Those other modalities are substitutions for presence, but they can't quite equal it. I believe the verse is saying that, saying rely on friends if you don't have family around. Rely on God and count on His presence really being here, now and with you wherever we are.

We are all family in God anyway. When we rely on our friends, we are relying on our brothers, sisters, and parents even if their blood isn't our own.

So read that verse again and remember it again. And now remember the friends, the real forever people, who God has blessed into your life. Let's listen to, understand, rely on each other and love each other. The past won't rule us anymore, we will live and love in today, and we will make tomorrow into something good. Let's be thankful for what's happened knowing greater things are yet to come. Through Him, let's do those greater things together, my friend!

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 27 October 2011

Be wise, my son, and bring joy to my heart; then I can answer anyone who treats me with contempt. Proverbs 27, verse 11.

For a long time I've said that I thought the greatest compliment a child can give their parents is to become independent. It's a testament to the blessings of God's grace and the talents of parents if children move out into the world and become independent people capable of successfully living on their own. With two of three kids now launched, I saw no reason to think otherwise. After reading this verse, though, I think I now believe that the greatest compliment a child can give here to their parents is to be wise in the love of the Almighty, because that brings joy to my heart.

It really does, you know. I love my three kids. I'm the guy who wasn't ready to have kids 20 years ago, the young man who was wrapped up in himself and what I wanted who didn't recognize the miracles set before him. A stupid young man is what I was, and though I have always loved them unconditionally, I didn't fully appreciate my kids.

The older they get the more joyous I feel when I see real wisdom in their choices and lives. I feel joy when I see my son standing up and taking punishment for serious things that have happened to him, only some of which were his doing. I feel joy when I see my daughter struggling to find her way, pay her bills, discover who she is and say no to the temptations of being young and available and to do so testing the boundaries of the wisdom she knows deep inside to be true. I feel joy when I see my other daughter working hard, finding her voice, learning to stand up for herself and become someone. I feel joy when I see my son-in-law becoming a mighty man of God, the kind of man you are honored to know and even more honored to welcome into your family. They bring joy to my heart as I watch them learning about God, wrestling with belief in a hard old world. I feel joy when I see evidence of abiding faith, even though it's sometimes fleeting, because I know it took root where it matters most.

Because of that joy, because of their wisdom, I can answer anyone. No weapon formed against me shall prosper; good words that I've been hearing a lot and contemplating a lot lately. One of my friends emphatically states this as her mantra and she powerfully means it! They are true words and this verse is a way of emphasizing them. I can answer anyone who treats me with contempt, from the churchgoing wife who looks down on me because I was a cheater to the ex-friends who hold my sins against me while refusing to acknowledge their own. From the hypocrite who talks smack and gossip to the person who slays you with a smile, nothing they say or do can matter because no weapon formed against me shall prosper. Nobody treating me with contempt will get far because I have joy, God's joy exemplified in my family, living in my heart.

That's a powerful thought; it really is. It's more than just Schuller's smarmy power of positive thinking. It is something tangible, real and gently superb that contains the force of a nuclear blast coupled with the grace of a kind word. God is telling us in yet another way "my grace is sufficient for you." He's saying "I'm always with you" and "don't ever give up." Nothing this world can conjure will be able to stand against you with such joy in your heart. If you think about it, doesn't your day go so much smoother when your mood is better? Doesn't your outlook become "I can" when you feel "I love" in your heart? Don't you feel the most confident when you know good people have your six?

There's no coincidence in that. God doesn't do luck or chance or coincidences. God does love and grace. The evidence is His word living in your reactions, even in your emotions. Perhaps this is a point where the maxim of "trust your feelings" has merit. Perhaps our confidence comes from the joy because the love we know for others is reason to trust that God is at work in our lives. Because of the love I have from God, I can answer anyone who has ever treated me with contempt. No sauce needed, folks: I really am ten feet tall and bulletproof.

Yes, for most of my adult life, I believed that the best way a kid could show they loved their mom and dad is to go out and make a success of themselves. Don't get me wrong: I still love that concept, and I still believe it is a great compliment, one that we should strive to inculcate into our kids. After today, though, I'll remember that watching real wisdom, God's real love, at work in their lives is better evidence of successful parenting and a far better indicator of the potential for long-term success. With that wisdom, His love, in their hearts, both they and I can't be defeated by anything this world throws against us. Ditto for all of us, my friends. Ditto for you.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 28 October 2011

The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it. Proverbs 27, verse 12.

“Stupid is as stupid does.” remember that quote from ‘Forrest Gump’ (which for many years I considered to be the story of my life; in some ways I still do)? I think it’s a step-child version of at least part of this verse. But think about it: if the dark clouds outside are starting to rotate, go get in the shelter. Unless you’re a paid storm chaser, you’re acting pretty stupid to stand outside saying “man, this is so COOL!”

In what follows, please note the substitution of “stupid” for simple because my read on the verse is that “simple” here doesn’t mean “lack of flourish or fancy.” In this case, simple just means stupid.

So without getting either political or preachy, can we agree that it’s the case with so much in life that stupid is as stupid does. This verse seems to be another common-sense observation on something pretty obvious. Bad choices lead to bad endings; bad choices are often stupid choices. I take away from it a number of equally obvious observations. In the case of this verse, Scripture neither condones nor recommends foolishness or stupidity. It also says there are consequences for foolishness and stupidity. I read, too, that it implies that simplicity is not stupidity but stupidity is pretty simple. Prudence is the opposite of stupid simplicity. Stupidity often leads to suffering whereas prudence leads to refuge and safety. Last, stupidity and prudence are both active choices, and stupidity isn’t necessarily driven by ignorance just as prudence isn’t necessarily driven by wisdom.

That’s a lot to swallow, especially on a Halloween weekend Friday when it’s been a long work-week and you and I are both ready for a weekend. It’s also a good reminder on that weekend. If there is danger, heed it because, if you don’t, you may just end up stupid. Could someone please pass this on to the government in Washington? If there’s no money, please stop spending. If there is danger, please take action to do something about it. If the room is silent, Mr. (and Miss) Politician, there’s no need to pollute it with your voice.

But I digress, shying away from sounding too harpy because, after all, it’s Friday. We all know that stupid is as stupid does; I keep reminding you of it (at the risk of harpyness even!). So, if you or I go out and drink too much (or even stay in and drink too much) then it’s probably unsafe to drive, operate a SkilSaw, or try to hang those orange Halloween lights that seem so popular these days. If you don’t know how to swim, it’s probably a bad idea to go boating without a life jacket. The list goes on and on; you probably are thinking up your own examples by now, so it’ll be a good time to just drop it, right? Besides, we’re back to the idea that stupid is as stupid does. If you’re acting stupid, then you’re at risk; if you’re acting prudent, then you’re near safety.

If...then: the verse is a kind of if/then statement, don’t you think? It’s an if/then, stated as a positive statement instead of just an if/then consequential statement.

Yes, my political and social views lean more to one side than the other. Without endorsing his rather shrill demeanor (or his political views), though, I was listening to right-wing bombthrower Glenn Beck on the radio this week and he was trilling about preparedness. His message was non-political actually, namely “take active measures to prepare yourself for coming dangers because there could be some.” Educate yourself, store food, engage your neighbors, be responsible, pay down your bills, save, and a host of other traditional, almost Puritanical, ideas that are good ones whether you’re on the right or left. They seem to fit nicely with today’s verse in that they are measures of active prudence versus active stupidity. Ours really is a dangerous world, you know, and it would be a really dumb thing to ignore that, especially if people depend on you.

At risk of sounding harpy (yet again), I’ll add in my own: get to know God. He knows you. Get yourself in touch with His grace and see how it transforms your thinking, your attitude, and your life. See how it prepares you to be prudent in matters of real life and death. See how it is the opposite of stupidity and will pull you away from staying mired in the swamp of stupid.

As a personal devotion, I’m reading Ecclesiastes, the book that comes after the Proverbs. Chapter four, verse thirteen says “Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning.” I believe it was no coincidence I read that verse yesterday when I was preparing to write this Proverbial. It, too, is another way of stating the same point. Better to follow a prudent kid than a stupid old man; better to be prepared than not be prepared. Prudent

is as prudent does, you see, just as it's willfully uninformed and unprepared opposite does the contrary. Even an idiot like Forrest Gump – or me – can understand that.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 31 October 2011

Take the garment of one who puts up security for a stranger; hold it in pledge if it is done for an outsider. Proverbs 27, verse 13.

Good Monday, Happy Halloween, and pat yourself on the back, now, for completing five sixths of the year that is 2011. Tomorrow you and I will be able to say "Christmas (or Hannukah) is next month." If you're like me, you've had a busy year, and at small milestones like today, if you're like me again, you might stop and ask yourself just where the time went. Day to day, we live our lives and (I believe) pay little attention to all the things that comprise each twenty-four hour period. At the end of a day, how many times have you or I said "not much" when someone asked us "what did you do today?" Sometimes that's just an oversight because, if you think of it, we each make hundreds, maybe even thousands, of minute decisions every day. Each one of those decisions that turns out successfully is a win; I've learned this lesson in combating depression and find it immensely helpful to remember.

If you make those thousands of daily decisions, you might say you and I are blessed to be industrious. I also think that, by and large, most people are honest and try hard to live their lives honestly. Thus it is that, on this minor milestone, it's good say that an honest man can become a beggar but a man can't be considered honest if he deceitfully makes himself out to be a beggar. I learned this saying while researching this verse; see www.bible.cc (I think). An honest (and industrious) man can still turn out to be a beggar, but if he lives his life honestly (and is industrious in honest ways), then his beggar status is moot. Sure, poverty may be a result, but inside in his spirit, he has something of much higher value.

Contrast that with the dishonest man, who may trade his industrious honesty for something else. It was virtue that drove the Puritans to cling to their Energizer-bunny work ethic, spurring them to work hard and live modestly. Do you know people who sell their image to be hard-working, diligent, and productive yet you rarely see them actually working? In my experience, such people spend much of their time selling their image instead of producing their image. The Puritan work ethic seems to slide off them; maybe it's too heavy to carry. They might be the person who puts in long hours but seems to produce little. Or they might be the martyr manager who is responsible for much but delegates little and then is constantly crying about how overburdened they are. Be careful, my friends, for they may (at times) be you or me.

Another thing that I find curious about this verse is that, in many other Bible translations, "outsider" means 'adulterous woman.' Huh? Where does that one come from? New American Standard version says "Take his garment when he becomes surety for a stranger; And for an adulterous woman hold him in pledge." Maybe there is something in the original text, in Hebrew, that says "adulterous woman."

So let's think about it. If you trust in the security of a stranger's collateral, is the verse implying that we should do differently for an adulterer? I've known many adulterous women (and men) and I know first-hand what it feels like to wear a scarlet letter. Let's sum up that whole adultery concept this way: it sucks. It sucks because unfaithfulness starts in the heart and that's where it hurts most. It is basically a question of honesty: are you honestly devoting your loyalties, feelings, and affections in the right direction? That's no easy question to answer.

Accordingly, it's no wonder that, on the surface, it would appear we should treat strangers and the unfaithful differently. A stranger can win your trust just by getting to know you; an adulterer is often someone you trust who ends up being someone you don't feel you know. Is it any wonder, then, that Scripture appears to intone that we should treat them differently? Then I remember a couple of key points, the first one being that, to God, we are ALL unfaithful. All of us (and that includes you and me) have fallen short of God's commands, expectations and hopes for our lives; all of us daily do thousands of things wrong even as we make those thousands of right and successful decisions. Our actions, our thoughts, our desires: it isn't hard for us to mess up, and we do. Maybe you haven't left your clothes on the floor to hop in the sack with someone you shouldn't, but being faithful in body doesn't mean you've always been faithful in your heart. That matters too.

And the second thing I remember is that an honest man can become a beggar but a man can't be considered honest if he deceitfully makes himself out to be a beggar. Good people can make lousy decisions and still be good inside. All it takes is faith and an honest view of our thoughts and actions. Have faith in God that He means what He says about His grace and love and let that paint those thoughts and actions in a realistic light. If you haven't already, I believe you'll see that, to live in the love and grace means honestly repenting of our wrongs. It means being willing to let God remold our lives so that we don't flock to the unfaithfulness of what once was, but we do eagerly (and industriously) work forward to the good that yet will be.

In this way, we put off the unfaithful deceit we once knew and clothe ourselves in something better. On a day like today, I find that's a good thing to remember, especially on a Halloween milestone that looks back at how far we've already come. It has been a busy year, hasn't it? If your life is like mine, the rest of it promises to be busy as well. Here's to working hard and working industriously in a better light.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 1 November 2011

If a man loudly blesses his neighbor early in the morning it will be taken as a curse. Proverbs 27, verse 14.

There are some people you just don't bug in the morning. Early on in my marriage, I learned to not bug my wife early in the morning. Just not a morning person. At our wedding reception, a family friend (for whom she was a nanny) warned me to not bug her before 8 AM (or before she had caffeine). Years later, I learned to not bug my kids in the morning as well. Oldest daughter is a zombie until her batteries charge in the sunlight. Youngest daughter simply sleeps forever, and my son is like his oldest sister, except he is downright hostile until he fully wakes up. If I am loud to them before they wake up, things don't go very well.

Consider this to be yet another area where I am a work in progress: simple consideration. That's what the verse is talking about. Yes, the example is about being mouthy in the morning, but I read a larger lesson from it, namely one about friendly, caring consideration. Don't be too loud in the morning because some people don't appreciate it, but doesn't the lesson apply in other areas? Let's try to rephrase it and see how it works.

If a man brags when his neighbor is busy it will be taken as a curse. That seems to work, conveying a similar message about consideration.

If a boy lets his dog out to bark any time of the day it will be taken as a curse. That one certainly works, especially if it's a yappy dog.

If a man talks too much about himself at a party in front of his friends it will be taken as a curse. I think that appears to work too, though it skews the meaning somewhat.

If a woman wears revealing booty shorts to Wal Mart at 3 in afternoon it will be taken as a curse. That one certainly works, especially since your picture might end up on the Internet.

If I shove all my belongings in the airplane overhead without leaving room for the other person's things it will be taken as a curse. Definitely!

Finally, if someone keeps barging in when someone else is trying to concentrate it will be taken as a curse. Yep! That one works as well.

Again, the common theme in all these re-translations is consideration. It is inconsiderate to act out in ways that displace the good nature of others. It is inconsiderate to say things out of turn, or out of place, sort of like cracking a bad joke at a bad time. It is inconsiderate to talk too much just to hear yourself talk, or to do so at times and places that inconvenience or disrespect other people.

Simple consideration. In this era of instant communication, crowded shopping malls where so much plenty is on display, and self-aggrandizing religiosity, simple consideration seems to be an endangered resource. I read this verse to be yet another reminder of The Golden Rule, and how unselfish and considerate that rule is. We were made for better than being inconsiderate louts (especially where that whole question of department store attire is concerned).

We were made for that Golden Rule, and despite the so-called 'need' to be connected 24/7, we don't need our iPhones in church, we don't need to always be right, and we don't need to pass the guy in front of us just so we can exit 500 feet down the highway. We were made to be better than that. Yes, I'm like you in that it's really hard to break bad habits (especially where road rage is concerned). But it can be done and God asks us to do it in His word. Time and again throughout Scripture He sets out good examples for us to follow, none of them being inconsiderate. Consideration for the feelings, thoughts, situation and heart of our brother is supposed to be at the root of how we interact with him because it's at the root of how Christ interacted with us.

When I find myself slipping into those old habits, I'm learning that the best thing to do is say a little prayer; I call it "the Dionne Warwick effect." Sure, it's corny, but it works! It puts the other person's situation ahead of my own and reiterates (when I need to remember it most) that it's not about me. It's a way that I don't let "the opposition" take away my peace or steal my joy. 100% of the time, it prevents me from shoving my foot in my mouth or putting my neighbor in the position of cursing me.

I think that's a good take-away from this verse. Yes, I'm still very much an early riser and, on mornings when I'm the only one awake in the house, I now try to be quieter, often going back to my office to send messages, read emails, write or work. I might even turn the TV on really low. It's a small example of trying to be more considerate. Mind you, I'm so far from perfect that I can barely control my own actions, but you have to start somewhere. If it starts with the TV, then continues with holding the door for someone, then changes into putting your bag under the seat instead of overhead, and finishes with doing all these things to the glory of God FOR His glory, then better late than never is a great statement to make. I'll work harder to remember it in the mornings.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 2 November 2011

As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another. Proverbs 27, verse 17.

This concept, of believers (especially men) sharpening each other, is a strong attitude within my church. Now, I've been a Christian (and a believer, understanding those two aren't always the same thing) for most of my life. Even when I didn't actively practice my faith, I never rejected it. I simply let it atrophy like a neglected muscle or an unused talent. Most of twenty years ago I was reintroduced to the faith through the sound doctrine and friendly teachings of a good pastor in a family church in Colorado Springs. My family left that church for awhile, in protest to some things with which we disagreed, but returned because we felt God had led us back there. In doing so, we dove deeper into spiritual truths and I felt my faith sink into me like strong roots.

Yet it wasn't until just the last few years that I realized that strong faith is needed not just for witnessing. I mean, what are we supposed to witness for? Come to church and tithe? Please; give me a break! Join our club and sing off key? True but really quite lacking. Get in the know and get in the Word? Yes, but it's not about me. No, all these things are off the mark. It took growing and being schooled by younger, stronger believers for me to see that we are to witness for Christ, for God among us, in a world hostile to that. For that to happen, we need to be razor sharp. We need to be spiritually, maybe even martially, prepared for war.

I think of this verse like I think of a sword being sharpened against a sharpening rod. Or a dull knife being honed sharp against a whetstone. Iron sharpens iron so that the implement can be used for its intended purpose. Sharpening happens for a reason, and it takes something firm, solid, reliable to sharpen a weapon, or a warrior, to a fine edge for war. The image comes to mind of Aragorn unsheathing his sharp sword and carrying battle to evil. Or Arthur pulling Excalibur from the stone. Or maybe of fighting against evil in some swashbuckling movie. Iron sharpens iron and for good reason.

And make no mistake about it, my friends: if you're going to be in the faith, you need sharpening! If you are going to believe, follow, and do whatever God in His Spirit asks of you, you had better be sharp as a knife and ready to spiritually wield one. We are here to witness Him to others who don't know Him. Set against us are the doom forces of evil who have been in chaos since Eden. They are real, they are poisonous and they are vicious fighters. If you're going to go against them you need the shield of faith and the heart of a Godly warrior. And you need to be spiritually sharpened to a fine edge so that God through you can cut through evil like butter.

This is all fine rhetoric, but what does it really mean? To me, it means having other strong believers mentoring you, encouraging you, holding you accountable, and teaching you to stand, resist and make the damned Devil flee. That's what the group within my church does. Being sharpened means having the conventional wisdoms of your faith shaken periodically by challenging teachings, things that open you up to letting God mold and re-mold you as He sees fit to do in order that you will be a spiritually lethal weapon ready for battle. And it means being encouraged to have steadfast, strong faith to stand against the petty evils of our day to day lives. When we surround ourselves with other believers who struggle like we do, we learn from each other, pray for each other, and support each other. When we devote our lives to learning, praise, and worship we become lightning hot weapons of light set against all too real forces of darkness. We have an edge, made sharp by the iron stone of the Lord which cannot be dulled no matter what the Serpent connives.

For most of my life, I learned the tenets of Law and Gospel and how both are necessary to faith, feeding and contributing to each other in a yin and yang circle of life. But I struggled with what to DO with it when faith called me to the works of living it out. God doesn't need me to do anything for Him, but He wants me to be ready at any moment to submit to Him and go out into the world as His weapon of choice. I have learned over time that He wants me – and you – to be sharpened by true teachings, His teachings, administered and carried forward by strong believers. He wants us to build each other up, to ready each other for battle, and to be able to stand when the time for standing comes.

That time is coming; it may even be now. It will differ between us because you will witness different from how I do. Maybe it will be day to day, or maybe it will be with you and I being part of a larger struggle with titanic forces beyond our ken. Whatever form it will take, the time is coming, and He wants us to be sharpened by iron so that we will be ready for it.

Perhaps this verse is a challenge to you to find someone who sharpens you, someone who makes you a better you, who brings out the best in you and knocks off the rust of what isn't. If you don't have such a person, find one. Better yet, open your heart and your eyes to letting them find you, to letting God bring them into your lives. Then let the good hard work begin. You'll find they make you better, stronger, and more confident in what you believe. You'll find that the love of God

in your heart becomes something you can more easily share with others, encouraging and sharpening them as you do so. All glory be to Him for that.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 3 November 2011

He who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit, and he who looks after his master will be honored. Proverbs 27, verse 18.

Yesterday was a big day on my project. My current role is to serve as the lead on a small business assessment at an insurance company in Michigan. Whether you know it or not, besides the whole national health care drive, your health insurance companies have been undergoing major changes at the direction of Uncle Sam. The kinds of electronic transactions they use have all been updated (required by the Federal government), and starting in 2013, the kinds of diagnosis codes your doctor uses will all be new. It would seem like a small thing, a claim code, but the ICD codes used for diagnosis are pervasive throughout health insurance plans. They touch almost everything, and complying with Federal edicts to use them isn't an easy chore.

This week, we formally kicked off an assessment project of how this customer will change from using the old codes to the new ones. As the lead, I briefed a team of about forty company executives, directors and managers, telling them what the next 7 weeks will look like and how my team and I propose to assess their readiness for compliance. For me, at work, it was the formal start of project execution, and it was my first face-to-face interaction with the CEO-level officers who will be our primary customers.

When I read the verse afterwards, I immediately thought it was a perfect summation of my day. To execute an assessment like this means many days of planning and preparation at the behest of a higher customer who is paying dearly for your services. The work you do will (literally) affect the livelihoods of thousands of people, so you need to do it humbly, patiently and correctly. As much as any job, you need to do your job well and do it the best you can.

When you work like that, I think it's like tending to a tree, being a kind of farmer. For something to bear good fruit, you work with it humbly, patiently and correctly. As another example (this one more literal), outside my home office is a peach tree I planted three years ago. This year, we got a big bowl of peaches from it. With some tending, next year there may be most of a bushel. My tree there has grown from a four-branched five foot tree to a healthy peach tree with dozens of branches and many hundreds of springtime blossoms. All that happened without my doing much to tend to it. Come February, after the danger of Texas frost has passed, I will prune it and then let nature do the rest. Some pesticides and bird netting may be in order for next summer, but if all goes well, with some responsible tending, in 2012 there should be plenty of fruit. That's a practical miracle you know, that a tree would produce fruit; that it could bring forth more life with a person tending to it.

But that's how things go in farming, in work, and in life. If you pay attention to them, give them your best work, and tend to what's growing, generally it grows better. What's more, if you do that in honor of something bigger than yourself, SOMEONE bigger than yourself, you lose yourself in that which is better and produce even better fruit. My mom once told me that the best advice they ever got was to lose themselves in a cause bigger than themselves at least once in their life. In this way, they might truly live in service to others and become better.

Well, isn't that some of what the verse is saying? Tend to your work and tend to what you love that you might enjoy its bounty. And serve something bigger, better than yourself, the master of your heart, that you might receive honor in addition to that harvest. We do these things by working responsibly and diligently with the tools and talents we are given. Then, we get to work more by helping to bring in the harvest, and edify those who are over us or came before us. After all, to serve is to be truly noble, and to share the bounty with those you would honor brings even more honor on yourself.

I'll remember that when it comes time to prune the peach tree in a few months. And I already remember it every day at work now. This isn't the first project I have led in the company for whom I now work, but it is the one with the biggest impact. I don't mind saying that my team did a great job in the presentation, and that I was able to neither bore nor alienate the executives. I enjoy public speaking, demonstrating my command of a subject and feeling even like God is calming me to speak well and confidently to strangers. We even got two "well done" comments from the CFO, and that is no small achievement for a company that is known to be skeptical to outsiders. It feels good to prepare to do good work and then successfully do it. I think it feels like harvesting the fruit that grew because you tended to your trees.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 4 November 2011

As water reflects a face, so a man's heart reflects the man. Proverbs 27, verse 19.

Have you ever considered that a mirror is honest and impartial? I'm like most people who carry around a few more pounds than they would like: I sometimes say that the mirror is my enemy. For a man in his mid-forties, I don't believe I look bad, but neither do I believe I look all that great. Looking in the mirror to size myself up isn't one of my favorite activities; I'm vain enough in other ways so, these days, I don't need to be vain about my appearance.

After posting yesterday's Proverbial, I researched today's verse and recorded it in the running file I use to write these messages. Then I went to get ready for the day. When I got out of the shower, I caught a good look at my bucky tail naked self and then remembered the verse, thinking about the mirror. Looking myself over, I saw many flaws and a few areas where I would very much like to work some improvement; all I can say is "I'm trying." Still, I stood there looking and realized that the mirror doesn't care whether I think I'm overweight or Adonis: it does what it does and reflects back without comment.

It reflects back my face – and midsection, butt, hair, tattoos, and the rest of me – and in doing so allows me to draw my own conclusions about what I see. That's where the heart comes into play. Years of childhood insecurities well up and I see someone who wasn't athletic enough to make the teams (so why even try). I see the worthless and weak boy who let others' opinions of him define him. Bad memories filter my view of the man who sometimes won't let himself get past winning and losing "the girl" for who could want someone such as me, with the shape I'm in? That's a delusion. Unfulfilled dreams remind me of all the things I've done, both good and bad, that have left their mark on me and made me into the person looking into the looking glass. It's just like looking at the mirror surface of a still lake: a surface that reflects the life and death contained in the deep body below.

The mirror reflected back what I saw in myself as a man. I'm not a bad looking man, or even a bad one. But I'm not a great looking man either, or even a great one. More than a few people on Terra Firma would have rightfully negative opinions of me for having known and hated me in the worst of my life's moments. The mirror reflects these things back at me just as they are, revealing my loves and flaws, and reporting an image just like a good (and rare) news story: just the facts. The prism of my experience, and of my heart, is where the perceptions originate. I would be lying if I told you that I'm usually satisfied with who I see.

Is that how God sees me? Does He see me in all my imperfections, desires, and flaws? Here's the shocking answer: it doesn't matter. Yes, He sees me just as I am, naked and filthy in the stench of sin. He sees me standing there, naked and afraid and repentant and hopeful, and He tells it like it is: you are a fallen sinner. I'm left with the Scripture ringing in my ears: "Who am I that you are mindful of me?" In this, He views me as full of wrongs, full of pride, insignificant, unholy. This is who I have become from some of the choices I've made. And yet...

...And yet that's not how He sees me at all. Because of His love and His grace and His sacrifice in the Savior, God doesn't see that at all. Instead, He sees a new me, cleaned up, fresh out of the shower, naked and unafraid, cleansed free of all the junk I did and carted around. He sees the blood of Christ that washed me much cleaner than the water of Flint, Michigan ever could. God sees in me hope, possibilities, a future, and love. He sees them because I opened my heart that He might install them there. The Scripture still rings in my ears – who am I that you are mindful of me – and I realize that He sees me as a reflection of His love, as one of His tools to impart His grace, share His words, love the others in His family of man. He sees me as the redeemed me.

Indeed, He looks into my heart and sees past all the muck and the mire and the impartial but shallow reflection from the lake top. He looks to the heart below. As long as it is open to Him, nothing else matters. To paraphrase Paul, what comes out of the heart is what defines the man, and a man with God and love in his heart will wear those as the face – as the mirror image – that he presents to the world. To be sure, love's opposite can live in the heart, too, and this too can define us if we aren't careful. Me, I prefer to wash all that away. If you see me, I want you to see Him reflecting back at you and letting you draw the same conclusion about yourself. You too can be redeemed; perhaps you are. What say you?

Water can cleanse or it can hurt. It can be warm or bracing. The reflection can be as well, and neither. I will admit that I sometimes don't like the reflection that the mirror shows me. I see the flaws, the hurt, the imperfections, and I lose sight of the fact that God doesn't give a flip about those things in light of His Son. When that happens, a gut-check is in order; a reminder to remember that the mirror of the lake or the glass can reflect the good things instead. I can look at the extra pounds as a challenge, the scars as souvenirs of overcoming struggle, the tats as artwork, and the bad memories as

mirages that can only hurt if I let them. The mirror will only see what I show it, honestly and impartially. Here's to showing it someone better in the days to come.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 7 November 2011

Death and destruction are never satisfied, and neither are the eyes of man. Proverbs 27, verse 20.

Life is a one-way death trip; I say that a lot. I cynically mention it whenever I want to elicit a response from someone feeling sorry for himself. I'll admit, it's kind of mean, and I'll also admit that it's something I wouldn't say to someone genuinely hurting, grieving, or in real emotional duress. But to someone who is bound and determined to feel sorry for himself, I don't mind telling them that they are wasting time; that's no small thing since you'll never get out of this life alive. Death awaits each of us, and no matter how many people die, if there are any left, well, they're going to eventually die as well.

Happy Monday, everyone.

This is a good reminder, then, of how nothing that happens to you this week can be all that bad. It could always be worse, you know. If you don't know destruction, think Richmond 1865, or the Somme 1916, Berlin 1945 or Detroit today. The forces of evil that oversee destruction are never satisfied. If something is bad, evil always looks to make it worse! Remember that dark mood you were in and things just seemed to get worse? Have you ever considered that maybe something was egging it on? Sure, it could be a lot of psychological mind-games that are convincing you into a negative spiraling self-fulfilling prophecy. It could also be that something was at work on you, looking for an opening to make a bad situation worse. I mean, how else can you explain a Jonestown, or four years in the hell trenches in World War I France? I believe that evil was at play then, and that many of the things we try to explain away as mental illness today are not mental illness at all but something much older and treacherous. Good thing I'm not an analyst, right?

And on that happy thought, let's compare death and destruction to the eyes of man. Malice is never enough for us: we always want more. Wanting can be a healthy motivation. Indeed, our very Declaration of Independence includes a healthy want called 'the pursuit of happiness' meaning it is our God-given right to pursue wealth, security, riches and peace to preserve our self-sense of worth. Sometimes, though, that doesn't seem to be enough. If you buy greedy kids a gallon of ice cream they will want five. "You only bought two cases of Dr. Pepper?" I've heard that one more than once. "I want" seems to be the battle cry of the modern age. I want a new car, I want a new job, I want that beautiful woman, I want a new plasma TV, I want the new house, I want X, Y or Z; pick your vice. 'I want' is the hallmark of a sick heart and a sicker society. Don't believe me? Ask Bernie Madoff. Better yet, ask the people he defrauded. 'I want' is the catchphrase of a world that is wanting indeed, but maybe not in the way it thinks.

Face it, my friend, we are fallen in a fallen world. May I recommend a better way?

Don't let my words give you the advice. Try Romans, Mark, or Ephesians. Seek ye first the Word from God himself and let yourself be moved by where it takes you. After all, I'm human just like you, subject to death, prone to destruction, and living with unsatisfied appetites. If you're unsatisfied, what is it that leaves you feeling that way? Read Mark and see if you're still unsatisfied; as the Gospels go, my favorite is Luke, but that's just me. Mark is straight-forward and a good place to start if you don't know much about this man Jesus. If you're living in destruction, read Ephesians and let yourself be reminded that there is a bigger, better world of which you can be a part when you let yourself live in grace. If you're worried about death, then read Romans and read the microcosm in a book of all that it is and means to be a believer and follower of Christ. If life is a one-way death trip for the body, then isn't it time you and I focused on living both now and in what's beyond?

Every person who has ever lived has been subject to death, and everyone except one is gone and powerless to bring themselves back. Destruction is the best of our lot here if all we live for is the day to day hopelessness of material things and sensuality. Take it from a recovering hedonist: it's never enough. Haven't you had enough of that? I know I have. I know that it's unfulfilling to live a life dedicated to just getting by and living in angst. The truth of the proverb is undeniable; the common sense observation it makes about the human condition is too obvious to ignore. If we let it end there, then what is living for?

Again, this is where I recommend you stop reading my words and go read some of God's. They will tell you what living is for, and what a real life can be. You and I weren't made for the death-trip: we were purposed for so much more. On a Monday morning, how about we do something about it?

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 8 November 2011

The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold but man is tested by the praise he receives. Proverbs 27, verse 21.

This is a pretty harsh comparison, don't you think? I mean, the methods for mining and extracting precious metals really haven't changed THAT much in 4000 years. You dig it up, you melt it, you shape it and bingo: silver and gold. Yes, I know my generalization displays a shocking disregard to leach mining, toxic chemical runoff and the vagueries of labor relations; all true. Still, I stand by my assertion that things haven't changed too much; it's still a fairly basic process. So it would seem with praise as well, and with the fact that this verse offers a harsh comparison in how something seemingly innocuous such as simple praise can be hotly refining, even violent.

That being said, let me ask you something: how well do you handle compliments? If someone tells you "good job," do you say "thanks" in return or do you defer the compliment? When someone compliments you on your outfit, or your weight loss, or your hair, or your anything, do you respond or do you blush and say "no, not really?"

Me, I am of two minds in things like this. One side of me is uncomfortable with accepting praise. The Lutheran in me has had humility pounded into me with a Law-hammer over and over again. We aren't to accept praise for anything because anything good that we do is simply God doing well within us. Thus, I accept praise reluctantly, and I'm getting better at it because I've wrestled with that Lutheran guilt for a long time. Of late, it seems almost like mocking God to be ungrateful – and thankful – when someone give you praise for doing something well. If God gives you a talent, you should use it to His glory because giving Him glory means He shares His love with you. Humility is needed, of course, but it's ok to accept compliments. Take that, Lutheranism.

Then there's the flip side. Do you feel starved if you don't get praise? I know I do. That's the weird part: I'm uncomfortable receiving praise, but I'm even more uncomfortable if nobody praises me. There is not enough time in the day for me to stand in the spotlight. Receiving that kind of praise seems different because it's impersonal. I LOVE the sound of applause or adulation. Just don't get too close because if you come in close and personal, I fall back on that Lutheran guilt. Again, here's an area where some work-in-progress remembrance would come in handy.

The verse cautions that praise can be a forge. For the person who is easily manipulated, praise can be a difficult thing to manage. It can become like a drug, something he can't get enough of and something that is hard to kick once you're addicted. Ask anyone in Hollywood and I'm betting they would agree with that point. For the person to whom praise is a foreign concept, then such praise can be a rare treat, a good thing. The older I get, the more I think that balance is in the middle; gee that's an obvious phrase, isn't it? Feel free to praise me for it.

Or not. I think it goes back to pride. Just yesterday I was reading a daily online Bible commentary (from a site called The Berean) that talked about pride in context of the book of James. James had a few things to say about human pride, all of them cautionary. The site says "A person infected by this deadly quality so admires himself that he is unaware of his paucity of vastly more important qualities. A proud person cherishes independence so that he will not be beholden to others. He is so preoccupied with his self-proclaimed goodness that he never realizes that he has any sin from which he needs to be saved, and thus he will not be corrected. He believes that he is above it all." There's something in that, namely that pride can be deadly if you aren't careful. In the context of this verse, a proud man can thrive on praise but if he isn't careful, if it feeds his pride too intensely, it can be deadly.

Ask yourself: is your pride really worth dying for? Maybe, maybe not. I believe it depends on what you're proud of. If our pride is founded in humble confidence in our God-given abilities, then a pat on the back now and then can be a good thing. If not, well, you know the answer. It's very Lutheran, you know, but in this case, there's more to it than just years of tradition.

We are each forged by many things in life. Death, divorce, bankruptcy, unemployment, hardship, hatred, gossip, manipulation: they all forge us, separating the good metal from the dross. Happiness, children, blessings, love, appreciation, caring, praise: they too can forge us, though in different ways. The yin and yang of praise and humility do act like a crucible, melting away what's wrong with both and hopefully leaving only what's good. Next time I feel like the spotlight is getting cold, I'll try to humbly give thanks for whatever time I'm in it instead of wallowing in my pity party of how there's never enough. I hope Martin Luther would approve. Then again, that doesn't really matter.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 9 November 2011

Though you grind a fool in a mortar, grinding him like grain with a pestle, you will not remove his folly from him. Proverbs 27, verse 22.

Out in my kitchen I have a mortar and pestle set. My mom gave them to me several years ago after she no longer needed them in her own kitchen. To tell you the truth, I never really figured out why she needed them in the first place. After all, she doesn't cook much to begin with, and those are cooking tools that one uses only infrequently, maybe for grinding up seeds or crushing something into a fine powder. It used to be that such tools were needed in a kitchen, when even flour could be occasionally grainy or coarse. Today, you can buy coarse flour and pay extra for it instead of having to grind out the tough pieces yourself. Most spices can be purchased already powdered. Maybe it's like having a lot of tools in the garage. You buy specialized tools that you use once in a blue moon. Hold that thought for a moment.

How often are we ground like coarse flour? Quite honestly, it seems quite often. Usually, it doesn't take much for me to wade into a pity party, thinking that I'm being beaten down, kicked around or even ground up by my troubles in the world. Comparatively speaking, it doesn't take much to get me down, feeling bad. Overload my work schedule and I feel overloaded; cut off communications with me and I feel alone; give me the cold shoulder and I'm cold from the inside out.

Oh me of little faith.

It's pretty foolish, if you think about it. Here I am smack dab in the middle of living a rich and blessed life and instead of feeling content, I feel sorry for myself. When I get in moods like this, I totally understand the verse and how a fool can feel ground up, mashed into powder. I don't like to admit it but that fool can be me, and all the grinding, smashing, pounding, and gnashing with the pestle still doesn't grind all that foolishness out of me. I cling to it because I don't think I know any different. I hold tight to that foolishness, my sins, because they're mine, I've done them, I'm responsible, and I'm guilty as hell. I could be smashed into the finest flour and still I would feel like I can't let go of those wrongs I've done because I let them define me, let them rule my life. When I get to feeling like that, I cling to it because it's all about me. See?

Repeat after me, please, the mantra I've said here before: it's not about me. That's not a new thought, and it's not an original one. I learned it at my church, and if you go there now you'll see a banner up on the wall which says just that. It's a good phrase because it sums up the cure for feeling beaten down and ground against the mortar and pestle of life. Say it again, my friend: it's not about me.

It's not about me because the attitude to model in life isn't the served but the server. It's not about me because my debts, responsibilities, and obligations are reminders of how blessed a life I lead and all the ways God will build me up and magnify His glory in that life. It's not about me because, yes, there are indeed so many billions more people in this world who live much harder lives than yours truly. It's not about me because at least most of my problems have real, doable solutions that I simply choose to ignore or procrastinate, and those, too, are huge blessings. It's not about me because you and I are friends, and every day I pray that these simple words will be God speaking through me instead of me speaking to you.

Get the picture? I could go on and digress into longer, truer, and (yes) more maudlin examples but I think you can see where I'm going. Thinking that my sins are unremoveable is a deception from the prince of deceit. He uses it against us when we're vulnerable...and we are always vulnerable. In such times, turn away, resist and remember it's not about me, then seek fresh comfort from the source of real truth.

1 Corinthians 13, the chapter about love, lists all the qualities of love that identify it as such because those are the qualities of love that God shows to us. Philippians 2 talks about the nature of a servant and how we should model our lives in that way, not out of compulsion but out of love...because it's not about me. And, from the mouth of Christ Himself, check out Matthew 5 for His advice on the blessings of life and how we should live ours in a harsh and sometimes grinding, cruel world. He addresses every care with love, and several chapters later reminds us that, when our house of life is built on His love, it stands on the most solid foundation possible. No storm can rage against it, no wind can take it down, because such love isn't about you or me.

And no mortar or pestle can smash it into powder.

Speaking of those, they have gone from the back of my Mom's kitchen cabinet to the front of my cabinet over the stove. That's the place where I keep the hodge podge of dishes, kitchen tools and assorted bric a brac that I don't know what else to do with. Not long ago, I actually used it, in this case to grind up a vitamin so as to dissolve it in water; soluble vitamins are more quickly absorbed into the body. Note to self: that didn't work out too well because all I did was mash the pill into powder that didn't dissolve quickly in my water. The tool did its job just fine; it was my concept that was a little off, but that isn't the fault of the tool, the pill, or even the water. It just is the way it is. Maybe I will try it again because, in theory, it's a good idea. For good ideas, you need the right tools, you know. Thank God He's loaned me a good set so that they're around when I need them.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 11 November 2011

Be sure you know the condition of your flocks, give careful attention to your herds; for riches do not endure forever, and a crown is not secure for all generations. When the hay is removed and new growth appears and the grass from the hills is gathered in, the lambs will provide you with clothing, and the goats with the price of a field. You will have plenty of goats' milk to feed your family and to nourish your female servants. Proverbs 27, verses 23 – 27.

I'm not an athlete. I exercise a lot but I'm not much into participating in team sports. Even though this is true I find that, in business and home life and sports, when you want to know how to do something well, you pay attention to foundations. You get back to basics. If you find yourself overloaded or losing focus, quickly getting back to the basics is, I think, the single best way to regain that focus and reassert control in your life. My friend, Alan, always says, "stick to first principles." Amen to that.

So it is that these verses, I believe, agree with my friend. In the context of animal husbandry they talk about the basics. Pay attention to the condition of your livelihood that you might profit from it. More importantly, pay attention to the details in the condition of your livelihood that you and those you love might live. Even in this age of an interconnected, fast-paced world, simple things still matter. Computers are made from components made from materials mined on the same earth that was around 6000 years ago when it was brand new. The programmers who run the internet still need to eat food grown by someone using methods that aren't much different from those used for thousands of years, right?

Whether we know it or not, technology still relies on simplicity. And simplicity still relies on paying attention to the basics. Have you ever been to a farm? The way you take care of animals or plant, cultivate, and harvest crops hasn't changed much since the time of Abraham. Sure the tools are much different and the technology is vastly improved but the animals and plants are still much the same. Not only that, but there are riches in simplicity. Pay attention to the details and there is a payoff at the end. That's why farmers work hard all season long.

And what are flocks? Sheep? Birds? Cattle? Of course they are. But how about the team you manage, the teachers who work in schools, the money in your checkbook, the supply chain that feeds your assembly line, the workers who volunteer? If you've ever been entrusted with managing anything, I think you can see that 'flocks' could be whatever it is you're 'farming.' "Be sure you know the condition of your team, give careful attention to your peoples' well being; for riches do not endure forever, and a crown is not secure for all generations." It might not be what King Solomon originally wrote, but I think it works just as well. Or this: "when the project is done and another one begins and the deliverable documents are all delivered, the people will provide you with work, and the team with the price of a new company. You will have plenty of income to feed your family and to nourish them all." Again, it's not what Solomon had in mind – project management in ancient Israel was a bit different – but I think you can see where I'm going with it.

Or, as God spoke through Solomon said in another book: "there is nothing new under the sun."

In all this, there is the reminder and the caution: the crown is not secure for all generations. What you and I possess today will pass away tomorrow. Our time and our treasure here is fleeting, only temporary. Using the talents God gave us to provide for ourselves is a blessing, an occupation, a calling. It is also only a reflection of the good vocation that is to come in the life after this one. And there will be a life after this one. When we die, what we have now will pass to someone else. We run our race here, even if we aren't athletes, and when we are done what we own and have is meaningless. Our crown will pass away when we do.

Until that time, it is our lot and our privilege to do our best with what we're given. We are blessed to work and make the most out of our treasure. For some, that means working at home, for others it's working in a deli, for others it's in an office or McDonalds or driving a truck or stringing cable. I couldn't do what you do for a living because I don't have your training, talent or experience; forgive my pretentiousness for saying the same about someone else doing my job. No matter who does what we do, the surest way to success is to always pay attention to the details and stick to the simple.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 14 November 2011

The wicked man flees though no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion. Proverbs 28, verse 1.

Last Friday was Veteran's Day and there are fewer days in the year when I am more aware of how it was an honor and a blessing from God to be able to serve my country. I spent 12 years in the Air Force: 11 active and another in the Reserves before I hung up my blues. Now, I'm not going to get all sentimental and melancholy, nor am I going to try to ennoble my service as something it wasn't. Yes, it was a calling, a team, a mission and a movement. For an uneducated kid from Southern Indiana who didn't have the money to go to college, it was also a job and a way out. I willingly got out of the military for my own reasons, all of which were valid at the time and few of which I regret. We make the best decisions we can at the time as much as God gives us the ability to see what He wants us to do with those decisions, and

I've been out 15 years, though, and since then, in every job, I've looked for one that was as much of a calling as my time in the service was. Sad to say, I've not yet found one. I doubt I will because, especially in an all-volunteer force in wartime, you won't find many regular jobs where your brothers and sisters have all volunteered to stand with you, righteous and bold as lions. Especially in that volunteer force – and even more so when those volunteers are fighting multiple wars at the behest of 330 million people who can't or won't stand beside them – you come to realize that you're part of something much bigger than just yourself.

The wars in which I 'fought' were not hot wars, not like the ones we fight in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, and now Uganda. The Cold War that defined half my service (and half my life until then) was one in which the bold righteous had to stand against the wicked unrighteous. I have known a number of former Soviet people since that war ended, several of whom became my good friends. I found them to also be righteous, upright decent people who felt they had been imprisoned under an unrighteous ideology. They told me they felt powerless to have done anything about their situation; it was what you grew up in and they loved their home as much as I did. But it was inculcated into them that, if you stood up against the powers in control you would be silenced, and they knew well the underground stories of a hundred million of their countrymen and women who had been silenced. Can you blame them for 'going along,' even fleeing when nobody was in pursuit? History will note that their Soviet overseers told them ruthless, greedy and bloodthirsty Americans were in pursuit of them. It will then also note that, when opportunity came to throw off the Soviet yoke, they did so peacefully and then joined (or tried to) the American model they had for so long fled.

My sisters and brothers and I stood against things like this, standing watch for others who couldn't or wouldn't. It was our choice as much as it was the choice of my peers to go to college or work or start families. Nobody forced us to stand up and defend our home, even when defense meant preparing to fight the unthinkable nuclear war. Nobody conscripted my generation to kill Asian Communists in black pajamas, then come home to peers who had occupied public consciousness while forsaking them in the name of free love, marijuana, bad music, and cowardice. We did what we did out of choice, our choice. It's one of the few choices I've made in this life of which I'm unabashedly proud. You learn in the service that it doesn't matter what the person next to you is like, where they're from, what color they are, or what they want in life. They're on your team, they're your brother and sister, and they're there for the same reason you are. They made a righteous choice.

I won't wax nostalgic, nor will I try to ennoble the idea of preparing to kill your fellow man in the name of following orders. Let's keep this real by remembering that's part of what you do in the military. There is nothing noble in killing, even when it is done so in the defense of liberty and God. If you'd asked me then why I was in I would have told you it was because I needed the job. I would have downplayed then what I embrace now, namely that I wanted to be a bold lion righteously standing my watch with other lions. I wanted to be part of something more than just me and my parochial outlook. I wanted to serve, not be served. It took me living after the experience, watching and supporting our current wars from the sidelines, to see how there is no freedom without God, how true liberty is not a libertine thing where the fact of having a choice means freedom from the consequences of bad choices.

To those who would 'occupy,' let that thought occupy your mind for awhile.

Last Friday, I went to see my Mom. I took her to a doctor's appointment, I did some chores around her house, and I set up her Christmas tree so she can get the jump on decorating it. She's 82 and it takes her awhile, but she loves to decorate for Christmas, so I figured it would be a good time to do so. We talked a lot, and we broke bread over agreeing about the brave state of those who stand the martial watch now. About how they face real evil on par with the Nazis who threatened the world during her youth, and the Soviets who threatened it in mine. And we agreed that those who would simply talk about evil while refusing to do something about it are mere shameful occupiers of time instead of being blessed masters

of it. They flee wickedness instead of facing it to defeat it. They are veterans of their own shame, and nobody will take good note of their self-serving 'sacrifice,' or pause to take a holiday in remembrance of them.

Thank you, again, to my brothers and sisters who served in the long gray line of history, and especially to those who stand on the front lines in our wars against the utopian hatred of radical Islam. You stand for liberty and what is good and right, just as your forbears did. Don't believe the media pablum that people are weary of your stand, or that your struggle is in vain. The task of those who stand is righteous, and you are as bold as lions in doing so.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 15 November 2011

When a country is rebellious, it has many rulers, but a ruler with discernment and knowledge maintains order. Proverbs 28, verse 2.

One of the pleasures of writing a blog is that you get to choose the subject matter and what you'll say about it. Thus, one of my pleasures in this blog is to (mostly) remain non-partisan. I'm clearly biased, but I mostly wish to keep my political beliefs out of this. It's not about me and it certainly isn't about politics. Matters of the Spirit are much better than that. This, however, will be as close as you see me come to commenting on things political. I've skirted the limits of this before, but I'll skirt closer now to make a point about the verse.

President Barack Obama, native of wherever, shame on you. President George Bush, native of Connecticut and (like me) transplant Texan, shame on you. President Bill Clinton, resident of the state Arkansas, shame on you. You three dullards were the elected leaders (or rulers) of our good land and you all land failing grades where this verse is concerned. Mr. Clinton, on your watch you oversaw a rebellious right rising to oppose your policies that were more about continuing your party's access to the Treasury than advancing American liberty; you also saw the hatred of radical Islam ramp up their war of rebellion against us. Mr. Bush, you oversaw two unfortunately necessary wars and a several-times sinking economy while caving to a vicious left on social issues with which they now advance their aims. The legacy you left is debatable at best. Mr. Obama, I really don't know what the heck you are thinking by the way you have overshot your bounds of Constitutional authority and destroyed both our credit and American credibility in ways your predecessors never dreamed possible. Unless something forces you to change, what you will likely leave behind is a disaster that threatens our very existence.

Here endeth the preachy sermon. Frankly, even though they were (and are) our presidents, they aren't worth the time. Besides, even my keyboard now has a bad taste in its mouth. Much as I like to debate, in the last few years talking politics has made even me nauseous.

Many common threads run through the recent decades of American history. The one that runs through that time and this verse, though, is rebelliousness. Our nation was founded on rebellion grounded in concepts that made rebelling against a tyrannical government justifiable. Our nation survived a rebellion that threatened to sunder it over the question of whether one race should enslave another. Our nation survived the dire threats of two world wars against nations that wished to enslave the entire planet, first in the name of imperial tyranny, then in the name of tyrannical, fascist socialism. Finally, our nation then survived a period of cultural torment in which the forces of selfish privilege struggled against the forces of traditional values.

It is from this last struggle our nation hasn't fully recovered, leaving us, on the surface, fractured and splintered by rebellious forces on both sides of the arguments. Whether you are a Tea Partier or an Occupier, chances are your feelings are like mine: based in emotion, self-justified by reason, and only partially supported by the facts and our shared history. Think what you will about the struggles and 'isms' of the 1960s, what resulted, from the vantage of an orderly society, was not all healthy. It is a good thing to have finally secured rights of civil standing that were previously denied to people because of skin color, which was beyond their control. It is only a debatably healthy thing that other 'rights' since then have been demanded by X, Y and Z groups related to factors largely within their control. When the personal became political, the good of society suffered. When rebelliousness for the sake of selfish rebelliousness became acceptable, society legitimized the illegitimate rulers of the fringe. Now we're stuck with them and the twisted 'isms' they brought along.

Throughout history, when disorder threatened, especially the kind of disorder brought about by combined cultural and economic fracturing, chaos and war resulted. Invariably, strong leaders emerge and what was before changes. Both good and bad died when the empires of the ancient world were no more. Centuries of knowledge and progress died with the Sumerian, Egyptian and Greek empires; when the Roman empire disintegrated a millennium of progress evaporated and a thousand years of disorganized obscurity resulted. Disorder breeds disorder just as disorder breeds unvarnished tyranny.

So why is it that the most controlled societies are the most orderly? I mean, the streets are clean, there are no vagrants living in the parks protesting the powers that be, and there is political and social order. I would submit, my reasonable friends, that they are only orderly on the surface. Underneath, yearning to be free, are forces of freedom that righteously subvert the tyranny of the minority. If you don't believe me, read up on the underground churches in China, Indonesia, Iran and even Russia. Read up on what political dissidents like Aung San Suu Kyi stand for, or what Alexander

Solzhenitsyn stood for not so many years ago. They worked and work for change from within that will better society without occupying, replacing, or controlling it.

By and large, just as rebelliousness is the central thread weaving through America's troubles, where liberty and underground strength flourish, faith in God is a central theme. Not forced faith but faith of the heart, faith that models the love only He can truly give. By and large, good rulers maintain order and healthy control of society when their actions are grounded in such faith. Rulers who manage projects, own businesses, or lead countries succeed when their discernment and knowledge with which they govern are centered on Him who grants such powers. Tyranny can rule only so long before it implodes. Where God rules, a nation will last forever.

Messrs Clinton and Bush are, thankfully, now relegated to history books. Mr. Obama, there is still time for you. Were I to have some cheesy Beer Summit with him, I would implore him to govern responsibly within the boundaries of his delegated and defined powers; I would implore that of anyone in his position. That's something that has been lacking for the last few years, admittedly for the many years before our current leader rose so quickly from blessed obscurity. None of us wants a weak leader, and only fools would want a tyrant. It is my prayer that we have neither. Let us hope that time shows an answer to such prayers.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 16 November 2011

Those who forsake the law praise the wicked, but those who keep the law resist them. Proverbs 28, verse 4.

What does it mean to forsake the law? If you go half a mile over the speed limit, are you forsaking the law? If you tell a white lie to spare someone's feelings, are you forsaking the law? If you promise your kid that you'll play Candy Land with them and then decide to take a nap instead, are you forsaking the law? Or is it something more intentional, more deliberate? Dictionary.com defines 'forsake' as "to quit or leave entirely; abandon; desert; to give up or renounce." Thus, to intentionally speed or tell a lie (even what we'd consider an innocuous lie) or even make a choice counter to your promise are conscious acts that abandon one side in favor of another that may or may not rise to the level of forsaking. Cheat on your taxes, definitely; fall asleep instead of the board game may be debatable. Yes, it's a hard old world, and an even harder one when it's legalistic.

That being the case, what is praise? When I think of praise, I think of the commendations we give for a job well done, and I think of good flattery. More importantly, I think of praise as hands in the air, unrehearsed, happy adulation, celebrating in God's word just because it is, just because we can. I think of someone breaking out into song, or happy prayers of thanksgiving and just happiness at being able rejoice, to bask, in God's love and grace.

So the only answer here is to be a prude and sit at home to play Scrabble (or Words With Friends) and watch the Hallmark Channel and be boring, right? Well, maybe it is; if those things make you happy and let you live a Godly life, knock yourself out! Personally, that wouldn't work for me; my choices help me to live a bit more kinetic life. I think the verse is saying, though, that whatever it is we do keep the law, do it righteously because in keeping the law we are resisting wickedness.

We are resisting wickedness by resisting the temptation to give into wickedness. Your wickedness threshold is different from mine. Different things and levels trip our triggers differently. Ditto for our ability to resist; that's an important action, that resisting part. It's the central theme of the verse. It does not say 'overcomes' wickedness, or 'defeats' wickedness, or 'crushes' wickedness or anything like that. It says that keeping the law, obeying commandments, is how we resist sin and wickedness. And what do you do when you resist? You stand, you don't budge, you hold out and persevere. You're like a wall against which the thunderstorms rage but don't push down. When we resist, we stand in strength, and if we resist while standing in the faith, we can resist forever.

But we can't 'overcome.'

Something more is required to overcome wickedness and sin. See that part of the Bible that starts in Matthew, Chapter 1 to learn more. When you do, you'll see there's nothing we ourselves can do alone to overcome wickedness. Alone, the best we can do is resist. With faith in the redemption that comes from God's forgiveness, though, we will overcome. It doesn't become simply a matter of 'can resist.' It changes our status to 'will overcome.' That's a big difference, you know.

When you do that, when you have faith in the one who redeemed you, you learn a few other things. One is that you want to give praise more freely, more spontaneously. Just as we once and again 'praise the wicked,' so our focus shifts to praising where it is due. Let Him work on you and you find yourself not wanting to put yourself in positions where you praise the wicked, where you flaunt the law. You find that, rather than being a hammer to pound you down, knowledge of the law becomes a beautiful reminder of what real freedom and overcoming feel like. It feels good to let go of guilt, to have the knowledge that even though it's a matter of free choice, our flaunting the law is still wrong. Finally, it feels relieving to not feel the pressure to perform, to let go of the burden of praising something that you know to be wrong.

I'm not saying that having faith cures all your problems, or that you or I can live a carefree and happy life here if only we accept Jesus. Troubles still come, and we still will slip and fall ourselves. But not feeling obligated to forsake what's right feels right because it is right. When the desire to praise comes – and it will – then it feels even more liberating to raise up a clean heart and give it over to the author of true love. That kind of praise forsakes the wicked and stands in celebration of He who gave both law and Gospel.

Live in that for awhile and nothing will ever make you want to forsake it.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 17 November 2011

Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the LORD understand it fully. Proverbs 28, verse 5.

Have you ever been willing to take whatever happens to you just so long as you can hold your head up high again? I have. I get this verse, you see, because I've been there. And since we've been friends for awhile, I'm going to say that I bet you have too. I'm betting you are saying to yourself "well I'm not evil" but then when you walk away from this verse, you'll think about it and it will bother you, if only just a little. After you've had a chance to ponder it, you'll think "well, maybe I have done a few evil things" and it will still bother you.

Good. The disposition to evil lives in all of us. It is always lurking inside us, clouding our judgment and keeping us from being better. We know what's right and wrong, yet somehow we always have an ability to do wrong. That doesn't mean we do it, just that the possibility, indeed the probability, of doing wrong is always there beside us. It's part of being human. It's sin. And whether we like it or not, whether we admit or not, sin is evil. Evil separates us from God. Where this verse is concerned, it means that, when we let that disposition to evil take over, we don't understand justice.

More than that, we don't understand the right from the wrong. Ever wanted something so bad that you were willing to put up with the wrong aspects of it just to have a little bit of the right? Ever stayed in a bad relationship just because you wanted to feel wanted? Ever overlooked a bunch of bad things just so you could have some of the good? I hate to be all judgmental but the truth is that when you and I do this, we're letting evil take a small foothold in us. We reject the right for the wrong; we reject the just for the unjust. We do those things because we believe the false comfort of the bad is better than the real comfort that seems out of our reach.

One of the sources I used to research this verse said "ignorance of moral truth is due to unwillingness to know it." Amen because there is a level of conscious thought or action in denying evil. Not knowing isn't an excuse; if you don't believe me, try willingly going 60 in a 20 school zone and then explaining to the officer, "I didn't know." Whether our rebellion is open or subtle, it's still rebellion. It's lying to ourselves, and that's bad enough. Even more, though, it's a subtle form of idolatry, saying "I know better." It's a way to show the world "I know what I'm doing." Really now? Really.

This is one of those lessons I want my kids to understand. As a dad, I want them to understand what's right and wrong in this world and be able to turn to God to be the decider on how to tell the difference. I want them to see that, like their dad, their mom, and everyone they know, they are disposed to being lured by the temptations of petty evil into thinking they always know better. Disasters large and small are the only logical outcome when we put pride before love. When we unwittingly (or willingly) side with evil, we willingly ignore just love. Unhappiness rules; chaos beckons; hell awaits. Pretty harsh, isn't it. I wish it weren't true, but it is. It's true in every walk of life. It's one of the reasons I want my kids to learn the lesson well.

It doesn't have to be that way. You and I can tame that nature; we just need some help. We need help from above to help us from within. If we're going to seek the LORD, we need to ask for His help. When we do that, He walks right in. If you listen to your conscience, have you ever considered that maybe that's God telling you what to do, making you aware of the right and wrong in your choices? If something seems wrong...it probably is. When those moments of choice come, when we are looking to determine what is the just thing, if we ask for help it is always given.

So what about earthly justice? The verse says that evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the LORD understand it fully. We all know about OJ, Casey Anthony, and dozens of other cases where the innocent appear to have suffered; we have each seen times when good seems trampled by evil. Where is the justice in that?

Here's the 'whoop' answer (and you may not like it): who am I that you are mindful of me? Who am I that the God of the universe should even think of me? Hand in hand with that, then, is the admission that, who am I to presume to know what justice is when my pride is asking the question? Good does win out; evil is eventually vanquished. It's just how things work. It isn't up to me to decide who wins or loses, or who gets what I think they deserve. If it is, then when I mess up (even in something big) then I'm surrendering my ability to have someone else decide for me. In criminal justice that's called "the system;" in the rest of life, I'm afraid you and I would call it 'unfair.'

But it is fair and, like Mr. Cronkite said, "that's the way it is." When you sink low enough in your sins, and when the consequences of them overcome you enough, you see that it's fair and you're willing to put up with whatever happens just

so it can be over, just so you can hold your head up again. That's the point when you're broken...and that's the time when you're open to God moving in and getting down to business.

That's the time to realize that greater things are yet to come for you because you can finally seek the LORD and understand justice fully. Notice that it doesn't say "find the LORD" but "seek." We 'seek' because this is a journey we're on and the journey matters. We seek to understand; we seek peace because where we sought peace when we were in evil only left our peace gauge on empty. We seek Him for help and He gives it. In our decrepitude He finds us and you & I realize that He was looking for us all along, staying with us even when we were turning our eyes away from His justice. Walter Cronkite, that's the way it is, too.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 18 November 2011

Better a poor man whose walk is blameless than a rich man whose ways are perverse. Proverbs 28, verse 6.

Let's get something on the table here and get it clearly understood: Scripture is not endorsing poverty. The proverb does not say "it's better to be poor than rich." It does talk about the attitude and actions of someone in a particular category of wealth, though. It is the blameless walk (and the heart that keeps it blameless) of the poor man that differentiates him from the perverse rich man (whose heart drives his perversity).

Mind you, wealth can be a sly devil. Remember Christ's observation that it's easier for a camel to walk through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. That is a case where the Creator Himself warns that wealth can lead someone astray. But what is it that's led astray? You got it: we're back to the heart.

We are all perverse; none of us is blameless. Thus, the contrast is even heavier, that because we're perverse and chock full of blame whether we are poor or rich, famous or unknown. It is the heart that makes the difference. Let me recount an incident from yesterday's flight back from Chicago. Yet again I let airborne selfishness bother me. In my work as a traveling consultant I get to, well, travel. I travel quite a lot. I think I'm getting cranky in my middle age because this type of behavior bothers me more and more as I see it more and more.

We were boarding and I put my bag in the overhead bin. I was in coach in a scrunched up seat that American Airlines calls "comfortable." I call it "expensive." As I was sitting there, wolfing down my cold Big Mac – didn't have time for a sit-down lunch – another traveler came on board. He was toting a rollerboard bag, one of those suitcases that holds a week's worth of clothes if you roll them and pack it tight. He looked at my laptop bag and had the audacity to say, "this will need to go under somebody's seat because I need to put my bag up." Really?

Yes, I got steamed but I didn't immediately say anything; I'll tell you why in a moment. He looked around and started hemming and hawing, and the man next to me (across the aisle) politely and quietly told him, "you might get a better response from people if you asked them more nicely." It was well-spoken but oblivious to Hemming Guy, who kept gruffing around (and holding up the long boarding line). Me, I was perturbed, not just because it was my bag he wanted to move. What kind of nerve does someone have to demand someone else be inconvenienced just so they can have their selfish way? I had been thinking about what I would write in this Proverbial, and clearly this man was in the far-from-blameless category.

And then I realized that I was right there with him. His selfish attitude was on display. Mine was self-righteously hidden but only just barely and only just barely contained. After all, he had a point. I could put my bag under my seat. Someone else could use that space, especially if they brought on two bags, something I often do myself but didn't yesterday. I was no better than Hemming Guy: I was just being more subdued. I was like the rich but perverse man just as much as my grousing fellow passenger.

That didn't last long. I had listened to the softspoken man across the aisle who, while being upright, also politely, firmly, and carefully both instructed and chided Hemming Guy in his error. His was the better example. Me being me, though, I got up, looked at Hemming Guy, and said to him, "Sure, I'll put my bag under my seat so you can put yours up.": I even said "you're welcome" before he had a chance to say 'thank you' (which he never did; I probably turned him off). A minute later, while shoving his other bag under his seat, he then started looking for a place to put his overcoat. This, too, needed to go overhead. So, I tapped him on the arm and said, "hey mac," and I opened the bin above my head.

For the rest of the flight, Hemming Guy sat in his exit row seat, reclining into the soft-spoken man behind him (who, like me, sat there in a reduced space; there's a reason why AA has never gone bankrupt: they jam people onto planes like sardines). Hemming Guy didn't say anything to anyone, but neither did he cause more trouble. When I wrote this on the plane (which is no easy task when the seat in front of you is compressed up into your chin), it hit me again that neither Hemming Guy nor I were blameless. Our attitudes were perverse, him in his selfish display and me in my crass and somewhat rude response.

What would Jesus want me to do? I'm betting better, something different, something kinder. After all, 200 people crammed onto an airplane need to be kind to each other if they're going to co-habitate for a few hours. Perverse attitudes paint us as the sinners we are when Christ wants us to act blameless. Indeed, if you're going to ride on an airplane these

days, you need a modicum of wealth to do so. It isn't cheap to fly anymore, even when you're shuttled like cattle. And both Hemming Guy didn't act nearly as nice as those cattle!

As I sat there in my \$800 coach seat I contemplated how, for someone aspiring to be richer in spirit, I had acted poorly. Who knows what Hemming Guy thought; it's not my business. He might have had a bad day, or wasn't feeling good, or could be enduring something terrible other than some trivial plane ride. But I did find myself at one point closing my eyes and praying for him on that same flight. He's a sinner just like me. It's not God who makes us sin, or puts us on crowded airplanes, or designs our lives to live in poverty or hurt. God destines all of us for heaven, but along the way we embrace the perversity of our sins and that puts the whole arrangement out of whack. Thanks be to Him that He also made them right again with that eternal second on Calvary when one man's death meant life everlasting for all who would believe, including perverse people like you, me and Hemming Guy.

Here's to hoping Hemming Guy is in that population of believers.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 22 November 2011

A discerning son heeds instruction, but a companion of gluttons disgraces his father. Proverbs 28, verse 7.

Yesterday, I woke up early and I didn't feel like writing; you may or may not have noticed but I didn't send one of these yesterday. I usually do wake up very early, but yesterday I was up at 0330 and was just up for the day at that time. My body said it had had enough rest and I was just ready to go; I was also ready for a nap about 2 PM, and I surely hit the sofa behind my desk just after that time.

Anyway, when I couldn't sleep I laid in bed and prayed. Whenever I can't sleep, I try to pray because I find, when I'm quiet there in the dark, I can more easily open my heart to God and tell him what's on it. It also usually helps me fall asleep again; at least it is relaxing. I prayed for many, many things, mostly prayers of thanks. I did that following suit on something that was said in church this week, namely that we should pray for big things and little ones both. This I did, and it hit me that I could pray for everything from the safety and blessings of my children to the jar of pistachios on my desk to the charger that charges my phone to the little green light that indicates said phone is charged (as well as the people who made the phone, and the equipment they used and so forth).

I hope you're getting the picture that we could each pray all day long just in thanks for all that God provides. If we did that, we wouldn't get anything else done. In our lives, there are thousands of different things every day, even every hour, for which we can give prayers of thanksgiving (a good theme this week), praise, and repentance. I find that, when I'm emptying my storehouse of prayers, more prayer-inventory quickly fills the empty spaces and, in the process of that, I learn a few things. The biggest thing is, once again, that it's not about me. True, we bring our needs and desires to God in prayer, but we also bring praise, thanksgiving, random thoughts and, most important, our hearts.

In those moments, God teaches us. His Spirit moves in our hearts and puts matters on them. Sometimes the lessons are huge and sometimes they are quick 'a ha' moments; I usually get the latter and later decide they were huge after all. Sadly, I'm not the wise son who always heeds this instruction. I quickly fall back into my sins. I'm getting better about letting go of the guilt for the old ones; it feels so good to not carry it around anymore. But every day, my mouth, my opinions, my actions, my thoughts all wade into the cesspool of wrongs again, and I take up new sins to sit on my storehouse shelf beside the good stuff.

I'm just like you.

And I hate to say it but, when we do that, we're gluttons. That's good to remember since this is Thanksgiving Week. It's like you and I visited the serving bar six times and gorged ourselves on free food. As we're patting our full bellies, letting the juices and gases churn inside, we're also patting ourselves on the back for being so darn rich and full. Thank God we aren't like THOSE people over on the other side of the room. I mean, look at them! They're throwing that good food away! Why pay for the food if you aren't going to eat it, and why come to a buffet if you aren't going to feast? They're probably messed up anyway; you can tell by looking at them, you know. Hey, aren't you gonna eat that last bit of turkey, you turkey?

My dad is dead and gone, but I'm betting he would be none too pleased to hear that. In truth, he might have joined in the talk at first, but then he would have turned from it because he had an innate sense of right and wrong that usually served him well. In moments when I gorge on my sins, I sometimes think of him watching from beyond, disappointed in me. In those moments, too, I think of God the Father, the creator of here and beyond, thinking the same thing. I can only imagine how the junk that I do disappoints Him, probably just as much as when I do well and He's pleased. Thank God for His endless mercy...and for the moments when He teaches a fallen son yet again to heed instruction and discern good teaching. After all, God is a Dad and a Son both, with the same Spirit of love moving between and in our lives.

My own son is fifteen and impetuous; fruit didn't fall far from the tree there, eh? He's all full of piss and wind, just like most teenagers, and is quick to make rash decisions. His music cycles between Eminem, a bunch of senseless hip hop, and Mozart (to which he loves to cook, just like his grandfather did). That temper of his he learned from me and his mom, and I'm learning that he needs time to unpack things that are said and done around him. He has done things that have disgraced me; that's true. He's more aware of them than I am. He takes things hard, and there's a deep young man who so many superficial people have taken for granted. But he doesn't even know all the things I've done in my long life and how some of them were disgraceful too. I'm not excusing them, or him, or rationalizing to dismiss them. Life is what it is and, as my friend Patrick says, "got skin, got sin." So it is with the next generation as it was with the past...and my own.

In the times when he heeds instruction, I'm proud; very, very proud of my son. Right now, he's struggling with a decision as to whether or not return to competitive wrestling and, no matter what he decides, he's doing it the right way. I'll support him no matter what. At three in the morning, I regret the times when I haven't been patient with him (or his sisters or their mom), and I pray thanks for the blessings when I have been. Whether my kid (all of them, in fact) knows it or not, they make me proud no matter what. They have their moments of gluttony, but when they are blessed to come around and put that in front of God, there couldn't be a prouder father anywhere. Those are moments for which I pray as well.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 28 November 2011

He who increases his wealth by exorbitant interest amasses it for another, who will be kind to the poor. Proverbs 28, verse 8.

Did you know that Bill Gates and Warren Buffett have already made arrangements to give away the vast majority of their billions? I don't know about the spiritual beliefs of either man. I simply know that such behavior can be evidence of God's Spirit at work. You and I don't have billions, and we probably won't ever become billionaires. Did either of those men charge exorbitant amounts for their products, one being software and the other being investment vehicles (or investment in businesses)? No comment other than to say that the market affords what it will based on what people are willing to pay.

In my humble opinion, America is both the most generous and most greedy nation on this planet. No, I'm not going to use my words here to guilt-trip you into thinking we are such an awful country. We aren't. Cite Messers Gates and Buffett for an example. Or Andrew Carnegie who gave away his entire fortune before he died. Or Milton Hershey, the profits of whose company go not to his cousins or distant relatives (he had no children) but, instead, to a school for indigent kids. John Rockefeller gave away a millions of dollars one dime at a time and still left a vast estate for his heirs. The list of charitable wealthy could go on and on and yet the strangest thing is that the vast majority of investment wealth in our country, namely the retirement investments and 401Ks, isn't held by the one percent of super-wealthy people. No, the vast majority of wealth in the nation is held by people like you and me. It's people like you and me who donate to churches, food drives, and needy causes. Large grants from the John D and Katherine T. Macarthur Foundation may fund programs on PBS, but PBS still gets most of its funding from donations out of the pockets of John Q. Public. You and I still give of our time and treasure to others in amounts the super-rich can't possibly start to compare.

And yet, this verse still tells the honest truth of how people amass wealth by sticking it to the little guy. Bill Gates owned a company that makes usable, relatively inexpensive software that people can use...but Microsoft didn't give that away for free. Warren Buffett owns companies that build businesses and provide jobs...that is, unless you're a competitor who is run out of town because of Buffett's undeniable market advantages. Big Oil may only make two or three cents profit on a \$3.00 gallon of gas, but it also allows the price of gas and oil to fluctuate according to a hyper-sensitive and somewhat greedy commodities market. Great wealth is amassed at great cost. That great cost is paid by you and I.

The verse also reminds us that rich and poor alike meet the same end in this world, and that God doesn't factor wealth into His equation of whether or not we will die. When Paris Hilton, George Soros, and I stand before God's judgment seat, I'm sure he won't ask any of us "how much did you make?" He might just ask, though, "how much did you love your brothers and sisters?" One way to show love is to share. I'm not a fan of the saying that we should "give back to society," especially since we live in a society that seems increasingly depraved and since the government confiscates more and more of our time and treasure for expenditures with which I disagree. I am a fan, however, of saying "give freely" of our hearts because, even in the hardest of times, we are still richly blessed in ways our forebears could not ever have imagined. Messers Carnegie, Gates and Buffett seem to have realized that because, as I mentioned, they all made arrangements to disburse their great wealth.

Maybe you and I can do the same. I seriously doubt I will ever leave my kids a fortune; indeed, I haven't earned one yet. But perhaps there are other ways in which I have amassed wealth that I can leave for others. Perhaps the verse cautions that wealth need not only be monetary. Maybe our wealth is in collectibles, belongings or even people. Maybe there are intangible things we amass in life such as knowledge, political capital, abilities, or even love. If we aren't careful – if our motives aren't Godly and Spirit-led – then we might amass those kinds of wealth in ways that take advantage of others. Don't believe me? Try collecting things at the expense of your spouse's' time, or studying and reading and pursuing higher education at the expense of time with your kids. Think about that when you're collecting friends on Facebook, or going from casual hook up to casual hook up. What will those things mean to you when you and I stand before God and He asks us how we used the many gifts with which He blessed us?

Who will our legacy be left to, and what will that legacy be?

I'm middle aged now and still in pursuit of the American dream. I wrote this missal from the cramped coach seat of a jet bound for Michigan because that's where I'm working this week. When I land in Flint, I will work a full day helping transform and update an insurance company's business so they can comply with Federal regulations. None of this happens for free. Tonight, I will write another Proverbial, and perhaps work a little more on one of the books I'm writing. Just this past month, I spent large sums of money paying bills, buying food, enjoying time with my family, and buying Christmas gifts that I couldn't afford only a few short years ago. It's important to earn a living, and I'm using the talents

God gave me to do so; it's one way He provides for my family, allowing me to meet my responsibilities and enjoy life. If I'm not careful, though, it could also be how I take advantage of others. Thank God He uses His Word to remind and shape us so that staying on the straight and narrow is an enriching walk in ways beyond the checkbook.

No, chances are that I won't ever be super-wealthy; I may not ever make enough money to ever really get out of debt or do the kinds of things I dream about. Perhaps that doesn't matter because money and possessions simply go to someone else when I die anyway. Perhaps real treasure is in how I can serve God in using my talents. I can influence others in these words; I can use time at work to befriend, to work in God-serving ways that make others' duties more efficient or easy. I can give a smile and a laugh instead of grumbling when I'm in the TSA line. I can be nice to the guy sleeping in the middle seat beside me by keeping my elbows off the armrest. Christ said it best: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. No interest is charged for loving on our brothers and sisters, but good interest is given and God is glorified one smile or kind gesture at a time. That's wealth worth building and a legacy worth sharing.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 29 November 2011

If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law, even his prayers are detestable. Proverbs 28, verse 9.

Your prayers, even the sweet ones you might say with your kids, may be detestable. The Scripture says it, not just me; please remember that. The other day, my wife and I were talking about hardening of hearts, specifically how, when a heart gets hardened, things become 'unforgiveable.' Mind you, no sin is truly unforgiveable. God, through Christ, forgives ALL sins, period. It doesn't matter if your junk is really bad or really small: every bit of it has been atoned for and you're forgiven.

What we were talking about was how people get into a mindset where we refuse to forgive others of the wrongs they do. We withhold forgiveness because our hearts become hardened either through choice or circumstance. Walls are built, grudges held, lists made. Whether or not we want to acknowledge it, this is something we all do. You and I both hold grudges. There are things that have been done to us that REALLY hurt, and I think it's only natural that we would hold grudges over those things. Divorce, cheating, manipulation, being hurt, being used, lies, deception: those things hurt.

Hear me out on this (again, it's Scripture, not Dave, saying it): if you willingly hold onto a grudge, you are turning a deaf ear to the law. It's natural because our nature is sinful, but it has consequences. When we do what's natural, we harden our hearts just a little at a time. When you do that, your prayers are detestable. If you're holding onto a grudge against someone in your past, or someone who hurt you, and you kneel beside your precious child's bed at night to fold your hands and say good-night prayers with him or her, those prayers are detestable to God. They are like garbage, a festering sewer, a vicious lie.

Pretty harsh, isn't it? But it's a brutal truth that I know I need to hear now and then. I need to hear it because I let my heart get hard about some things. Relationships gone bad, resentment that I've held onto for decades, situations that are out of my control, wrongs deliberately perpetrated against me: I have let my heart get icy cold about some of these things, and I've let myself forget that I, too, have done these things to others, even to the people closest to me.

So when I come to God and talk to him while still holding onto those grudges and that hard heart, I imagine how He must feel about what I'm doing. He loves me and pines to hold me close, but His holiness just can't tolerate my flaunting His perfect love with my imperfect hatred. His laws, His commandments, His reminders were given not to hammer us but, instead, to point out to us when we mess up and how much we need His forgiveness. Whether we realize it or not, the basis of God's law is love. It is the outer boundary to His holiness, and if you think about it, it's our outer boundary too. His laws are one place where His love touches our lives.

Knowing that, it makes sense that, when I'm praying honest, heart-felt prayers while holding onto that hurt and anger from the past, it's like I'm jabbing my finger in God's eye. It's just another way of making things about me. We're made in the image of God, and I know how much it irritates me when my kids tell me one thing and then do another. Or when they come to the dinner table and spend all of the meal texting or trying to talk on the phone. Or when they deliberately pick a fight. Are our 'adult' actions much different? Is it really a stretch, then, that when we knowingly flout the laws of love, our self-serving attempts to talk around it are detestable to a God who can see right through them?

Does this mean we should just give up prayer because, let's face it, we ALL occasionally turn a blind eye to the law? If you're a person of faith but you're tempted by your desires or the flesh, are you any less of a person of faith? Not at all. Indeed, if we give up prayer, we're giving up a personal lifeline that each of us has to the ultimate Creator, Father, and God of all time. This same God created everything you see, touch and know with just His words. This same God who wields the power of supernovas, hurricanes, and the rushing tides also came to us as a tiny baby born in a humble, cold barn. And how much does He love us? Just look at the nail marks and open your heart to see. Yet He wants to talk with you, in private, just the two of you, and hear what's really on your heart. If we cut that off, it's building up yet another hard wall.

Which brings us back to that conversation about being hard-hearted. The longer I believe and the more I study God's Words, the more I know inside that I can't believe what I do and hold onto the anger, the hurt, the humiliation, and the resentment of things that are far in the past. We live our lives in one-second increments, you know, meaning that whether the hurt took place many years ago or just recently, it really only took place a second ago. It's in the past regardless. Letting go of that hard heartedness is done in forgiveness, in seeing others as flawed and imperfect children of God just like me. I want my prayers to God to be acceptable, pleasant, and uplifting; I want Him to look at me and smile instead of

smiling and shaking his head in disgust. I want to do better. It all starts with forgiveness and that forgiveness opens up closed, cold hearts. When that happens, it's anything but detestable.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 30 November 2011

He who leads the upright along and evil path will fall into his own trap, but the blameless will receive a good inheritance. Proverbs 28, verse 10.

I ask a favor of you: please just accept that this verse is true. Don't over-analyze it: just accept it at face value. Do this because God made it so, for yourself, not because I say so. Do it because it's simply true.

In my forty-five years, I've been both the leader of the upright along that evil path and the upright man who was led there. I have made friends and gotten close with people I shouldn't have, and I have led astray other good people who didn't deserve it. In the times when I led others astray, it never went well. At the very least, I felt miserable and guilty for what I'd done; at most, my actions brought emotional and even physical wreckage on me and the people I love most. In the times when I let myself be led astray, I felt fortunate when I was able to break free of their toxicity, and I feel rewarded to have benefitted and lived a good life that my other actions clearly showed I didn't deserve.

Wanna know something? We are all like that from time to time. We have each been both leader and led, sinner and saint. It's part of our condition and on our own, it's incurable. I'm a firm believer in self-improvement but it didn't take me long in life to realize that no person is truly, one hundred percent independent. You can't improve yourself without the support and assistance from others. Even self-made people have rarely-acknowledged support systems that allow them to make the most of their choices and rise on the fruit of their talents. Nobody truly 'does it' all on their own. We weren't made to. We are never fully on our own. God is always there even when no other person is.

Wanna know something more? We can each be blameless. That's a fruit of Christianity, you see. It doesn't happen on our own. You are made blameless by believing that Christ took all your blame away. Even if you spend an entire life living in depravity, when God puts His Spirit to work in you, your blame is taken away. You may indeed still face the earthly consequences of your actions, but the eternal, spiritual, supernatural consequences of them are erased and you can stand before God Almighty blameless. Period. You didn't do it on your own: it was done for you out of love. You're blameless and you can walk away from leading yourself and others down the pathways of evil.

The simple truth of being made blameless makes this verse even more powerful. He who leads the upright along and evil path will fall into his own trap, but those made blameless will receive a good inheritance: It says "will" not "ought to" or "might" or "deserve." It says WILL RECEIVE. It's a guarantee. My personal belief, too, is that being made spiritually blameless quickly affects your physical life as well. I know of countless people whose lives became more relaxed, more tranquil, more empowered and full of peace because they didn't have to tote around anymore the subconscious guilt of the things they had done. They knew they didn't have to worry about what could happen any longer. Even when the worries of the world or new sins pop up, such people take to letting their lives be changed by this simple, all-powerful truth, and it becomes like a shield to ward off those troubles. Resistance and overcoming become not only possible, but preferable, to simply getting by with the compromise of character. That changes your life in other, better ways.

I'm one of those people. I've been the despicable man who led good people into sins they might not have otherwise done, and I've become one of the other kind of man, sometimes led astray but still made blameless by someone who cared enough about me to pour out His own blood and die. The older I get, the easier it becomes to see how I only want to be the latter kind. The former can simply be who I used to be. That amazing truth is something I now accept simply at face value, just because it is. It needs no other proof or mortal justification. It just is. It just is because He just is. After all, when Moses asked God what was His name, God responded "I AM that I AM. Tell them I AM sent you." He just is; He is just I AM.

Truth is truth whether we embellish it or not, but the truth doesn't need your embellishment or mine to make it more true. That's why it's reliable and it's why it's true, what we can all fall back on no matter what. Embracing it shows us the errors of our ways, then how to repent and turn from them. I pray that you cling to His truth today and that, if you're leading an upright someone along some primrose path, you'll turn around and walk the other way. I pray that, if you're being led down that path, you'll see where you're headed, and turn your lead around to go the other way. Wherever you are, I'll just pray for you there. When prayed in Him, those prayers become living, breathing, active vessels of action going to work to better someone's life. That's just the way it is too.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 1 December 2011

A rich man may be wise in his own eyes, but a poor man who has discernment sees through him. Proverbs 28, verse 11.

"You can't fix stupid." I will admit a fondness for the comedy of Ron White. I suppose I'm channeling my inner redneck in admitting that – perhaps even bringing truth to his quote! – but it is what it is. His cynical quote sort of segues off the first part of this verse, doesn't it? I mean, if I have a lot of money and I think I'm all that AND a bag of Fritos, I'm sort of stupid, aren't I (as well as arrogant)?

Here's where I think it's important, yet again, to note that 'rich' need not mean 'monied.' College may make you a better person, but it doesn't make you better than anyone else; a lack of education doesn't mean you're stupid either. Experience may mean you've been around the block, but it doesn't mean you've been smart about it; we've each known many people who lacked experience but were rich in insight. To be fair, it must be said that this verse is, yet again, NOT an endorsement of poverty. A lack of wealth (however you define it) doesn't mean that the un-wealthy are any wiser. Neither does it say "wealth is always evil." It simply uses the contrast of rich vs poor to show how even people our opposites can perceive correctly about us.

Whether you're poor or not, by now you have probably discerned that I don't have much tolerance for 'the elites.' In my own experience (an example of 'wealth' that sometimes left me poor), I've felt my neck under the boot of those who were better off than me. I've felt the insecurity of sensing that I wasn't cool enough because I hadn't been around when X, Y or Z happened. I wasn't smart enough, or didn't wear the right clothes, or drive the right car, or live in the right neighborhood. Too often, I let what others thought define me.

Notice what's common about those things? Do you think it's the attitudes, both of the 'rich' oppressor and me, the 'poor' object of scorn? Do you think those kinds of attitudes, either the rich person's arrogance or my corresponding insecurities, are Godly? Do you think they are what God had in mind for us? Me neither. He wants what He thinks of us to define us, and in His eyes, you are just fine the way you are. I'm more than quite ok just the way I am. God doesn't tolerate our junk (and we shouldn't either), but He doesn't let that define us. Think about it: God blesses us with exactly where we are each & every day, and He even stands back to allow the fruit of our choices (even the bad ones or the insecurities) to ripen into what it will: just so we can see the contrast between Him and that fruit, and then understand how much He loves us & why we need Him so much.

Through all that, God loves us right where we are. He was tortured, bled out and died to prove that, then came back to keep His promise to prove it yet again. He did that so that we might know, poor or rich, that He loves us just where we are in life. Sure, He doesn't want us to let the things of this world blind us – hence, the poor have discernment and see right through the rich – and He doesn't want us to let things of this world lead us astray. He knows that His love is better than all that and that His love makes the poor man rich (or the rich man richer) in ways that really matter.

Perhaps wealth burdens us with a lack of discernment. If you think about it, that's more than possible. We acquire money, property, friends, knowledge, experience, emotions, whatever, and it builds up in us first pride, then a false sense of security. The rich man may be blind: blinded by the illusion of security or prominence that his wealth allows. The poor man doesn't have those things so he doesn't need the pretenses that put the rich man at risk (because of them). Selfishness is never wisdom but is, instead, bare folly.

And realizing that makes me think again, thanks to Ron White, that you can't fix stupid. You can't pull the mote out of someone's eye if they think it's just fine to have one there. You can't make a fool see the error of their thinking, and you can't make someone who is 'rich' see how fleeting that kind of wealth is if they refuse to allow such thinking. But God can. He can cut through all that and help us see how irrelevant it is in the scheme of what's really important. God can fix stupid. In fact, He already has.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 5 December 2011

When the righteous triumph, there is great elation; but when the wicked rise to power, men go into hiding. Proverbs 28, verse 12.

What would you have done if you were a Christian in 1938 Germany? Would you have turned a blind eye (as so many of our brothers and sisters did) to the rising anti-Semitism and violence against Jews? Or what would you have done in Iran in 1979, when the Islamists were returning and seizing power as the iron-fisted reign of the Shah ending? Would you have clung to your faith, would you have fled, or would you convert to Islam? What about if you were in the library at Columbine?

We have the benefit of 20/20 hindsight to say "I would have done X" because we know this is hypothetical and nothing will happen to us. It's easy for you and I to say what we would want to say when things are going well in our lives (and when we have the luxury of being disconnected from the actual situation). What about when things get tough? What would we do when our faith is put on the line? Today's verse tells me that God is interested in our responses. He knows already what we will do, but He wants us to navigate our choices and side with Him. Too often, our choices disappoint him.

They always have. Don't you think He was disappointed in the Garden? Or watching Judas betray for measly silver? What about when you stood by as your friends ridiculed that kid? It's easy to say "I would have been Corrie Ten Boom and hidden the Jews" or "I would have stood up for my faith in Tehran" until the persecution actually begins. It happens still every single day in our world. Today, in Indonesia, you can be caned if you speak against Islam. In China or North Korea, you get hard time for even professing belief in God. In Saudi Arabia and Iran, if you profess belief in Christ, you can be executed. Those are real places and real people are persecuted.

You don't need to go too far, though, to see that, when the wicked rise to power, people of faith go into hiding. In the high schools, when the cool kids pressure the un-cool kids, the un-cool kids often shut up. In the suburbs, complacency runs hand in hand with keeping up with the Joneses and if you aren't complacent, you're in the silent majority which is silent none the less. Even in your own church, when the strong-willed have the loudest voice and a place of prominence, the strong-willed don't necessarily have the Godliest posture. Everyone usually swims along like a lemming. Don't believe me? Turn on the evening news, or get online and read up. Better yet, try speaking up against a popular but ill-guided notion in a church meeting.

So I'll say it again: the verse tells me that God is interested in our responses. He is interested in hearing us say what is on our hearts because, to paraphrase what His Son said, out of the mouth come the things from the heart. He doesn't just want to fore-know what's on our minds in this matter: He wants to hear us, what we believe, who we are. He wants us to stand up for Him, join the front lines at His side, and make ready for action. He wants us to stand with Him because he knows that true righteousness starts with Him, and that wickedness and evil are real things that cause good women and men to clam up. He knows that we, as frail people, need these types of gestures to build up our faith.

He knew it in Gesthemene, when He asked His friends to stay up, keep watch, and pray for him. Instead they caught forty winks. He knew it when Saul was overseeing the stoned murder of Stephen. He knew it just last week when the gossip started, or the kids started talking, or during those talks around the water cooler. He knew it when you and I were caught silent as the louder voices in the crowd spoke over the rest.

Good men and bad go into hiding when the wicked rise to power. Despotism often rises to power under the auspices of popular consent, using the legitimate means of ascension to gradually box their opponents out of existence. Yet it is wickedness all the same. When they can afford to get away with it, off come the gloves and out comes the bared teeth. Whether it is political control of a nation or erstwhile control of the ladies aid society, peoples' agendas often have more to do with themselves than the things of God. When that happens, we run for cover.

How much better would our world be if, instead of running to hide, we ran back to God and stood up? How many fewer problems would there be if people relied on God for solutions to them? Wouldn't this be a better world if we firmly, quietly, but resoundingly kicked Satan in the teeth every time we were confronted with a choice between right and wrong? That's what God wants us to do, you know. The verse is an observation about what happens when we don't do it.

Pollyanna and Billy Graham? Sure. But it only takes one person, standing up, to inspire a movement of righteousness. I'd much rather occupy a place on God's side than Wall Street, LA, or some makeshift camp.

I'd rather do that because, as long as there is a world, wickedness will have its day while hiding its true nature. Hitler didn't seize power: he was elected, and after honestly winning Germany's equivalent to the Medal of Honor twice. The penny-ante Hitler's of our time – Chavez in Venezuela, Ahmadinajad in Iran – were elected; they didn't overthrow any government. They were chosen. It can happen anywhere, even here. It happens every year in our world, and it could happen here too. What will you do when it does?

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 6 December 2011

He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy. Blessed is the man who always fears the LORD, but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble. Proverbs 28, verses 13 and 14.

We're tackling two verses together because together they make a stronger point. The two verses go well because they were meant to be together, one after the other, for all eternity. They are four contrasts lumped together into four clauses.

The first talks about how keeping secrets is destructive. It hurts to hold onto your junk. It ages you from the inside out, separating you from the people who matter to you. Worse, it separates you from God. God doesn't cause calamities in our lives, but He does allow them to affect us so that we might turn to Him and know Him more. Those who conceal this truth, who deny it, don't prosper. I can honestly say that the unhappiest people I've ever known are those who have held onto junk for far too long. If you've lived a life of addiction, low self-esteem, tears, envy, and malice, how good would it feel to have all that lifted off? We can't do that alone. Alone, our tendency is to hide, conceal, cover up and keep trying to move forward. It's hard to be healthy, though, when you're sick inside. Concealing our junk keeps us sick.

Then comes the saving grace of confession and turning to a new way. Turning from a life of junk is liberating. It feels fresh, new, empowering, and humbling to have mercy poured on you. The beauty of mercy is that it is always cleansing. It washes away the shame and secrecy of hiding. When you have the weight of your sins lifted, you wonder how and why you carried them around for so long. Life doesn't become a Pollyannaish bowl of cherries, but you see things in a different light. Instead of rolling through the roadblocks ahead, you begin to see them for what they are, then start to think of ways to avoid and go around them. Letting go of yesterday's junk helps you to see that it's a healthy thing to confess it and publicly renounce it. At least that's how it worked for me.

Blessed is the person who always fears the LORD in everything they do: that's the third clause. When you know the weight of sin and the lightness of merciful release, I believe you begin to understand that it takes something to hold onto the feeling. There's nothing we do to make ourselves worthy of it, but He makes us worthy. Just like the mirror of mercy shows the ugliness of our sins, so, too, does the mirror of respect show us what can happen when we give up that respect. When we fear God, we understand how He is merciful and loving, and that to keep that mercy and love pure, He is holy. He won't compromise His holiness – He can't; it isn't even in His nature – so with that holiness, love and mercy comes immense power. A thought from Him could wipe out the universe; a single breath could level a city. We should remember this and be mindful of it, bathing warm in knowing that He uses that power, instead, to reinforce His love in our lives. When that happens, is it any wonder that we would prosper? Nothing can stand against it.

Finally, there is the last part. NOTHING can separate us from the love of God. Repeat it: NOTHING. From the outside acting in, nothing in this world can break us away from it. It's super-glued onto our souls. From the inside acting out, however, that's a different story. Your faith can't be taken away, but you can give it up. Just as we can renounce our sins, so can we renounce our beliefs. People can believe in the power of knowledge and self to trump everything. Time and experience can change that. Is it any stretch, then, to think that we could willingly turn away from believing in God? Faith can't be taken, but it can be surrendered. It takes a hard heart to do that. A gut check is needed, though: remember that we aren't talking about moments of losing heart...unless we let those moments grow into more. This isn't talking about flashes of anger, depression, or sadness. Those things can surely grow into a hard heart, but usually they pass.

I don't know about you, but I need to know these things every day. Every day I struggle with the temptation to fall back into old habits and old sins, to do something new that I would conceal. It's a daily battle and a foolish one because I know that nothing is hidden from God and that the people around me look at me closely. I know, too, that confession and renunciation do indeed bring mercy, that forgiveness feels like a warm bath to sore muscles. But I need to hear that my respect for the LORD is something that also blesses me with mercy, that He is a real presence in the hectic life I've made. And I need to know these things when the old angers well up, when I'm reminded of past sins, old feelings, a former life.

Do you need them too? Do you also need to be reminded that tender mercies are new every day? Nobody can make you feel bad about yourself, but God can make you feel spectacular. That's another way of saying what these verses say. Feeling blessed feels spectacular. It is a full sensation of knowing you're in favor, that you've been given something precious, that you're special. A humble heart needs to know that 'it's not about me' but even humble hearts, now and then, need to be reminded that God thinks they're special and wonderful. In these days leading up to Christmas, perhaps that's one of the lessons of the holiday as a whole.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 7 December 2011

Like a roaring lion or a charging bear is a wicked man ruling over a helpless people. Proverbs 28, verse 16.

I'm going to use the words here to promote a (book and a) movie. If you haven't seen (or read) it, go see "The Help." It comes out on DVD very soon. Rent the movie and watch it.

Why am I saying this? Because the verse applies. Without divulging too many details, the story is about racial tensions in Jackson, Mississippi in the 1960s, told from the point of view of the black paid help who work for (largely) prejudiced white women. The conflict comes when the hired help collaborate with a white woman to write a book outlining their experiences. It's so easy for me to say "stand up, for God's sake!" when the system isn't dead-set against me. That just wasn't the case in the Jim Crow South. Dixie wasn't hell, but it sure as hell wasn't a good place to live if you were black because every institution we take for granted now was set against you.

The main antagonist is a roaring lion, charging bear of a wicked woman who joyously defends her 'segregation now, segregation forever' attitude. She deliciously reveled in keeping her help 'in their place.' Lies didn't matter, humiliation didn't matter, morality didn't matter, even life didn't matter: as long as she (as a white woman) ruled over her (black) servants, all was well. The rub came about when people simply wanted to be treated like people. Damn those black women: how dare they stand up and demand to be treated equal!

Really.

It's just a story about the way life used to be in America. I reject the assertions that there is widespread institutional racism in the nation today, but you will definitely still find pockets of it and people who too comfortably carry it around in their pockets. I read this verse and I am reminded that things like this really happened, that good people had to stand up against oppression and the threat of murder just to assert rights that were legally already theirs. I remember that wickedness can keep down good people anywhere. It doesn't have to be Stalin, Saddam, or Al Qaeda: wickedness can take many shapes and forms. It can be racist woman, they misogynistic 'musician,' the overbearing boss, the controlling in-law, the tyrannical pastor, the over-opinionated Facebooker. Wherever we turn out God, we invite wickedness. Even the subtly wicked still rule like a roaring lion or a charging bear. Wickedness is dangerous no matter what form it takes.

And people are helpless until they decide to hunt bear. That's what happened in the movie. One of the white women decided to write that book about 'the help' and what it was like to live as a black woman in the South. In their own way, the women quietly, strongly & defiantly stood up and hunted bear. They took down 'the system' from the inside out, one small word at a time. It was done righteously, with the truth and without malice. If you want to know how it turns out, read the book or, as I said, go get the movie.

If you want to start a movement, first begin to listen. But before you listen, "be still and know that I am God;" that's the first part of Psalm 46, verse 10 and it's brilliant. If you want to hunt bear, then prepare and the first thing to do in preparing is to involve the Lord. We do that by first listening, then following where He leads us. The helpless shake off their helplessness with the help of the Lord. It has always been this way, from before Sixties Mississippi until long after you and I are in the dirt. When we succeed, we succeed because we've followed God.

"The Help" isn't a story of faith in God, though that certainly comes into play. I'm thankful to live in a place where good people before me struggled to set right some wrongs that had been in place since days of old. You and I don't have to live in a nation where the laws, businesses, and attitudes foment hatred because of your skin color. We don't have to put up with that anymore. We also do, however, have to keep listening, and we have to win freedom for ourselves every generation. It isn't a given, and it is fragile. Freedom is always at risk no matter when or where we live. If you don't believe me, go to China, or Africa, or Russia, or even many places in Islamacized Europe. On this December 7th, read up about what our grandparents had to do to keep their freedom after it was attacked. If you don't believe this, be still and listen to God, and then listen to stories of people like 'the help' who once lived in a place that wasn't free.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 8 December 2011

A tyrannical ruler lacks judgment but he who hates ill-gotten gain will enjoy a long life. Proverbs 28, verse 16.

I once worked on a project where the configuration lead was an overbearing woman who was, well, a tyrant. On a previous effort, she and I had been friends; in fact, I learned quite a lot from her about the system we were configuring. She was smart, sharp, and had worked at multiple health plans. On the later project, however, her aggressive side came out and I came to see that she was a tyrant.

She was a bully by nature and, like all bullies, insecure. Several of us called her “the Queen Bee” behind her back, though I think I may have actually once called her this name to her face; I don’t remember. In her defense, I don’t believe she had ever had any management training, and her mentor was herself another bully. Both were extremely knowledgeable about how to configure payer systems, and both were politically connected in our organization. The configuration lead, however, was highly intolerant of any opinion that didn’t originate between her ears and did not tolerate someone garnering more time in a spotlight than she received.

I think of this woman and I think of how a bright, intelligent, charismatic, talented, and promising person can still be someone who lacks judgment. Under her management, our team met its goals, but there was always an unnecessary “hurry up” mentality at play on the team, as if we were always running behind and were on a forced march to just make our minimums; it was an illusion she kept up to make the rest of us look busy and herself in control. She lacked good judgment when it came to how she related to her team and her customers. And she lacked good judgment concerning that to which she hitched her star.

Do you have tyrants in your life? A parent who lords their personality over you? A brother or sister who is determined to be king (or queen) of the hill no matter what? A friend for whom you always play a subservient role? Can you see that there is an epidemic of lack-of-judgment going on here? You both have it; I have it concerning roles in my life. I know of people in my life who are tyrants and, to be honest, I’ve been a tyrant too. In some areas where I rule, I have been a tyrant who lacks judgment.

But contrast this with what the verse says about those who hate ill-gotten gain. We can ill-get almost anything from knowledge to wealth, from relationships to love. If we do, the tyrant in us is at the helm. That whole ill-getting action is antithetical to what God has in store for us, and the verse confirms this. If this were not so, could someone who embraces illicit gain live a long life? Could such a person truly prosper in ways that matter? If prospering is a gift from God – and I believe it is – then it only happens when He blesses us. The really strange part of it is that, because of His grace, He blesses us continually, whether our ‘gaining’ is on the up and up or not.

Could any of us really live our lives to do that, or to give in that way? I think not. That’s why the proverb makes the observation that it does. We each have a little bit of the tyrant in us, and we each also want to be blessed. God blesses us no matter what, but our nature makes us discontented as long as we’re carrying around the junk and guilt over how we came across those blessings in life. Until we let go of the junk, the tyrant grows stronger. When we do, happiness becomes possible.

I’ve had years to think about the configuration lead and why she acted the way she did. She was one of the more duplicitous people I’ve ever known, yet I have to confess that I’ve prayed for her from time to time. Behind every tyrant is someone who made them like that (as well as a bag full of choices that were made along the way). Perhaps she wasn’t always a tyrant; perhaps there’s someone better waiting to get out. I don’t know what all of her choices were; they aren’t my business anyway. But I still find myself praying for her now and then as I know she’s still working in the same business in which I work, and this is a small vocational community. There’s always a chance of seeing her in the airports, or at a client. If that ever happens, I hope we can work well together. I’m not the same man I was; perhaps she has changed as well.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 9 December 2011

A man tormented by the guilt of murder will be a fugitive till death; let no one support him. Proverbs 28, verse 17.

This is some pretty sour medicine. At men's Bible study last night we were talking about law and Gospel, and how so much of Scripture is categorized as either law or Gospel. If you haven't heard of this, God's law is written on our hearts to speak to us of our need for His Gospel; God's Gospel is written on our hearts because we are defined by law. Without law telling us of our sins, we need no Good News; without Good News, the law of our sins is damning. It's like a yin-yang kind of relationship; one is needed for the other. It's about Him, for us yet for Him as well because law and gospel reveal sides of God's character and His personality. One is holy justice, the other is holy love. Both are fused together and, as we understand them, separate but distinct. I suspect, though, in the life to come we'll understand this differently.

But that's later. This is another part of reality. Friends, this is a law verse. It means much more than just killing, though, because the penalty for our sins is death, namely our own. You will die because of sin. There is no other reason. If you deliberately cause the death of someone else, you're guilty of one of the most heinous crimes possible. For the dead believer, it's all 'mission accomplished time.' They move on to the next and most fulfilling phase of life. For you, however, you're in a world of hurt, unending hurt. Murder carries consequences beyond human justice. If you have even a sliver of conscience, it's the hardest thing to live with. Do it and you'll learn that terrible lesson. I don't make the rules here: I'm just telling you the way it is. Don't shoot me, the messenger: it would be murder.

And I don't want you to be tormented by the guilt of murdering me or anyone else. A man tormented by the guilt of murder will be a fugitive till death: alone, no matter where he goes, he won't find rest or comfort from that guilt. A guilty conscience is a tough thing to live with. If yours doesn't feel guilty, I celebrate you and am thankful it doesn't. I'm also highly doubtful of it. I know first-hand how it feels to have a thought, a memory, a stabbing pain torment you. Take it from me: it's hell to live with a guilty conscience. A guilty conscience can be an effective playground for the devil. Real torment is involved. I've known people tormented enough by their guilt who contemplated suicide; I am one of them. We've all known people who succeeded at it.

I can't even begin to imagine how it would feel to know I've murdered someone. The closest I've come is that anger and the depression surrounding suicide. That's bad enough. To live with the knowledge of having taken away another's life is unbearable. Sure, the ganstas, defense attorneys, and Dexter can all portray it as just another series of complex emotions. Barbra Streisand. The verse tells of something different, something much more trustworthy.

In ancient days, the penalty for murder was death. Deliberately kill someone and the authorities would deliberately kill you. Aren't you glad that you live in a place where lawyers can define down the meaning of murder? Ok, maybe that isn't something to be happy about. After all, it could just be that our ancestors had a better grasp than we do on the gravity of certain things. It could just be that, by defining down the meaning of murder, we desensitize people to what a terrible thing it is to deny someone God's gift of human life. It could just be that we are trying to sugar-coat something that can't ever be made sweet, understandable or palatable. Our ancestors better understood how destructive and terrible that was. It's time we recapture that understanding.

We can do that by getting back to the basics, by understanding that some things are off limits because they truly are terrible. Go ask a murderer on death row if they would prefer to be living on the outside. Better yet, go ask someone doing life without parole if they would like a do-over on the murder that landed them in prison. Go ask the gang-banger homeys if murder in the name of pride is really worthwhile. Go ask someone who has deliberately killed another human being if they are bothered by the guilt of it, if they are punished by it daily, even minute by minute. If they tell you anything, most of those people will tell you what a terrible thing it is. This isn't "Sons of Anarchy," "Dexter" or some TV crime show. This is real.

There's more. Here's where we can see the verse can be extrapolated to include more than just killing. Substitute your favorite sin for "murder" and you can see the seriousness of it. A man tormented by the guilt of adultery will be a fugitive till death; let no one support him. A woman tormented by the guilt of lying will be a fugitive till death; let no one support her. A boy tormented by the guilt of stealing will be a fugitive till death; let no one support him. A girl tormented by the guilt of envy will be a fugitive till death; let no one support her. You have the picture now; how does it look?

Not only this but, when things are bad, you're on your own and that's the way it is supposed to be. People aren't supposed to coddle us in our sins. We don't get leniency for 'trying' or for having good intentions. If we've messed up, we own it. The people around us are supposed to shun us, scorn us. We reap what we sow; we get the consequences of our

actions. It's both justice and human nature, and sometimes that means life in a cell or a walk to the death chamber. That's just the way it is.

Pretty hopeless, don't you think?

There is no 'gospel' (or 'good news') present in this verse. The law points to our soul's need for God's gospel, for some way out of the spiritual damnation that can come if we harden our hearts to these things. Left alone, this verse is an observation about the damned. If it is read alone, it is hopeless. To hear gospel, you need to read elsewhere. There are whole books in the Bible that either directly tell of the Good News or explain how to live out the Good News. Read this verse, then go check out the New Testament. Murderers need it and can find honest forgiveness there. You're as guilty as one of them. You need it too. So do I.

God doesn't bring calamity, sin or torture into our lives here, but He does stand back and allow us to bring them in: all so that we might instead pursue His Good News and be saved. If you want to know more, check out those books or get with me and I'll point you in the right direction. Until then, I want to leave you with these questions: how long will you let the hurt go on and what are you prepared to do about it?

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 12 December 2011

He who works his land will have abundant food, but the one who chases fantasies will have his fill of poverty. Proverbs 28, verse 19.

I am a healthcare consultant. In just a few weeks, I will start my twelfth year of doing this for a living, meaning I will have done it longer than my previous life's career (in the Air Force). Officially, that will make me a career consultant. I'll be the first to tell you: this wasn't the career I planned for or even wanted. It would be hard for me to imagine a scene where you're asking a bunch of kids 'what do you want to be when you grow up' and one of them screams out "I want to be a healthcare IT consultant!" It just wouldn't happen. And in the interest of full disclosure, I'll also confess that this isn't a career I would recommend to my kids. It has taken me a decade to learn the in's and out's, the business of how health insurance companies work, and to master the terminology and data. It can be extremely frustrating even as it is profitable. No, it wasn't what I set out to do years ago, and it isn't even all I would want it to be now. But it is my career and it is what it is.

Because of how God blesses me through this job, there is abundant food on my table. When I'm on an airplane, jetting off to the next client, it's awful easy to miss that fact. It zips right by just like the birds outside the jet. I may not be where I thought I would be, or even where I want to be, but I'm where God intends for me to be so He can bless me and those around me. Because of how God blesses me in this position, there is food on my table, there is money in the bank, and there is satisfaction.

But what about dreams? Read closely and you'll find that the verse doesn't condemn chasing a dream. A dream can be a realistic goal, something out of your reach that you need to work for. It might be how you know what your heart tells you to do, perhaps even your life's calling. Not so a fantasy. A fantasy is unrealistic and unlikely. It's satisfying and exotic, something you wouldn't do in your ordinary existence. Fantasies may be fulfilling in private times, but they aren't much use otherwise. Dreams, though, can keep us going. Dreams can be things that, with work and dedication, we can make come true. And the great thing about dreams is how God blesses us through them. He may very well speak to us that way, imparting advice and direction for the ways in which He wants us to move. And it could just be that, as we journey along, the dreams God gave us yesterday can be replaced with new ones, unforeseen dreams made possible by how and where He blesses us today. That can be a good thing.

This weekend was our monthly Dinner and a Movie Bible study and we had a big soiree for it at Chez Terry. This month's movie was "It's a Wonderful Life." You probably know the story of the small town man who dreams of doing big things in life but sacrifices those dreams for others. George Bailey wants to live large, build big buildings, be important, be noticed. Instead, he unwittingly sacrifices those fantasy dreams to build people and hearts, to help them build lives instead of just sticks and bricks. He could very easily have gone off chasing those fantasies, futilely asking "what about me?" Not George. George does what he feels he ought to do instead of what his dreams tell him to do.

I'm no George Bailey; I don't have that kind of character. I just don't. All too often I have chased the fantasies instead of seeing the abundant table spread before me. Half of every year in the last ten, sometimes more, I've spent the nights alone, doing what I felt I had to do instead of what I wanted. When I wasn't looking, I became involved in the fantasies of others who were hurting like me. When I didn't want to, I jumped into poverty of the soul, bringing heartache, wreckage, and hurt to others and myself. George Bailey is the character with character; I've often done well by making the best choices I could, but I've also made some pretty awful ones too. When they were bad, they were very bad. All too often, I let my character be tarnished and defamed by them. That's hardly what happened in the movie.

And yet, it's still a wonderful life. All the while there has still been abundant food on the table and God pouring out His blessings on me: the wicked servant who didn't deserve them yet was blessed by them all the same. The food on the table, the good health, sound house, caring relationship, growing family, and blessed church were all vital things in my life. I have simply failed to appreciate them and be thankful. Recognize that, I'm left here on an early morning flight to Chicago, writing these words and silently praying the same prayer as old George Bailey: "Lord, I don't care what happens to me. Just let me live again."

Between 20 and 30 people cycled through the party and associated Bible study on Saturday, sharing fellowship, good food, a little bit of wine, and a chance to discuss the things of God in the terms of a classic movie. At one point, while rushing to pull hot appetizers out of the oven, I quickly glanced around and thought, "this is great. This is where I'm supposed to be right now." It was made possible by hard work, working the land of my career and how God blesses my family and I through that. It was made possible by all those trips to Arizona, Minnesota, California and Michigan this year,

even the hundreds of days and nights apart. The moment was a reality because of struggling to do what I ought to do instead of what I fantasized about doing. In that moment, God blessed me to look around and see the abundant food of friends and their love that He had blessed into my life. Like the dreams I once had and the new ones in my heart now, those moments keep you going and bring love into your life. They make it worthwhile to work in this career that I own, understanding what a blessing it is. Just like the note left for George Bailey said, no man is a failure who has friends.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 13 December 2011

A faithful man will be richly blessed, but one eager to get rich will not go unpunished. Proverbs 28, verse 20.

Yesterday I wrote about what a wonderful life it is, how God blesses us even when we don't deserve it and even when we aren't living the lives we thought we would. Let's face it, though: we all get down now and then; it's part of being human. When you let yourself get all wrapped around thinking about what you don't have, you venture into dark territory. When your thoughts become pre-occupied with 'why me' or what you don't have instead of what you do, then you risk becoming something much harder to live with.

Unfaithful.

I'm not just talking about marital fidelity, though that's obviously a part of it. Faithfulness is much more. It's belief in what you don't see. It is standing up for what you believe. Faithfulness is being trustworthy, kind, and honest; faithfulness includes integrity, doing the right thing when nobody is looking. Faithfulness is clinging to hard truths even when you don't want to, and it's disciplining yourself to do work when it would be much more fun to watch TV or surf the web. Faithfulness is listening when you want to talk, saying 'I'm sorry' to honorably keep the peace, sitting down to talk over the bills, keeping up family traditions in tough times, and getting your to-do list done because you said you would.

Get it? I'm betting you do, so I'll stop belaboring the point. Unfaithfulness is what happens when you don't do those things. Gee, thanks, Dave. I really appreciate hearing that. What a great way to start my day!

Here's the twist, though: have you noticed that, even though we all slip up and venture into Unfaithfulland now and then, we are still blessed? Even though we mess up, fantasize about what we shouldn't, keep slamming our neighbors, gossiping about our enemies, taking up bad habits, and harboring anger about our exes, God still blesses us immeasurably. If you wake up to read this, you're blessed. If you have air in your lungs, you're blessed. Clothes in your closet, someone to say 'hi,' something (anything) to look forward to, a place to call home: if you or I have any of these things (or more) we're blessed. God does it whether we deserve it or not. He pours blessings down on us in ways we can't even imagine. The next time you're feeling down (and it happens to me a lot), I'll challenge you to do this: just start counting small, even insignificant, good things around you every day. Say a quick "thank you for my shoes, thank you for air, thank you for a drink of water" and so on.

Before long, I promise you that you'll feel different. It could just be that God will go to work on you and help you or me, the unfaithful, to realize the legion blessings in our lives. It's a series of small prayers that cost you nothing but will gradually open your heart and begin to let God transform it.

Imagine how different it would feel if we were faithful.

Yeah, maybe it's a prayer-mind-game, but it works because it's one way God uses to remind me of some needed humility. I need those reminders every day because I'm constantly going in search of the latest get-rich-quick scheme. Those schemes are the dreams and fantasies that preoccupy my time when I should be working. Or the latest way to quickly pay off a bill. Or maybe they are the little ways I put myself first in how I schedule my day, arrange my time, or choose to pass it by. Maybe there is punishment when, instead of spending time with my son, I choose to sit on my computer and write. Or it could be when I stare at the shapely lady walking by, or when I'm sitting in church wishing I was anywhere but there.

See the key here? Unfaithfulness is anything that takes your eye off the ball. I'll say it again: unfaithfulness is anything that isn't right. Anytime anything comes between you and the love of God, it's unfaithful.

I need those reminders to keep me grounded, to keep me realizing how truly rich God has made me. I bet you do too. The number of digits in my bank account is moot: I'm filthy rich because of something He did for me. It's Christmas, so I'm really hoping you realize that He did it for you too. Realizing that makes you begin to understand that it really is a wonderful life after all.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 14 December 2011

To show partiality is not good – yet a man will do wrong for a piece of bread. Proverbs 28, verse 21.

Here's another verse that I needed help to understand. Personally, for this verse I prefer the New American Standard Bible version which says "to show partiality is not good, because for a piece of bread a man will transgress." The version I commonly use is the NIV; here's an instance where another perspective can help. In the NIV, the two verses seem disjointed, even set against each other. As I read it, I don't fully grasp the meaning of what Solomon was saying. Was this just one of those verses where the king went all egghead and the scribe simply wrote down what he was told? I picture the king, uttering these inspired sayings and the scribe looking at him and thinking "I really don't get all that." Maybe this means I have a future as a scribe.

I wonder why the first part of it says "to show partiality is not good." The second part of it is just an observation about the depravity of the human spirit. There is no limit to the evil that people will do for even the smallest gain. That part I understand easily. It's that first clause that's tricky. Partiality to what? And why contrast partiality with how men are depraved over even the tiniest gain?

Then I remember that a piece of bread isn't a small thing. Children in the villages I visited in Uganda can go days without bread. To them, it isn't a small thing. When you're starving, two things are life: water and bread. Well fed in the West, you and I may take bread for granted. A couple of weeks ago, I threw out a whole moldy loaf of bread from on top of my daughter's refrigerator. I realize, now, that such a thing could have fed a family in Uganda for a couple of days. And we in America take it for granted.

If we can take something so fundamental and vital for granted, is it any wonder that we would be willing to do wrong for something even smaller? You don't have to be a crack whore to do it either. If you don't believe me, have you ever told a white lie for a small gain? Or have you ever covered up something so you wouldn't get in trouble, even if it was something insignificant? And have you ever compromised your integrity by going along with the crowd at somebody else's expense, maybe stayed silent when your conscience told you that you should speak up?

Let me know when you start to agree with me on this point.

So I come back to that first part again, asking 'why' about the whole partiality thing. I suppose that the verse could be alluding to a bribe; that's what my Concordia reference says. When you're bribed, you're partial to whatever it is that bribed you. We of the post-modern world seem to be inured to bribery. Whole delegations in Congress operate on the policy of legitimized bribery and we accept it as commonplace, even normal. Then, like Claude Rains, we're shocked to find, at our convenience, that there's gambling in Casablanca whenever the other side does something with which we disagree.

It could also mean that it isn't necessary for someone to be partial to someone (or something else) because of that whole depravity-of-the-soul thing. It doesn't take much to push us into sin. Something small will do the trick. After all, Judas betrayed Jesus, who he already knew to be God incarnate, for 30 pieces of silver. In today's terms, that wouldn't even pay your monthly cable bill.

Then there is www.christnotes.org, which says "Judgment is perverted, when anything but pure right is considered." That's a good perspective too. It's not just talking about formally sitting in judgment of someone or something: it's also talking about how we judge even small things, our perceptions and our sense of right and wrong. When we base that on anything but 'what would Jesus want me to do,' our judgment is perverted, skewed, made wrong. In that light, the first part of the verse works well with the second: when our judgment is skewed, we stray from the straight and narrow quite easily.

But I suppose the best explanation is just 'it is what it is.' A psychologist I've visited (rightfully) told me that I over-intellectualize things, that I sometimes have an overly strong admiration for the intellect. That's a good thing to remember, especially when I read fairly simple statements like today's verse and look for meaning that may not be anything more complex than simply saying "it is what it is." So that's where I should leave it. God said what He said and that's good enough.

That's really what makes a wonderful life.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 15 December 2011

A stingy man is eager to get rich and is unaware that poverty awaits him. Proverbs 28, verse 22.

It's Christmas time again and we all remember the story of "A Christmas Carol." Who among us couldn't tell the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, the Victorian miser who traded love and happiness for the pursuit of wealth? He worshipped the acquisition of wealth and compounding interest. Wise in the ways of business, Scrooge was written to be a man who was so miserly and stingy that he would only light enough fuel in his fireplace to barely provide light and warmth to his hovel. Where the light of the human spirit and the love behind it was concerned, Scrooge refused to light it at all. When I think of a stingy man, I usually think of Scrooge.

Yet you don't get rich by being a spendthrift. You need to be a good businessman and have the good sense to save. I can understand the profit motive. It's a theme about which several online friends and I argue now and then. There is nothing wrong with being a capitalist, or acquiring wealth in an upright manner. Indeed, the charging of interest was an allowed (even encouraged) thing in Biblical times. Knowing that, you could reasonably make the argument that Scrooge wasn't a miser but, instead, was simply a very frugal man and businessman.

Good businessman or not, what happened to Scrooge when he got old and got wealthy? He became poor. True, rich in monetary wealth, by every other measure that matters, Scrooge was a poor man. His life had been spent in the pursuit of getting rich. It was the one thing for which he had been singularly eager, trading the love and happiness of youth for the loneliness of old age. Without love in his heart, he was a poor man on the fast track to damnation until those three ghosts intervened and his heart was changed.

A stingy man is eager to get rich and is unaware that poverty awaits him. That's Scrooge to a T. It's also you and I. What? I'm an old Scrooge? Yes I am. You are too. Ok, Dave, let's hear it.

You're a Scrooge because you're stingy with your love. You hold back from loving God and your neighbor with all your heart. According to Emmanuel Himself, that's the first and most important command of God. You're failed at it. You're a miser because you hold out for something better, you build walls around your heart, you only love half-heartedly. When you choose, you love to open your heart and love as God commands. That, too, is a choice with which you're stingy. You're eager to have love, friendship, companionship, happiness make you so rich on your own terms that you don't realize the marvels slipping by. You're a miser with your love. You're Scrooge. The verse is talking about you.

Everything of which I accuse you I'm guilty myself. I'm standing right beside you as you are accusing me of those same things and more. I'm an old poop myself sometimes, and I'm a Scrooge too. The man I see in the mirror has a hooked nose, red eyes, and thin blue lips just like old Ebenezer. I've traded real love for the illusion of trying to be rich in other ways only to find I felt poor, despicable, and un-loveable. Jacob Marley might as well show up at my door, lugging his chains, wearing his grave clothes, warning of the danger ahead.

Every so often we read stories about common, ordinary people who amassed great wealth in unassuming ways. They scrimp and save, invest wisely, forego extravagance, and live plainly. Over a lifetime of doing this, they become wealthy, maybe even millionaires. The amazing thing to me is that so many of them are happy. They often leave their wealth to others who need it, or create an ease of life that I can only imagine. I think they understand something of what wealth really is and what matters versus what doesn't.

How much richer would life be, then, if we invest wisely in love? The thing about love is that, for it to grow, we don't scrimp and save it, or forego it, or contrive to live in any way for it. We embrace love and share it, investing it into our hearts and into the hearts of others. Applying the posture of growing God's love, we 'put ourselves out there' and do our best to love honestly yet unconditionally. Then and only then can we understand what it really is to be wealthy. Love is the only wealth you can take along when we exit this world in God's good time.

What is poverty? Is it just the absence of monetary wealth or worldly worth? Or is it really the absence of love? Just like the stories of people who amass wealth and leave it to others, I often hear about the poor, who live out lonely lives estranged from family, or separated from loved ones, or afraid to love again because they might get hurt. I read this verse to say that those kinds of people are the truly poor because the riches they had stored up were without any basis in what really matters most.

I don't want to be an old Scrooge anymore. For too long I was miserly with my heart; for too long I waited for Marley's knock on the door to tell me what a terrifying stench I had become to the God of real love. Those days are done. There's more to live for now. With Christmas coming, there's the birth of real love to remember and the gift of that to share with others. For me, today's verse is an opposite reminder of that, reminding me of what can happen when we turn our hearts away from what they were meant to grow, feel and share. When Scrooge learned that lesson, he finally became a rich man indeed.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 16 December 2011

He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor than he who has a flattering tongue. Proverbs 28, verse 23.

Today is the final day of a project I have been blessed to lead for the last eight weeks. It hasn't been a very large project and I haven't led a large team, only three people. We've conducted forty-six interviews with business and technical experts at a health plan in Michigan in preparation for the mandatory ICD-10 coding upgrade that is coming for all American health insurance users in 2013; if you want to know more, email me or Google "ICD-10." If you participate in the healthcare process, whether as a doctor or as an insurance company user, you'll be affected by the nationwide effort.

The project has found no shortage of things this particular health plan must do in order to prepare for the upgrade. Some of them are large and some are small; some will have wide ranging impact and some affect only a tiny part of their business. By my calculations, it will cost millions of dollars for this plan to become compliant. My small team has spent every workday (and then some) looking at systems, data, reports, and jobs to find thousands of items that need to be addressed.

Some of what we've found is not good. In fact, without giving away their secrets, I'll say that there are some business processes my customer is doing that are wrong, counterproductive, and unnecessarily costly. Nothing illegal is happening, but there are problems with the way this company is working with its data. Today, I get to stand in front of the company executives and carefully, politely, but firmly tell them these things. I'm a bit nervous about it and ask you to pray for me.

I ask you to pray because I know prayer works and I know that, like the verse says, I will have to rebuke without a flattering tongue. My team was commissioned to find these things, determine their impact, and report back. We've spent much of the last three days fine-tuning our deliverable documents and executive presentation. The opinion of many people is that CEOs are over-paid fat cats who don't do much yet earn mountains of money. I know different. I work with executives on a daily basis and find them to be 'working men' just as much as the blue collar factory worker who forges steel or assembles a car. The work is different, but it can be tough. For anyone to say otherwise shows ignorance.

From my perspective, it can be tough to tell them that much of what they are doing is wrong and that there are many entrenched risks in the way they are using their systems. Without some dedicated change, they will not be able to become compliant with the many Federal mandates regarding the ICD-10 codes. That would drive many millions of dollars in fines, delayed reimbursement of doctors, delayed action on patient claims, and more: all because of findings presented today by yours truly, the nervous consultant.

Yet I hope for the best. I hope because I know we have done good work and that I believe my audience will be receptive to what we say. Like I said, we've spent much of this week polishing our presentation. I insisted that we would not in any way compromise the data or refuse to present negative findings. Hand in hand with that, I also said that they know their board better than we do and that we wanted to present our findings in the manner best suited for them to take constructive action on them. This we are doing.

I also have hope because I trust that God will put the right words in my mouth at the right time. There will be some rebuking, and I have the hope, the promise, that God will instill into me the knowledge to present facts, to not editorialize (hard for me to do), and to present solutions. God is a god of solutions. He never hammers us, and He never allows the hammer to fall without offering a way out. That's just the way He is. Because of that, when I have to deliver bad news (bad news that will drive deep, painful change here), I trust that God will help me deliver that news in a way that best serves the people paying for our services.

That's my job. I believe there are no coincidences in life; God doesn't do coincidences. God gives grace. Therefore, I believe this verse was put here today for my use. God wrote it for you and for me because we need to know it right now. It's good advice and something of a platitude, but He knew, eons ago, that we would need to know it here today, in this place where you and I live and work. I firmly believe God knew from the start that I would do this job today and that I would need to know He is with me as I get to deliver good and bad news, then recommend ways to help turn a harsh lesson into the potential for success.

I will admit: I'm not doing this to gain favor. I'm doing it because it's my job, though I'll also admit that being in the favor of your customers isn't a bad thing. I want people to remember that we did good work here so they will think of us the next time they need our kind of help. That, and not the greedy cabal is at the heart of what is called "capitalism:" providing for

yourself through earning a profit by satisfying the needs of others. In my reckoning, whether you're doing your best on a production line or doing your best standing in front of executives, he who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor than he who has a flattering tongue. You don't try to snow 'the man.' You tell 'the man' what he needs to know and you do it with confidence in your abilities and faith in your heart. You do it as a service because that's what God wants you to do.

So please pray for us today, my friends. Pray for the people who work here, for their leaders, and for their customers. It's been an honor to work here and to meet the people I've met here. I'm thinking the best approach is sort of Mary Poppins: a spoon full of sugar makes the medicine go down. Pray that they receive it well and then take wise action to correct what's wrong and build on what's right.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 20 December 2011

He who robs his father or mother and says, "It's not wrong" he is partner to him who destroys. Proverbs 28, verse 24.

We rob our parents. I never got into Dad's stash of coins and took them to spend like my children have. And you didn't hold your parents up at gunpoint and demand something from them. Neither you nor I could likely be considered criminal in how we deal with our elders; it's just not how most folks I know live their lives.

But we rob them all the same. My daughter Sammie's favorite childhood book was "The Giving Tree." If you've never read it, The Giving Tree is the story of a tree that loves a little boy as he grows up and willingly gives up everything so the boy can be happy. All through the book, no matter what the boy wants, out of love, the tree gives it...and it's never enough. You could say that the self-focused boy is robbing the tree while thinking "it's not wrong" and always wanting more. In the end, the tree is destroyed (and yet not) to satisfy the boy's selfish hunger for more.

It's robbery. The boy in the book robs the tree of its life. My children rob me of my patience, my income, and my time. You rob your parents in ways near and dear. We each rob our elders of respect. Don't believe me? Next time you get stuck behind Grandma on the road and she's going 30 in a 50 zone, check your emotions. I'm thinking "robbery." God put us here to learn to love Him and yet we don't really do that much, do we? Got skin, got sin. We're thieves. It's ingrained in how we live our lives. We're little better than Tony Soprano, a petty thief bent on larger-scale destruction. What we say and do hurts. We're robbers.

And yet. Those are two very important words, you know. And yet it's not robbery. Can you rob those who give their consent to it? I love my kids and want the best for them. I don't want to be the Plano Parent or Helicopter Mom who indulges their kids too much. There's nothing more grating to me than spoiled children. But each of us is given only so much time on the earth and parents give those things because they can, not just because they have to. It's a privilege to parent, a duty of love. Out of love, our parents devote time, talent, and treasure to us, but because we're kids, it's not enough. We always want more and yet...and yet sometimes it doesn't matter.

It doesn't matter because of love and grace. Our model is Him who created us for those things. He is a parent too. Yes, he created us as fallible humans with the capacity to both love and hurt. He chooses the love; we unfortunately choose to hurt and yet the love just keeps on coming. It is a gift of grace, a mercy and perfect adoring love that we can't even begin to understand. When I rob God of the love, respect, and worship in all things that He asks and deserves, He still pours out His mercy. When my kids rankle me for the hundredth time, talking back and smarting off, I still love them unconditionally and provide whatever I can for their learning, happiness and safety. I'm betting you do the same.

Now, I'm not going to be naïve and insinuate that everything is hunky dory in how we get along. Some people have genuine, even righteous, conflict while others just have conflict. I know of one friend who is one of the strongest men you could think of, but around his dad he is like a little puppy. Still another friend is having a long-term fight with her elderly mother over issues the both of them have let percolate for years, yet in my outside estimation, it seems insignificant. If you asked my kids, they would probably tell you that my wife and I are nagging, overbearing, harping parents who ask too many questions.

Robbery. It's still little more than petty robbery. But you can't rob the willing. If it will help others know they are loved and saved, take it all. It's just stuff or money or even time: even if we can't get more of those things, they're just things. If it helps you, you're welcome to it. I challenge you now to think the same.

So what do we do about it? You know the answer. Today is five days before Christmas. Take it to the manger and see what love looked like there. Better yet, take it to the Cross and see why the manger was just a fore-shadow of the amazing love to come. Check the intent, put down the goods, and sit in learning wonder of what real love looks like. Take up that challenge and let Him in to rework you.

I didn't have nearly the time I wanted with my own father. My mom is in her eighties now and is infirm, in decline actually; there isn't enough time left to say and do a lifetime of things that I would have like to have done with my parents. It is what it is, though, and rather than focusing on that, rather than robbing them further, I will prefer now to be content with what is. To model Him who taught real contentment and love. I'll put down the gun and the goods and take my own advice, and stop being a party to the destruction.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 21 December 2011

A greedy man stirs up dissension, but he who trusts in the LORD will prosper. Proverbs 28, verse 25.

True confession and full disclosure time here again: I've been greedy and have recently, consistently stirred up dissension. See, I really like to debate, and I am somewhat intolerant of the shenanigans in government. This isn't a new thing; ask anyone who has known me awhile and they'll tell you I've been like this since about 1966. Without divulging my preference for one side or another, let's just say the political atmosphere in the last few years has been a target rich environment. Much to talk about and debate with good people who have strong, long and sometimes wrong opinions: just like me.

Still, I have to confess that I feel greedy tonight. I feel like my greed for talk has run its course and I am weary of it. The last few days I've had several debates with several groups of friends and the whole thing leaves me feeling drained. We don't agree and probably won't any time soon. Our viewpoints are polar opposed, and for every fact I throw out someone else counters with another (or a baseless opinion, one of my pet peeves). That's the nature of debate, I know, but it sometimes leaves me feeling exhausted. We don't make much headway in convincing each other, and while the exchanges can be productive and spirited, they don't really go anywhere. In the end, both sides are still polarized and I simply feel spent.

And then I do it again.

Sometimes I ask myself why and the only answer I can come up with is greed. I like to debate and I like to hoard that 'talent.' I'll even admit that, sometimes, I'd rather be heard than be right. And sometimes, I'll drive home a point long after I should have simply given up and gone silent. What this does is stir up dissension. It boils up the blood of good people who normally wouldn't have an axe to grind, and if taken to a next logical level, it can cause dissension. I like to try to convince good people with whom I disagree why I believe their point is in error, but that doesn't mean I'm always right. It also doesn't mean they are wrong. It just sometimes feels overwhelming, and I don't know when to shut up.

If I'm not careful, it could be ungodly. Not only would it then be unproductive: it would be wrong.

Mind you, I'm not a 'leadership by consensus' guy either. I agree with Margaret Thatcher that "consensus is the absence of leadership." I once belonged to a good church that was, on the surface, managed by consensus. In good times, this worked well, but when hard times set in the leadership floundered. Not long after, I joined another church where the pastor bullied the council into always having his way by taking one position and then declaring that, if you disagreed, you were fomenting dissent. It too was a floundering, discouraging organization. Years after these things happened, I still wonder about them. I mean, Christ wasn't a consensus leader. Neither was He one to encourage deconstructive dissension either. He stuck his neck out and took unpopular stands.

Here's the difference: He was God and I'm not. I'm unwilling to bend on matters of principle, but I don't have the Savior's ability to see through that and let go of the arguments that really don't matter much. It's that whole greed thing. Jesus wasn't greedy. Not so Dave. Sometimes, I have trouble determining when I should stop.

That's the key, I suppose, in determining what is worth the fight. Is it something of God or isn't it? Boil that down and the determination is pretty easy. That's what the second part of the verse is saying. Go with God and go to God for leadership and then follow. I think back to the men's retreat a few months ago when the discussion centered around being a fan or a follower of Christ. Are you a fan, someone who likes to dabble on the sidelines, root and cheer, maybe debate about the merits of 'your team?' Or are you a follower, someone who will go where the team goes, get on the field and sub for the wounded players, and commit? If you're going to follow God, it's going to hurt from time to time, even when you're submitting to a higher and better will.

Why make the hurt worse by clouding it with personal agendas?

A few months ago, I wrote here that I had grown weary of arguing, so I guess the wheel has spun around. Here I am again, argued out and just tired of it. I'm tired of feeling greedy and used-up. I know there are more debates ahead, especially as the election season heats up and the lies begin to fly. Rik, Roger, Derek and DeFranco: I'm sure we'll debate, but I'm promising to only do so when I believe there's something more substantive than opinion to be said. The

world would be better for that. Here's to hoping both myself and my opponents recognize the fights that are worth fighting and walk away from the ones that aren't.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 22 December 2011

He who trusts in himself is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom is kept safe. Proverbs 28, verse 26.

The best management advice I ever received was from a retiring colonel. It was his last day on active duty at the end of a long career that stretched back to flying F-104s in Vietnam, and he chose to spend part of it in the section where I worked in Colorado. This was the colonel who had cleared the way for my assignment in Colorado after I'd been slated to go to a unit in San Antonio. He was the man who had turned around our headquarters unit from a combative terrible place to work into a mission-focused solid unit. He was the real deal and I respected him immensely.

Col Jensen's advice? "Learn how things work." Speaking to our stable full of brash, cocky young racehorses, he said he had learned this simple lesson as a hotshot fighter pilot. It was a piece of advice passed on to him by another grizzled old veteran. Whenever you go into a new place, learn how things work, how things are done, who does what, what goes on and why. Don't just jump in and start trying to re-do or re-invent the way things are done: learn how things work and then move forward.

Simply brilliant, don't you think? It encompasses so many lessons in just a few tidy words.

Reading today's proverb, I thought of this advice again because it's segues off the verse. Don't trust in yourself: learn how the world works. Learn that you're part of a bigger system, that you're a tree in the larger forest. Don't get too big for your britches; don't get the big head. Trust in what you know but don't necessarily trust in yourself. Even more than this, trust in the people around you. Trust in what they know as being part of something much more important than any one person alone.

And do these things because wisdom is your ultimate goal. As a warrior, your goal is to defeat your opponent and return to peace, to compel him to do your will. You don't do that just to bomb the bad guys: you do it to win, to be victorious. In your own small way as part of the bigger strategy, you tactically fight to achieve your mission. And you do it with the unspoken goal of wisely returning to peace and normalcy. Wisdom is the goal for which you strive because in wisdom you are safe.

I don't know if Col Jensen was a particularly religious man, but he could have been. His advice wasn't a Proverb, but in my opinion it could be proverbial. There is something godly in learning that you shouldn't put too much trust in yourself even as you trust your abilities and your knowledge base. It may seem like a subtle difference in saying those things, but it's an important one. If you trust in yourself first, you put yourself in the place of God. If you trust God first, then in the knowledge and abilities He gave to you, you are in the position to walk in wisdom. That's how the world really works.

And when you walk in wisdom, you are kept safe. For most of the time, that's a literal statement: making wise choices usually results in safety. Even when it isn't literal, though, our hearts, our soul, what matters most is safe and sound. Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for thou art with me; soothing reassurance from Solomon's father that he who walks in wisdom will be kept safe even in the face of flying arrows and speeding bullets.

Trust only in yourself and the outcome may just be different. That, too, is how the world works.

I've toyed with the idea of writing a management book myself, but taking the advice from Scripture instead of just personal experience. It would be hard for me, though, to not include Col Jensen's sagely parting words. It has been fifteen years since he said them to our team and they've stuck fast with me and served me well. These days, though I work in a career field far removed from what I used to do, the words serve me well. When I go to a new organization, I first learn how things work. Analyze and evaluate before executing. Good words of management advice that just happen to be proven principles of project management. They're good words that take Col Jensen's advice to the next level. More than this, they are what God would have us do.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 23 December 2011

He who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses. Proverbs 28, verse 27.

Christmas Eve is tomorrow. Do you ever wonder what it was like to be in Bethlehem on 'that night?' I bet it was raucous around the taverns, with so many people in town in a place that had been famous for hundreds of years. It was probably crowded and noisy during the day, and I'm betting there were traffic jams of walkers, riders and carts on any roads in and out of town. The streets were dirt paths and filthy; the people needed baths; there was anxiety and angst during that rude winter season in Judea.

Do you ever wish to have been there? Do you ever think to yourself "if I had been there, I would have helped." To paraphrase Martin Luther, shame on you! No you wouldn't and neither would I. If that isn't true, then why don't we do something for our neighbor here and now who is Christ in our midst?

Still, I have those thoughts. They are more like I wish I was instead of how I really am. I wish I was the kind of person who would go out of his way to help others, to help the poor, because those people are blessed. It isn't the Barack Obama's or Bill Gates' or Bono's of the world who make it go around. Indeed, I have often thought that even though celebrities tend to suck all the oxygen out of a conversation, in reality they don't do very much to affect real change. If you want to change the world, do it in your own way by shining a little bit of God's love. Be yourself and use the gifts He gave you and only you, and do so in a way to serve. Do your best to be your best while living a wholesome life. Do only what you'll be pleased to admit, and love on people just because you can. Be a Godly representative to everyone by being your Godly self. THAT is hope and change you can believe in.

Do these things out of love, just because you can, just because it feels good to love on someone else, just because it's the right thing to do. I'm not harping on this: it's simply a practical fact. These are the kinds of things that change lives. Do them because when you love on 'the poor' you lack nothing. In the areas of life that matter most – faith, hope, the Spirit of God, generosity, what is best in our humanity, and love – you will be rich beyond measure.

I think about the innkeeper in Bethlehem. He (or she) wasn't mentioned in the Bible but there surely was somebody who owned the overbooked inn where Mary and Joseph couldn't find lodging. Did he see the desperately pregnant and poor young couple and consciously say "I can't help you." Did he offer them the barn or did they simply go in there because she needed shelter in heavy labor? Did the innkeeper understand the desperate situation of the people in his building? Did he simply not have room because Bethlehem was crowded with taxpayers or did he not give them a room because they didn't have the money? We don't know.

Irrelevant questions, I suppose, because the story, like the baby Himself, is what it is. The great I AM became man in a stable full of dirty animals instead of a palace surrounded by luxury. When the innkeeper heard about the shepherds who visited that night, was he amazed? Did he ask himself "what have I done?" or did he even hear about it at all? Years later, when he heard about the professors who came to visit the child, did he think back and ask himself what had happened under his nose?

You and I can go back to our thoughts of "I would have gotten Jesus, Mary and Joseph a room at the Hilton" but I bet we wouldn't have done much different. Maybe the innkeeper is worthy of many curses; maybe he is worthy of our scorn. Maybe you and I are worthy of his. Going back to Dr. Luther, if we believe any different, why don't we do something for our neighbors?

This year, I rang the Salvation Army bell again as I have done many times before. Please don't misunderstand what I'm saying here for I don't say it to brag. It is simply a statement of something I did. This year, I also served a week in Uganda, wrote 500 pages of a faith blog to encourage others in God's word, and donated countless hours and time to others who needed them. Again, I'm not bragging. I am using myself as an example of the old adage "if I can do it so can you." I'm the most unworthy of servants and Christians; I can be the most unlikely and unbelievable of believers. But when I do these things, it is not I doing them but God living through me. That's a fantastic and wonderful thing. It's a real Christmas gift, you see.

That's the good news: I believe you do similar things in your own ways. In your own way, you (like me) are the innkeeper, turning away the Savior without even knowing it. In your own way you, too, are also the servant, giving to the poor

because you can. You, my friend, are the reason for this season. Christ, God Immanuel who lacked nothing, sought out the poor in you, me, our neighbors and our ancestors because He saw our need. He knew our souls and sought us out to give the transcendent gift of His perfect love. He didn't need us, but He wanted us. He didn't need our worship, our words, or even our service...but He loved us anyway and wanted those matters of the heart. You're the reason He came because you mattered to Him. Before you and I were born, even at that time in Bethlehem, we mattered to Him. You're the reason for the season. You and I are the reason for the Savior who was born to die so we could be born to live.

When I wonder about that night in Bethlehem, I wonder about what it would have been like to be there, to have the opportunity to help and then not do it. I'm ashamed to admit I'm not unlike the innkeeper, or the stranger on the street, or the passer-by who saw the hurting, pregnant woman and did nothing to take pity on her. I hang my head in shame, and then I remember again that the wonder of the baby in the manger is that He came to take away my shame and yours. Christmas Eve is tomorrow, and a very Merry Christmas to you, friend reader. Remember why those words matter when you remember that you matter because of them.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 27 December 2011

When the wicked rise to power, people go into hiding, but when the wicked perish, the righteous thrive. Proverbs 28, verse 28.

Merry 2 Days After Christmas! An old friend of mine was tired of hearing “merry Christmas” and “happy holidays” too early and to trite in the season, so she opted to say “merry new thanksgiving” instead. Me, I kind of think we are Easter people because of Christmas, and we are Christmas people looking forward to Easter. We are those things when we thrive, and according to this verse, we thrive when wickedness is at bay. It seems a bit easier to keep wickedness at bay when you have a merry Christmas (and a hope of Easter) in your heart, don't you think?

That's important to remember these days when it seems undeniable that, when the wicked rise to power, people go into hiding. Recently, for just a flash of a moment, it did. When power ascends, people retreat. Physically speaking, there is nothing different about a president who has both houses of Congress in his same party, but his perceived power is immense and his opponents seem lessened. Get a divided government and neither side seems particularly powerful.

I read all of the “Left Behind” books. Personally, they left me behind feeling cold, and rather perturbed; I'll leave why for a separate editorial (or book review). One thing that did stick with me (other than the perturbed feeling), though, was the overwhelming sense of foreboding evil. In their fictionalized end-times scenario, the authors wrote how wickedness entrenched and steadily rose to power. When that happened, good people had to go into hiding. The series, like the Scripture it mimed, had a ‘good triumphs’ ending but not before leaving you wondering how the protagonists would get out of every building volume.

Throw aside the cheesy fiction and it's that way in real life. Think Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Think the underground believers in Iran, North Korea, China, and other dictatorships today. Think how one faction becomes silent when a stronger, more sinister faction ascends. Think about how bullies take over schoolyards, meetings, workspaces. When wickedness increases in power, good people go into hiding.

Now think back to the cheesy end-times books. Good didn't disappear: it went underground. In today's real-life totalitarian dictatorships (like North Korea, China, Iran and San Francisco), there are still communities of devout believers who work quietly from the inside, from deep cover, from hidden places. They quietly, patiently resist wickedness and advance good by living faith. In time, with the right conditions, they persevere and overcome. Think the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia. Think Tiananmen Square (before the Communist massacre). Think Mother Theresa. Even in the concentration camps of World War II, hope never fully died and, in time, liberation released it. Good never goes away, even when it's on the ropes.

And eventually, good will triumph. That's not just some Biblical prophecy (even though it was and will be true again). It happens every day. Even in the worst of times, good will overcome and defeat wickedness. That's how God designed it. He is bigger than any problem, stress, or ruler. He is bigger than any petty wickedness or organized political evil. We were designed for good, not for the terrible wrongs that our sins perpetuate. When evil finally abates and wickedness is driven away, righteousness thrives. Good breaks out and takes the place of what was before.

On Christmas Day here in North Texas, a desperately troubled man dressed up as Santa Claus and murdered his family. He shot six people before killing himself. My mom and I were talking about this and I said that the only way I can reconcile it in my mind is to believe that evil took hold. I don't discount that mental illness, financial disaster and marital problems were mixed into the equation, contributing and giving the man some twisted motive. But the man was supposedly a normal man otherwise. I think, down deep inside, that somehow evil came in and took over. The way I see it, something evil and terrible took control of the man and made him do an awful thing he wouldn't otherwise have done on his own.

Where is the hope in this? Where do the righteous thrive? One hope is that, if the victims believed in Christ, they were now at home and at rest. Another is that lessons will be learned from it, that others may be led to avoid the situation in which the tragic family found itself. And yet another is that the evil itself that took control of the killer is gone, hopefully vanquished into oblivion. We can and should grieve for the loved ones left behind. We can and should try to learn from what happened. And we can and should remember that, even in the middle of such a horrible thing, God is not impartial. He didn't cause such a thing, and it wasn't what God wanted, to be sure. But He wasn't impartial either, and He will use what happened to turn it to good. Inadvertently, through the actions of the killer, wickedness perished and good can be restored. Those left behind can become Easter people after a Christmas tragedy. Even now, the healing has already begun.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 28 December 2011

A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed – without remedy. Proverbs 29, verse 1.

Stubbornness isn't usually a good thing. In America we make much of independent spirit and Puritan pride; they can help you to really go places. If you're going to succeed, you need grit and an independent streak because it's a tough life. You need a backbone and the wherewithal to stand up on your own, against odds, and stick it out. You may need to go against popular opinion, or resistance from the people closest to you if you are to succeed in something to which you believe you're led.

And you need to be true to your word, even when other influences or the sequence of events make that difficult. If you say you're going to do something, then you need to do it. Independent people do this: they stake a claim or make a promise, then they follow through. If you say you are going to do something, you need to follow through no matter what. Proud people live their lives this way; I often think that's the reason why they waste very few words.

But that spirit isn't what this verse is talking about. Instead, this verse is talking about jackass stubbornness. We've each known stubborn people who just won't give up, people who just don't seem to listen to reason or persuasion. They are right and nobody will tell them different. I once installed a garage door opener with a friend who was bound and determined that they knew where the center point of the garage was without measuring. "You can see the center," said my friend, and they started for the drill. No amount of my weak reasoning could persuade them to measure twice before cutting. Six weeks later, the new opener poked its lifting arm through a brand-new garage door: all because of stubborn stupidity on both our parts.

I've been known to be stubborn myself. Too many times I've been stiff-necked and refused to listen to the advice or reasoning of people who actually did know better. You don't get to be a middle-aged man with the shameful resume of affairs, lost friendships, having been fired from one job and rolled off other projects, and years of troubles without acknowledging that much of that was due to my own stubborn choices. There's a favorite George Jones song which I've quoted here before: "I've had choices since the day that I was born. There were voices that told me right from wrong. If I had listened, I wouldn't be here today living and dying with the choices I've made."

Thank you, George, for a Scriptural reminder.

It can be a hard world, and there are consequences for our actions. If you're stubborn, it WILL catch up with you. The people who tell you about all the bad things that could happen if you do X, Y or Z don't usually do so because of any agenda: they usually do so because they care and because they know what they're talking about. You can't cover up a crime; you can't hide indiscretions; you can't run away from guilt. When your choices catch up with you, they usually have quick, disastrous connotations. All hell breaks loose when the truth breaks out. Ask anyone (including me) about what happens when your scandal goes public. In the middle of it, it will feel like you're being destroyed and that you have no hope. Some of that will be the consequences themselves; some will be your guilt pecking at your conscience.

I believe you must read into this, though, as regards 'without remedy.' Human consequences happen. Spiritual consequences are atoned for by God alone, and those consequences spill over into our human lives. The verse doesn't mention this, but I read into it that this 'without remedy' part is implied to mean our humanity. God doesn't design disaster in our lives: that comes from our choices in sin. God does design redemption in everything; if you don't believe me, ask yourself why every choice you make seems to lead to other choices and that you can always boil them down to right and wrong ones. That's God at work in your life, providing a way out of every situation. When we constantly choose the wrong way, we compound our risk and compound the consequences. The world WILL make you pay for it when it all catches up with you.

But God won't. That was the whole message of Christmas: Him being born here to live a life and die a death that renders your spiritual payment complete. We don't need to worry about being separated from divine love here or hereafter because of what He did at Calvary. Understanding, contentment and peace can be ours here by letting go of the guilt, letting Him take care of it. Perfect peace later comes as its own consequence. Paul put it best in the fifth chapter of Romans: suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, and character produces hope that doesn't disappoint us because, at just the right time, God poured out love on us through His Spirit in His Son. The world may make us 'pay' for our sins, but the separation from all love that could have resulted from them is made null by Christ. Without remedy becomes without conditions and without end, amen.

As part of a Bible study, several months ago I watched "the Mosquito Coast." It was the story of how stubborn pride cost you everything. Harrison Ford played an inventor who casts his pride before the world and pays the ultimate sacrifice, first with his family, then with his life. He was destroyed because he remained stiff-necked after many rebukes and consequences told him he should change. The movie got me thinking about the ways in which I'm stiff-necked. Since the new year is only a few days away, that's a good thing to keep in mind. This is another good opportunity to change my own ways and leave some bad habits or past sins behind. Stubbornness for its own sake never got me anywhere good, and I don't want to end up without remedy here even as I know my spiritual remedy has already been set in place. Today is a good day to start. Care to join me?

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 29 December 2011

When the righteous thrive, the people rejoice; when the wicked rule, the people groan. Proverbs 29, verse 2.

Next week officially starts election season here in the US of A. As a political junkie, personally, my stomach is already turning. In years past, I was energized to follow along, render my opinions and debate. Now, I'm just sick of it. I'm betting yours is too because I'm already fairly sick of the constant back and forth, the seemingly endless debates, the polarized nature of the candidates, and the unending pontificating from the elites who tell us what they think we should believe. After all, they know better, right?

And we're living in good times.

Now, I'm not blind. I know that times are tough, that there are millions of people out of work, many more than the 9% the government claims every week. I've traveled all over the country, literally from coast to coast, since this recession/depression began, and I know that times are bad. Prices are rising steadily (again, more government lies), as a relative component of the cost of living gas is more expensive than at any time in history, and our allies are in disarray over the troubles likely ahead just after New Years.

Still, we're living in good times.

Why do I say this? Here where I live (admittedly, in an area that has weathered the Depression better than most in the nation), stores are still full, you can still buy basic groceries relatively cheaply, and there are fewer houses up for sale than in areas like California, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Ohio or Michigan (some of the places I've visited this year). Even in those places, you can still buy food, get shelter, and keep your family safe. What's more, people here live in safety. There are police to keep the streets mostly safe, and the aberrations you hear about crime and socially unsafe conditions are truly aberrations because those things themselves are not the norm. Try living the way you want in North Korea, or Sudan, or Venezuela, or even in some parts of northern Europe now. You'll think differently.

The verse says that, in good times, people rejoice. We rejoice because the righteous thrive. To be righteous is to acknowledge one's place before God, to remember that it's not about me. 'The righteous' don't live with their eyes in the mirror or in the memory books: they live with their eyes looking forward towards God, seeing blessings where challenges exist, seeing life where death should rule. When you live life knowing you're blessed, you thrive as the righteous.

Well, I know I'm blessed but I don't always let myself see it. I don't always feel the righteous are thriving, not when it seems like good is on the ropes. There are perceptions of so many problems in our country, and only some of them are real. Reasonable people can't chalk all the problems up to only perceptions; there are very real problems facing us with foreign threats, a bankrupt government, and societal norms that have devolved down. As regard the body politic, starting next week, we'll groan. The silly season will begin in earnest and we'll be buffeted like a sailboat in a gale. Both sides will paint doom and gloom; fingers will point; voices will be raised; crass opinions will be thrown about; tempers will flare.

That's just on the morning news shows.

Both sides of the political spectrum will have us trying to believe that the people are groaning because wickedness is either ruling or challenging to rule. There will be truth in the arguments of both sides, and there will be lies mixed in with the truth. If you're like me, you'll be sick of it by the time the largely irrelevant polls close in Iowa.

And yet we're living in good times. And yet the people are groaning. If I were out of a job, I might be groaning too.

But over the weekend I was talking to my mom, who grew up during the last Great Depression, and she talked about how tough times were back then. She talked about how hoboes used to come to the door and ask for food in exchange for meals. She talked about how customers at her father's feed mill bartered for feed and grain because they didn't have money to pay. She talked about how storms from the Dakotas blew in roller clouds of dust that left films of black all over everything (even in closed rooms). She talked about how hard it was to buy things, to get things, to want. Living where she did in the family she did, there was always plenty of food, but things were still extremely frugal.

Me, I get irritated if we have to go out to eat for the second time in a week. I get irritated if the cable hangs up, or if I don't have cell phone coverage, my internet is slow, or my friends haven't responded quick enough on Facebook. As compared

to people who genuinely live in tough times and rough places (in other words, most of humanity), I'm a spoiled child, groaning about things for which I should instead be thankful.

Times are tough and people are groaning; judge what you will to be the cause and what we should do to remedy it. I can't say that wickedness doesn't rule the day but neither can I say that those in charge are evil. They aren't in charge of me. They may be elected and slippery as a snake in oil, but they aren't in charge of me. The person in charge of me, responsible for me, is me...

...and I've been redeemed. THAT makes the rest of it all look pretty small.

In the months to come, when the politicians seem more like poo-throwing monkeys than grown adults, I'll do good to remember that. Comparing ourselves to the rest of the world, the righteous and unrighteous alike of America are still thriving. I don't see many people rejoicing about our current state, and if you listen to the media, we're all groaning. It simply isn't true. We're better than that because we've been made righteous and blessed. We still need to elect good leaders, people of virtue who will promise more than hope, change and more of the same milquetoast Ivy League hash. And we need to elect people who will understand when there is real groaning and what to do about it instead of just pandering and constant campaigning. But in the long run, it won't matter much. In the long run and in the long stretch of things, it, and they, won't matter very much at all.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 30 December 2011

A man who loves wisdom brings joy to his father, but a companion of prostitutes squanders his wealth. Proverbs 29, verse 3.

Brace yourself: it's the end of the year and we're going to talk about some uncomfortable truths. Next year is only a few hours away now, and next year promises an interesting ride. If you can say you're finishing this year with a better love for wisdom, then that's a blessing. If you can say you're finishing it while in the company of prostitutes, join the club.

One of my favorite consultant jokes is this: the only difference between a hooker and a consultant is that the consultant has a contract. Sad but true at times. See, this verse is talking about both sex and more than just sex. It may surprise you to find out that, despite my days as a rounder, I've never been with a prostitute. I've known a few, and I'll confess I even bought drinks for a few in my younger years knowing full well what trade they were plying. I just never took the plunge. In my years, I've also known people (gender neutral) who turned tricks for money while working other 'respectable' jobs. Some of them have been my friends.

Then I became one myself. Huh? I am a prostitute? What? No, I've never charged money for sex and no I've never solicited for it either. But I'm a whore all the same. I've sold myself cheaply and I've been paid for at a high price. Here in the real world, I've vended my talents, I've sold my inheritance, I have squandered the wealth of my life for little more than being used like a cheap hooker. It happened in my career; it happened in friendships and relationships; it even happened in church. Every time I have been untrue to the commands and ideals set forth by God, namely to love Him and in doing so love His wisdom, I have sold myself into the slavery of prostitution.

And yet I was paid for at that great price. At least Rahab the hooker was immortalized for doing something noble. Me, all I've done is ply my trade for the next bidder. Yet I was paid for all the same; priceless. God himself paid for me, in all my decrepit and dishonorable filth, using His own life. I who squandered wealth was personally bought back by Him who squanders nothing. Pretty amazing thought on which to end the year, don't you think? Whether you acknowledge it or not, you were too. Go ahead and reason, struggle, resist and deny it: you were still bought back just like me. What do you intend to do about that?

While you're thinking, notice that the verse talks about a 'companion' of prostitutes, not a buyer of their services. Do you love wisdom if you keep poor company? Apparently not, according to this verse. If you call me friend or coworker, you're keeping bad company because, as I've told you, I'm like a modern day street-walker. Be careful saying you know me: you're squandering your wealth if you keep my company. You're showing contempt for all things Godly and wise if you're on my friends list.

Then again, we're two peas in a pod, aren't we? I mean, maybe the same could be said of me, keeping your company too. After all, odds are that you've sold out in a few ways yourself. Got skin, got sin. It's going around, just like some social disease spread by people of low repute. That's us. If we keep each others' company, if we're companions, we're squandering wealth.

So what kind of wealth is the verse talking about? Money? Sure. My services and yours cost time; we have to earn a living, you know. But what about the other blessings in our lives? Love, reputation, friendships, responsibilities, opportunities, knowledge and, yes, wisdom: we can be rich in these more ephemeral things and squander them every time we sully ourselves by willingly being less than what God expects and wants us to be. I mean, people remember you because you were loved, had a good reputation, were a good friend and so forth; they remember you if you aren't those things too. Trust me: I've reaped what I've sown.

Seeing myself in that light, it becomes easier to see how loving wisdom brings joy, and is the goal of those who know better. I'm a Lutheran, meaning that Lutherans are well-acquainted with guilt and inadequacy. Catechism and the law/gospel hammer in most churches try to pound it into you. In the end, you're left feeling that nothing about you can ever be good enough for a perfect God, that you should never be proud of your own accomplishments, especially if you're like a prostitute, like me.

Hogwash. A man who loves wisdom brings joy to his father. The best way to do that is for children to live their lives loving God in every way. One of the best ways to do that is to inculcate your job, your talents, your time with that love. Learn and become wise in the ways of the Almighty, and you will not only find joy, peace, and contentment: you'll bring it to the people who love you most, including Him. Put off the old life and put on new, clean robes of honor. God wants you just the

way you are, not the way the pecking hens think you ought to be. He wants you to start where you are so He can take you where you were designed to be in a new place, maybe even in a new year.

That's a high task for a hooker like me but it's a great new year's resolution. I mean, my past, the world, even those close to me constantly remind me of what a screw-up I've been, of the people I've used and who have used me, of all my failings. Wisdom paints those things in a different light, saying "trust God, learn from them and be better." I think about the story of the Prodigal Son, who spent his inheritance on prostitutes and partying, only to realize he had nothing. He went home to his father, who welcomed him with open, forgiving arms.

That's the story of my life. For the first time in a long time, I'm trying to live in ways worthy of it.

This year has brought many changes, and I've come to believe that pausing to look back at them doesn't do you much good. I'm not a fan of the year-end shows that tell about all that happened and all the celebrities who died. From my life as a spiritual prostitute I've learned that it's better to put your faith in God about what's ahead instead of what's behind. What happened is what made you into who you are: someone embraced and bought-back by the Almighty. It's better to learn and live in the moment, then use those lessons in the days to come. We may just get the chance to be better, to maybe correct wrongs we did, and help others in their journey towards eternity. Such living demonstrates how a man who loves wisdom brings joy to his father, but a companion of prostitutes squanders his wealth. Such living is a good way to start the next year of our lives. Blessings to you today, and a happy new year of great opportunities just up ahead.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 2 January 2012

By justice a king gives a country stability, but one who is greedy for bribes tears it down. Proverbs 29, verse 4.

A happy Monday after New Year's, and since this means the holiday season is now officially over, let me be the last person to wish you both a Merry Christmas and a happy new year! Is it just me or does the New Year's holiday seem a bit strange this year? I mean, with it falling on Sunday, the NFL being on all day yesterday, and the Rose Parade on today, doesn't it all seem a bit off? What does this have to do with today's proverb?

To be honest, nothing. It's just an observation, and leaders make observations; indeed, Solomon made several books of them (that, thousands of years later, people like you and me ponder). I'm not a king, though, and neither are you. But aren't you a leader in your kingdom? True, you aren't the king of the world (or Leo DiCaprio), and you aren't president and you may not be in charge of much at all. But you're still a king (or queen) in your own realm. You still lead in your own way, and what you do affects so many other people. That's not so small after all!

Think about it: it's a very George Bailey concept. Our lives affect so many others and when we aren't around we leave a great hole. I've long said that I don't believe the world moves or turns because of the actions of the president, celebrities, or the CEOs and academic elites. Instead, I believe vastly so much more in the world happens because of ordinary people living extraordinary lives in ordinary ways. WE make the world go around, not the people in the news. We do it by living out a thousand small choices every day, by hundreds of interactions and conversations every day, and by how we live faith. Especially that last one. Whether you acknowledge it or not, God is working through you, through how you live your life today, even right now. He put you in charge of your life and made you the monarch in it. When you live a just and upright life, you lead in stability; when you don't, you tear down.

The same goes for me, you know. I have zero aspirations to high office. You won't see me running for Congress, the legislature or even city council any time soon. I don't believe I have either a thick enough skin or the necessary talents for representative office. That, and I've put my family through too many tough times already. But I'm still king. God still put me in charge of me. It may not seem like I rule over much, but in actuality I rule over quite a lot. My wife pointed out to me that I'm infectious: that my words and actions affect other people. What I say in this blog, how I lead my kids, the words I say at Wal Mart, controlling my impatience behind the wheel, posts on Facebook or Twitter, conversations at work: what I think, say and do affects so many other people in small ways that may or may not become bigger things. Shouldn't they build up instead of tearing down?

On this Monday after New Year's Day, I'm thinking that this verse is a good reminder for how I should rule my kingdom this year. By justice a king gives a country stability, but one who is greedy for bribes tears it down. I can lead and live my life by focusing on justice. Giving up true sovereignty to God is the first step. With that comes a willing heart, a listening ear, and a more patient attitude; it's that 'fruit of the Spirit' thing. Those are leadership qualities, you know. Such qualities may make me seem less exciting to some folks, but I find that I want to be that guy. After all my time living otherwise, I find I want to be someone who's stable, who's a more Godly man instead of that other guy. It's not that I haven't lived a life with peace or maturity, but I haven't lived that way enough. To be more, I want to be what the world thinks of as 'less' and this is a blessing. In this new year, I'm working to live a more just life.

Or I can lead and live it by focusing on myself. After all, my thoughts, words and actions can affect others in negative ways, too. I can continue to be a rounder, a flirt, a hypocrite, a pot-stirrer, a spiritual light-weight. I can be greedy for bribes, letting the wise ways of the world control how I live in the world. All these words that I write can be just nice words to hear, to maybe remind me of a better way and a tougher road that I'm too self-focused to walk. Many people become successful living this way; some become kings, presidents, and Kardashians. It can be all about me when I'm greedy and focused on those bribes. That bribe, you know, doesn't need to have a bunch of dollar signs attached to it. That bribe can be a woman's touch, or status, the soothing thrill of applause, or being in 'the clique,' Whatever it is that trips your trigger can be the thing with which you're bribed. If you're greedy for that, you're susceptible. You're also tearing down.

So let's resolve to do better. At the very least, let's resolve to give it a healthy try, shall we? I'm not much of one for New Year's resolutions. I usually break them. But how about, this year, we ask for help from the Divine and from each other, and we resolve to lead in our lives in a just manner? How about we work to build up instead of tear down, encourage rather than criticize, listen instead of comment? How about we do whatever is needed to serve instead of take, that we work to be content with what's on our plate instead of just craving what's still on the bar? Last year was a hard year; I was ready for it to be over. The cool thing is that, for me to restore stability and justice in this life over which I'm king, all I needed to do was say "please forgive me" and He did. That's always the start of restoring my reign to health. I didn't need

to wait for New Year's to do it: it happened on the spot, in the moment, time and again. So it was last year, so it is now. We need the grace and thankfully it's there. Let's seek it, then share it, then live it out in our lives starting now. We can and we will because victory is assured. Let's resolve to do better today, here and now, you and I, your majesty.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 3 January 2012

Whoever flatters his neighbor is spreading a net for his feet. Proverbs 29, verse 5.

Ah, flattery; we've visited here before. Way back in chapter 17, verse 8, it said "A bribe is a charm to the one who gives it; wherever he turns, he succeeds." And chapter 19, verse 6 says "Many curry favor with a ruler, and everyone is the friend of a man who gives gifts." Both of those verses indirectly talk about flattery, and how smooth talkers try to have their way. One talks about how charming flattery is, like a smooth bribe, and the other talks about how people flock to a smoothie. And just yesterday we talked about bribes, and how greed for them helps us to tear down instead of build up.

This verse is more insidious. It exposes a flatterer for what he is: dangerous. You see, it's easy to tell yourself that you're just being polite, or that you're a harmless flirt. I mean, what harm is there in pouring on compliments when you may not need to say them? They're just words, and if it makes someone feel better, where is the harm in that? It may not have felt completely right, but if it made someone's day, that uneasiness was easy to brush aside. This has been a hard lesson for me to learn. I have always wanted to please people, and when I was younger, I would say and do most anything to do so. If it meant saying a few things that weren't fully true just to make someone feel better, what was the harm in that? Maybe more than I knew.

These days, I watch my son, who is learning the art of words from his father. Son is from the rap/Lady GaGa generation, so the words he uses kind of frighten me sometimes; what is the world coming to (this is the point where I must admit I'm getting old)? He isn't a ladies' man, but he could be. He isn't a smoothie yet, but he could become one. The patterns are already in place. He's confident, learning to master his vocabulary, likes to brag, knows how to put up a front, loves to joke around, and is becoming more unafraid. He's just like I was in so many ways. Kind of scary.

It's kind of scary because I don't think he understands the road ahead of him if he lets himself become a smooth talking flatterer. It took me years to learn (and then un-learn my behaviors) that flattery is basically dishonest. Even when your motives seem good, it's a dishonest thing to tell someone something that isn't true (or even fully true). It took me a long time to learn to give compliments where they're due, to let yes mean yes and no mean no. You can't lessen the truth; it is what it is. Not only that, but later in Scripture it explicitly warns how flatterers can be dangerous. Romans 16 says that people who cause divisions and put obstacles in the way to faith are often flattering smooth talkers who deceive sometimes naïve people; again, there's that basic dishonesty idea. Paul cautions to keep away from them because they aren't serving Christ. Keep away: that means they're dangerous.

Whoever flatters his neighbor is spreading a net for his feet. You don't realize it at the time, but you're setting a trap for good people, even when they're good people you love. Part of you wants to do the right thing, but another part knows you're wrapped around this flattering image, these gaudy words that you've bestowed on people. You've led them on, and now they're counting on you keeping up that image. In their eyes, you're one way, but in the mirror you want to see yourself differently.

Once upon a time that was me. No wonder I brought so much trouble on myself; no wonder I'm concerned my son would turn out this way since his primary role model wasn't always a good one.

Thankfully, this is a change that people can make. It's doable. Flattery is a learned behavior, one that deftly masks the insecurity behind it. Both of those can be unlearned by letting God take the reigns in life. The cure for the common sin is Christ. It really doesn't take very long, either. It starts with a heart-to-heart, then moves into communing more with Him through time and His Word, then it becomes action as you work to live out what you're learning. Brain surgery? Hardly. But it's purely transformational, and it can take a very short time, days or even weeks. Results can be seen almost immediately. First you will see them in the mirror, then you'll see them around you.

Nowadays, if I see you and tell you "you look very nice today" or if I ask you how you're doing, I mean it. It's a process that has been years in the making, and it's still very much a work in progress, just as I am. It takes work to undo patterns of behavior, but nothing is impossible for God; as you see good changes unfold in your life, this lesson in particular becomes very real. I do it because it's what God wants of me, and because it's the right thing to do. I do it because my family is watching and I want to finally live in ways that honor instead of flatter. If I can do this, my friend, anyone can. Even you. That's not flattery: that's a powerful truth.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 4 January 2012

An evil man is snared by his own sin, but a righteous one can sing and be glad. Proverbs 29, verse 6.

On the surface, this seems like a no-win verse. We're sinful from birth; do you ever get tired of hearing that, of having all these religious people harp at you with how sinful we are? I know I do. Too bad the truth hurts.

And the truth of it is that we are; we're filthy with it. On our own, there is NOTHING we can do about it, either. Clean living, good deeds, putting \$100 in the Red Kettle, helping Grandma out with the groceries, and making your bed every morning are meaningless on their own. On their own, without faith in God to back them up, they are worthless. They're just make-work to use up your 24 hours per day. On their own, without faith, they are evil.

Evil? Making your bed is evil? My teenagers seem to think so. In reality, though, if it takes the place that God asks for in our lives, then yes it is evil. The big, fat Webster's on my desk defines evil as "arising from or caused by real or supposed wickedness." How could helping Granny be evil, or donating to a worthy charity?

Again, it goes back to God. Anything – thought, word, action, feeling, emotion, anything – apart from God is evil. Anything apart from God is wicked. Even our best intended actions are worse than nothing, worse than Stalin's active mind on a slow day. Apart from God, even our best intentions are offensive to a holy God of pure love because anything apart from God in His holy love is not love. It either is or it isn't, and if it isn't, then it isn't love. If it isn't love, then what is it? Answer: love's opposite. In other words, evil, that same evil that runs you and me through time and time again.

Man, that's pretty harsh. Again, too bad the truth hurts.

So who is righteous to sing and be glad? Who on earth could possibly be righteous? Answer: everyone. Anyone on earth, any of nearly 7 billion people, can be righteous. It can't happen on our own: we need help. We are sanctified, made righteous, by faith in Christ. That alone can do the trick, and to be sure, it's no magic trick. It's supernatural. It's amazing. It's life-altering and life-giving. And it's so easy. Good thing that truth hurts, you know.

God wants everyone to be saved. You, me, your children, the Wal Mart people in spandex, Hugo Chavez, goat-herders in Turkmenistan, the Obama kids, Rush Limbaugh, and those gossip women in the Baptist ladies guild. All of us. He doesn't want any one of us to slip away and reject Him. There is always room in heaven for one more. When we embrace Him and make Him the center of our lives, when we accept His singular sacrifice to make right all of our evil, we are made righteous and we can sing. I can't sing worth a plug nickel, but I'm pretty sure it sounds good to God.

And while we're at it, let's put to rest a rumor: believers are boring. You've read plenty of my writings here. Does it sound like I've lived a boring life? Does it even remotely sound like I live a boring life now? Indeed, being made righteous means laying aside the guilt that the enemy wants you to carry around. It means real freedom to choose. You get to choose what to believe in, how to follow wisely, and how to live life in ways that are meaningful. I find that I lead a much more eventful, compelling, fulfilling, happy, and fun life in believing that I ever did in the mire in which I muddied myself in the past.

Without faith, I'd be back in the mire in a second. Without faith, my singing voice would sound just awful. Without faith, I'd be clothed in evil again, because evil tries even harder to have its way with you when you believe. It's a real spiritual war, and the 'fighting' can be quite intense when you're fighting to resist temptation, stay the course, and live what you believe. Sometimes you take hits and sometimes you slip and fall; happens to me most every day. And every day, every time, I get up to try again. Every time He's there beside you and me, beckoning us to get up and trust Him again and get back in the good fight. That's a good, hard truth as well.

An evil man or woman is ensnared by their own sin. It's like a jungle trap, waiting to hold you fast and keep you from escaping. It's always out there, always trying to trip you and me up, enmesh us in a net of wrongs, and remind us of how inadequate and un-righteous we really are. Just remember: the cure for the common sin is Christ. Embrace that, sing, and start to be glad. No win? Not hardly.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 5 January 2012

The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern. Proverbs 29, verse 7.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions; you've heard this aphorism. It applies in families, church council meetings, high school pep rallies, every term of Congress, and even at Wall Street banking firms. How many stories do you hear in the news about X, Y or Z program being started by government with the best of intentions (or even to meet a need) but then going badly or costing grossly more than its original estimate? Or how often have you taken a bill with the intention of paying it off in a month or two, only to find yourself saddled with that bill many months later? Have you ever tried to help someone only to find that your help backfires?

Note to self: none of this is what the verse is saying. It's a relative to the proverb, but it's not specifically what it's saying. Please hold onto this thought.

Part one of the proverb (obviously) talks about what the righteous care about. Remember that we aren't righteous on our own but we can be made righteous; the cure for the common sin is Christ. When that happens, one thing you find is that it becomes easier to care about others, about things that really matter. With me, it began to matter what other people were going through, how they feel in their lives. You begin to see that it's not about you, that you're no angel. Empathy becomes a practical thing, not a detached state of feeling. When you empathize, it becomes easier to honestly pray for someone, to honestly care about their well-being and their benefit. Walking around in their shoes becomes a privilege, not drudgery. Is it any stretch, then, that we would care about justice for the poor, that even the least in our society would get a fair shake?

Be advised, though, 'fair' is a dangerous word. It's highly subjective. Along with that 'road to hell' concept, please hold onto 'fair' for a moment as well.

It takes a truly cold person to not care, you know. Yes, sometimes we need to have a hard edge and be shrewd in dealing with people; sometimes that even means cutting them out of our lives. I've done this and so have you. That can be done in love, however, because if someone is toxic to you or the match just isn't a match, then it is a caring thing to lovingly but honestly make a change. To me, it takes a cold person to simply cut you off, or to say one thing and then deliberately do another, or to turn a deaf ear when other people have need. Chalk it up to self-preservation, sure, or maybe it's something else.

And while we're here, let's get this on the table: what about all those greedy rich people and greedy corporations? Aren't they self-righteous? Why haven't they wiped out poverty with their millions? Maybe the best response to that is 'why haven't you?' Why do you and I tolerate poverty if not because of a lack of caring? We don't need millions to make a difference where we are because the poor are everywhere. It's that whole 'remove the plank from your own eye before removing the mote from another's' concept that Christ taught.

But let's face it: this verse could mean a whole lot more. 'Poor' does not necessarily mean monetary. Change the verse to read "the righteous care about justice for the hopeless, but the wicked have no such concern." Or maybe "the righteous care about justice for the sick, but the wicked have no such concern." And it could work as, "the righteous care about justice for the ignorant, but the wicked have no such concern." You get the drift. We could be poor in the bank account, in spirit, in knowledge, in talent, in ability, in resources, in hope. There is any number of things that 'poor' could mean and perhaps the verse talks about all of them. Couldn't someone rich in spirit righteously help someone poor in spirit? Shouldn't they?

This is where it's good to remember that 'road to hell' theme and what 'fair' means. Good intentions become good when they're infused through God. Apart from God, all our good intentions are worthless. Without faith in Him, they are even insulting to Him, and since God is pure love (love in its rarest, almost mysterious form), then without that love, it's easy to see why they are worthless, insulting and void. When something isn't love, you know what else it is. Thus, good intentions without God, even from the righteous, are both dangerous and unfair. 'Fair' is a way of equalizing outcomes on this earth, something that sin has rendered impossible. 'Fair' (as we understand it) in God's kingdom will be a completely transformed concept.

The verse isn't saying that we should try to equalize outcomes or that it is futile to try to help. But these are good cautions to keep in mind as we try to model God in Christ and be more caring, more empathetic, more Godly in how we deal with

each other. Christ wanted fair treatment for the adulterous woman who was about to be stoned; "let he who is without sin cast the first stone." And He lived His life in ways that always demonstrated Godly intentions, whether it was responsible celebrating (with wine at Cana), feeding people (those 5000 people by the seashore), caring for one's enemies (with restoring the soldier's slashed ear in Gethemene), or total forgiveness under any condition (as in the criminal on the cross next to him). Christ's entire ministry – indeed the entirety of Scripture – is about God in our lives, about His intentions and His fairness being the best way to live life. Wanting to be fair becomes a healthy motivation; wanting to model God's intentions becomes a way of life. Seeing those things realistically becomes the way things are instead of just the way things ought to be.

So what it boils down to is that, when God makes us righteous, we begin to care about justice, actions, the situation, and the hearts of the poor, no matter who 'the poor' are. When we reject God working in our lives, we reject such concerns. Could an unbeliever live a 'good' life and still be an unbeliever? In earthly terms, of course. But where is the love in that? What good is done if we simply lead others to hopelessness, and how would that be caring for justice for the poor? It wouldn't be. What it would be would be a fair journey on the road to hell lived with good intentions.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 6 January 2012

Mockers stir up a city, but wise men turn away anger. Proverbs 29, verse 8.

I'm one of the unwise men. I've discussed here before that I debate online. The discussions are spirited and lively, and in their own way they're healthy. It isn't a good thing for one to live a life being polarized, so I think it's healthy to hear opposing opinions from people you trust. Yet I find myself getting angry at the futility of our debates. We don't seem to solve anything, and as I see it, my friends are advocating some views that are (in my opinion) wrong and insupportable, maybe even indefensible. They could (and likely would) say the same thing about me even as we try to keep emotion out of rebuttals; facts can be debated, emotions are simply bluster. It's disappointing and sometimes even discouraging.

I find myself getting stirred up by the mockers on the other side, good men who often resort to opinion instead of fact, emotion instead of reason. When the debate resorts to name calling or invective, I usually back away even as I find myself wanting to respond in kind. It is all too easy to sink to the lowest level and react and respond. That isn't a Godly thing to do. So here's a bit of full disclosure: I haven't been very Godly in how I've debated. I HAVE sometimes sunk to that level. Often, I'll barrage someone with facts, sometimes even so many that I could be looked at as a bully. When they respond with facts, it's a good debate. When the name calling or opinions start, though, the debate sinks and it simply feels like we're slewing garbage.

Seems like we all forget that mockers stir up a city, but wise men turn away anger. I can't speak for my friends; I'm only responsible for me. Me, I know I've been the pot-stirrer who sometimes reacts unwisely.

Is it just me or does it seem impossible to watch anything on the news today without seeing the reporting of emotions and opinions versus the just the facts? Why do we allow our government and our media to divide us so? More than that, because our government and our media do this, what do we intend to do about it? Perhaps the better question, however, would be 'what would God want us to do about it?'

You know the answer.

That explains why I'm unwise. All too often, I resort to debating, to trying to win the arguments I think are worth fighting for, and then I usually end up sinking into the mire when someone starts slinging the hash. I hate that feeling, I really do. More than that, though, I hate to lose, to not have the last word. That isn't constructive. How do I stop it?

Yes, I know the answer. It's the one I have all too often disregarded. It's tough to do what God wants us to do. It usually means denying ourselves or turning away from things we think we want to do. Changes of behavior are always in order, and sometimes it means keeping my mouth shut when what I really want to do is throw the words back to prove, yet again, just how dreadfully wrong my friends are about some very important issue.

That isn't a Godly thing to do. It makes me into the mocker who stirs up the city instead of the wise man who turns away anger. The wise man learns that some things aren't worth the argument, that mockers aren't worth the time. Wiser men than me turn away from the fights and don't get roped into them. Wiser men let words and silence speak for themselves. Mockers fall back on, well, mocking, using emotion, harsh words, and conjecture to mock instead of build up. Mockers stir up emotions and reactions in others, and do it for reasons that aren't Godly either.

Guess I'm guilty of that from time to time as well. The trick is realizing this and these other things while not beating one's self up over them time and again. We should be contrite and own what we do, but we should also walk away from guilt when it wells up and not let it or others rule us with it. If we don't, we become the city in which the mockers stir up discord.

So, once again, I'll beg the forgiveness and patience of my friends and my God, and resolve once more to do better. In this time when opinions are strong because the stakes are very high, it's natural that we'll want to air those opinions. Perhaps that's not always what God would have us do. Perhaps there is a better way. Here's to hoping I learn that lesson and remember it more in the days to come.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 9 January 2012

If a wise man goes to court with a fool, the fool rages and scoffs, and there is no peace. Proverbs 29, verse 9.

The English Standard Version of the Bible translates this version as "If a wise man has an argument with a fool, the fool only rages and laughs, and there is no quiet." I read several translations and felt that this was the one that most closely captured the intent of it. Reading from the NIV translation, that whole 'going to court' thing throws me off. Here in 21st century America I think of court as a formal thing, a drawn out, tedious process that could produce either justice or OJ Simpson. Rules to be followed, procedures that take place, your honor and counsel to the bench: it seems contradictory to me that a wise man would choose to go to court with a fool.

After all, why would he? If you're in the middle of an argument with a fool, why would you want to pursue it any further? Fools and their foolish words speak for themselves. This is a lesson I've had to endure both as the wise man and the fool. As the fool, I'm the guy who doesn't want to lose, who doesn't want to give in and acknowledge when others, even lesser men, have better points or better logic than me. The argument starts, usually over something small, and it keeps escalating, building, fomenting, taking on a life of its own. One thing after another makes backing down and returning to reason impossible. If one isn't careful in such a situation, one might get all lathered up and make even more of a fool of one's self. Your opponent may say just enough to egg you on and watch you scoff, rage, and laugh, or they may say enough to make you look even more stupid. Perhaps they stop arguing altogether, giving truth to the adage that the best thing to do for a fool who is determined to hang themselves is give them rope.

It takes a pretty small person to act like a fool, don't you think? No matter what version you translate, a fool is a fool. There's no peace when arguing with fools. The more foolish they are, the louder they'll get. They may resort to name calling, personal attacks, or lies and conjecture. I've been that fool; I'm betting you have too.

What causes this? Pride, of course. And what's the foundation of that kind of pride? You guessed: selfishness. It's all about me; I'm king of the world. For the fool (or the formerly wise man who won't let go of the fight), it's all about me. When you don't want to back down, no matter the reason or justification, perhaps a gut-check is in order. Perhaps it's a good time to check motivations and ask yourself "is this really worth it?"

That's something wise men do a lot. In my wiser moments, I've caught myself asking this question. What about it? Is this worth it? Where does it leave us? These are some of those gut-check questions. One of the principles of the 1990s strategy of total quality management is constant evaluation. People focused on living, working and improving on quality continuously evaluate. They evaluate their performance, their work, their situation, the people around them and themselves. In order to do your best in every situation, you constantly, continuously focus on producing the best results at all times, then you adjust as necessary.

That's a wise thing to do, you know. And if you're the wise man in an argument with the fool, as long as the fool has the loudest voice, there will be neither peace nor quality.

Before we go, though, something has to be said: there are some things worth fighting for. If the principle is of God, it is worth fighting for. If the principle is of freedom or justice, it is a principle worth fighting for. If it is a principle of safety, or fighting for the welfare of those you love, it may be something worth fighting for. What's the key in all these things? Godly principles. If a principle is a Godly one, it is a principle for which standing up is of great worth. You know this as well as I do, and no loud fool can tear you from your principles.

Wise men know this, too. So the next time you get in an argument, think it over. Are you going to be the wise man or the fool; are you going to court or going to pass? I'll be thinking the same things.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 11 January 2012

Bloodthirsty men hate a man of integrity and seek to kill the upright. Proverbs 29, verse 10.

The man of the hour is Tim Tebow. If you've read these for any amount of time you'll be able to predict what I think of Mr. Tebow and his faith (clue: I think it's wonderful). I won't expound on whether his faith is right or wrong, or even about whether or not he should so publicly pray in public. Instead, I'll ask a question: when did it become out of place in our world for someone to 'Tebow'?

My coworker and I were talking about this yesterday. I asked this question not knowing what her faith belief is or her background. We got to talking about just when did it become uncommon for someone to have such a strong show of faith in public? When did it become a curiosity for people to pray or show they believe or express their faith in such a way that other people would think it was odd? After much discussion, we really couldn't land on any particular date so we moved on to another topic (since forgotten).

I think I know the answer. We became that way today. PDF – Public Display of Faith – became a curiosity when we legitimize the bloodthirsty men inside each of us. It isn't necessarily a matter of 'when' so much as 'how' or 'why.' What in the Sam Hill are you talking about Dave? Walk with me a bit.

You see, I don't want to seem like too much of an old geezer (although perhaps I am now) but it seems like this particular thing has gotten worse in the last decade or so. Our societal tolerance for dysfunction has been defined down. You hear it in the misogynism of popular music; you see it wherever you see Lady GaGa or her big sisters Britney and Madonna; it's on the peephole into paradise, and it's all over the big screens too. Here endeth the sermon on how our morals have shifted for the worse because that's been going on as long as there has been a thing called 'popular culture.' If you read about Old Hollywood, that is the Hollywood of the 1910s and 1920s, it's been going on for a very long time. Bounce back a hundred years before and you can find scandalous talk in the press and even more scandalous conduct in the boudoir and this without the advantages of celluloid or recorded sound. To me, 'when' the precipitous slide started is almost a moot point because, no matter when it started, we're living with it now.

That's why I say 'how' and 'why' matter more. Since before the time of Solomon, bloodthirsty men hate a man of integrity and seek to kill the upright. Just this past Sunday, my friend, Mark, preached on Cain and Abel, reminding us that murder first occurred only a few years after we were originally created. The stain of sin goes back to the end of innocence in Eden, back to before Cain murdered Abel, even. And like it or not, the bloodthirsty man lives raging within every one of us, you and me included. Don't believe me? Did you ever envy the man who got promoted over you, or the girl who made the cheerleading squad when you didn't? Did you ever ridicule your neighbor, or flip the bird to the guy who cut you off on the road? Have you ever borne a grudge like I did and wished someone would be hurt because they hurt you?

That's how the bloodthirsty man hates. He (or she) lives inside you and me, goading our sense of 'justice' onward, feeding our anger, jealousy and selfishness. Neither you nor I have killed anyone in fact, but in our malice, envy or even our active disinterest, we've sought to kill those we have passively (or actively) hated. If Christ's first command to us was to love God with all our being and then to love our neighbor as ourselves, then every time we've failed that we've each been guilty of harboring degrees of hatred. Sometimes it's the raging red-hot hatred of fierce greedy anger; sometimes it's the soft hatred of mellow apathy or callous neglect. Either way, it can be a bloodthirsty thing no matter how you do it.

What about 'why?' That's more subjective, I think. Your 'why' is different from mine because you and I are different people. What trips your trigger might not trip mine and vice versa. Perhaps, though, in the end, even 'why' doesn't matter as much after all. Maybe it's moot why we hate or why we seek to hurt and kill the upright people in or around us. Maybe the only thing that matters is that we do. We're all guilty of it.

What's the antidote to that? You know. There's a whole Testament of the Bible that vividly describes it. How the Spirit speaks to you to turn your bloodthirsty hate to selfless love is the real 'how' that matters most. Like what triggers us, how He works in and through you will probably differ from how He works through me. What matters is both the process and the product because both are of God. Remember: the cure for the common sin is Christ.

That brings us back to Tim Tebow. You can't read a football story these days without reading about Tim Tebow. Not just his near miraculous comeback plays but also about how he shamelessly and boldly lives out his faith on the field. I don't know when that became a curiosity, and I'll admit that it sometimes bothers me that it is. It doesn't bother me for long,

though, because I know the way of the believer is tough and we're guaranteed that many in the world won't accept faith and will persecute us because of it. In the end, none of that will matter because, whether we Tebow in the end zone or not, when we cling to saving faith in God, our sure victory is always guaranteed. Kneeling in public displays of prayerful affection simply becomes an honorable way to turn aside the bloodthirsty haters in each of us. It's a personal act of devotion between you and God that you get to (not 'HAVE TO') share with other people as an example of leadership. However you'd show PDF is up to you. Give it a try and I think you'll see that it isn't out of place or odd at all.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 12 January 2012

A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control. Proverbs 29, verse 11.

I'm a Civil War buff; have been for years. I've read dozens of books about it, seen any number of movies, have visited most of the major battlefields, and I even have an 1858 Union musket hanging over my mantle in formerly Confederate Texas. Like so many other people, I'm fascinated by General Robert E. Lee. He was perhaps the most able general ever produced by the United States military, he was gentrified and 'connected,' and he was both manly and just.

He also had a volcanic temper. Like his hero (and marital relative, George Washington), General Lee had a terrible temper that he worked all his life to control. For most of the time he was measured and stoic, able to keep his spirits in check and not let on what he was feeling. When he got energized, though, and when the temper took over it was memorable. His officers knew well to avoid him when he was enraged. Lee would become red in the face and unleash at whoever or whatever was tormenting him in the moment.

Lee was an educated and deeply devout man. He regularly prayed at the start and end of every day, even praying for his Union enemies after battle. I wouldn't be surprised at all to learn that this verse was one which he took to heart. There's good reason for it because it's good advice for the general and the foot-soldier alike.

Think about it: it feels SO GOOD to really blow off steam and let your temper fully vent, raging, swearing, cursing, yelling, maybe even coming to blows. It's like blowing all the steam out of an over-stressed system, letting the release valve blow and letting the pressure release explosively. Things may get broken, people may be hurt and offended and some of the damage may be irreparable, but man does it feel better to let it all out!

That is, until you step back to view that damage. If the first thought to cross your mind isn't 'what have I done,' then you should check your conscience (and maybe have your head checked). No one of godly conscience could view the full venting of their temper and not immediately feel both guilt and foolishness at it. What good is there in breaking things or punching holes in the wall? What good comes from offending people needlessly, and more than that, what kind of person would so deliberately, callously hurt someone out of selfish anger? Did it help to yell, scream, swear, curse, rage and fume? Was it necessary at all? Is that look of brokenness in your loved ones' eyes worth it? Don't you feel like a fool? And if you hit someone? I'm old fashioned enough to live my life believing that any man who hits a woman in anger is no man at all.

General Lee knew these things (so did General Washington). They knew their Scripture and they understood why this was more than just good advice. But notice a few things that I'm betting the good Virginia gentlemen also noticed. Notice that the verse doesn't say "a wise man doesn't get angry." Anger happens, and properly channeled, properly tuned, that isn't a bad thing. We've talked about righteous anger, and about being wronged, and that it's ok to be angry...just not to let it fully and destructively vent. The wise man gets angry, but knows how to handle it: the way God would want us to. Christ got angry, but He channeled it properly, used it instructively, even when forcefully clearing out the moneychangers.

Notice, too, that the verse doesn't say "the wise man keeps his anger under control." It says "keeps himself." That's a small but important difference. Yes, in controlling our temper we control our anger; too true. But underlying that is the idea that, in controlling anger, we are controlling ourselves. The anger is what it is and, quite honestly, it can spin out of control even for 'good' people. Only by controlling ourselves can we reign it back or keep it in altogether. Besides, we are in charge of ourselves. God put you in charge of you, and in all truth, you're both the only person here in charge of you and the only person you're really in charge of. I really only control me. That's a lesson God would want us to remember, whether we're controlling how we react to anger, happiness, temptation, satisfaction, hunger, or extremes of temperature. Keep ourselves under control and the emotions become subject to us, not the other way around.

I think General Lee must have known these things. He was known to be a fair and just man. One time, a soldier, guilty of some infraction, was brought to Lee. "Do not be afraid, son. Here you will receive justice," was what the General told the scared young man. "Sir, that is what I am afraid of," was the young soldier's reply. It's easier to be fair and just when you know and exercise the limits of your self-control, and that's a Godly thing to do. General Lee did it. So could you and I.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 16 January 2012

If a ruler listens to lies, all his officials become wicked. Proverbs 29, verse 12.

Legally-speaking, have you ever heard of the "fruit of a poisonous tree." At one time, I wanted to be a lawyer, and I even took a number of pre-law classes before discovering it wasn't for me. One thing I learned during those classes was the phrase above. It's a legal concept talking about evidence & testimony, namely that if a piece of original evidence or testimony was inadmissible then everything attached to it or coming from it is also inadmissible. More plainly spoken, if the source is tainted then everything that comes from it is tainted as well.

That's something of what this verse is saying, you know. If the original story is a lie, then everything that follows from it is tainted. That doesn't mean that everything that follows is also a lie, just that it's tainted. Why is this important? You and I are leaders. We may not rule much but we rule something. Our families, our workplaces, our relationships, our teams: we have been put in charge of something. If we believe a pack of lies, then everything we do from that will be tainted.

This isn't a new concept; it's pervasive through our history. Going back to the start, there's that whole idea of original sin. We're all tainted with it. There's no way to know what life would have been like to live without sin, but don't you wonder sometimes? Whether we like & agree with it or not, it's still our condition; a fact is a fact. Our ancestors sinned and we (as the rest of humanity) pay a price for it. If you think that's unfair, the next time one of your kids does something wrong and you decide that the entire family has to suffer from the punishment, then ask yourself if it isn't a similar concept.

Then there are consequences. Lies don't work, and they don't bear good fruit. Good doesn't come from lies: only more lies come from lies. How many times have you had to cover up the truth? More to the point, how many times have you covered up a lie with the truth and had that truth be untainted? It seems to me that one of the consequences of a lie is that no good comes from it. In my experience, lies only breed more lies or more trouble. Whenever I've lied, nothing good has come of it. How much more would this be so for someone who is in charge of much? If a ruler listens to lies, is it any surprise all his officials become wicked? If a manager listens to lies, or if a supervisor listens to lies, or if a pastor listens to lies...is it any surprise in these situations either. There are consequences.

Finally, there's something else on my heart about the verse: they hear but they do not listen. Hearing doesn't take much work, especially since ears do it unconsciously. We hear sounds, we hear noises; they happen all around us. Listening, however, is conscious. It takes effort, work, activity. It takes effort to listen to lies, and that to which we listen we also intake to our hearts and minds. We pay attention to the things to which we listen. The leader listens to the lie; the leader takes in the lie; the leader produces lying consequences from the lie. What happens if the leader refuses to listen?

How nice would that be? I wonder what good that could bring that about?

God can bring that about, but we have to open ourselves to the possibility of it. Here's a good way to start: if you want to see the power of the verse, do a switcheroo on it and change the word "lies." If a ruler listens to truth, all his officials become righteous. Or honest, informed, upright; you get the drift. Maybe let that speak to our conscience, and then maybe admit, "Lord, you've got a great point there." Step 1 always involves realizing it's not about me. Lies are about me, us. They're always designed to keep us on defense, to keep us thinking we are the center of things. Maybe step 1 is realizing we aren't.

You know where step 2 goes. Open up The Word and find out.

It takes a real leader, a true ruler, to realize when he's being lied to. It's even harder when you've listened to those lies for so long and then you turn your back on them. I don't know how many world leaders do this, or CEOs, corporate VPs, union bosses, PTA presidents or leaders of church councils; I'd rather not be too skeptical as I'm skeptical about enough things as is. I'm skeptical, in part, because the legalistic side of me tends to think that, once tainted with lies, always tainted with lies. It's that whole 'fruit of a poisonous tree' idea again, that once we've believed the lies then everything that came after them is just as deceitful and poisonous. Thank God that He used that same approach to do the ultimate switcheroo, replacing the enemy's lies with His cleansing truth. Thank God He inserted mercy that listens instead of deceit that only hears what it wants to hear. Thank God that isn't a lie, and that the fruit of His tree is faith, hope and love.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 17 January 2012

The poor man and the oppressor have this in common: the LORD gives sight to the eyes of both. Proverbs 29, verse 13.

This is a verse about grace. Plain and simple, above everything else we could say about it, this verse is about grace. It's about how God provides to all of us, sinner and saint alike. He provides for criminals languishing in prison and wannabe criminals rolling around in their bedrooms in the suburbs. The poor man and the oppressor are the same before God, and God provides for both of them, for all of us.

That's a miracle, you know. In fact, this verse talks about miracles, several of them. That God would provide for beings He created who thwart His loving intentions is miraculous. That God would give when He doesn't need to is a miracle. That we of such varied backgrounds could expect to be provided for AND be equals is a miracle. And that there is such a thing as sight. To me, sight, like gravity, defies evolution, especially since hearing, smell and taste are much more finely attuned senses. That creatures can see simply boggles me and strengthens my belief that we are created beings, not random acts of natural selection.

But I digress. But God doesn't. You see, everything is under God's dominion, and that's a miracle of patience as well. Struggle as we do, we lose sight of that fact. In an age where, just in the USA, there seems to be a wide chasm between the rich and the poor, it seems hard to remember that everything is under God's dominion. He gives sight to the rich and poor; he provides for the rich and poor; he oversees the rich and poor. Does this mean that God favors the rich over the poor? No, not in any way. God doesn't tolerate the sins of men: we do. Through it, in His grace, He still cares to listen intently to every prayer, to pay attention to every one of your heartbeats, to know when you are happy or sad, and to love unconditionally. Best of all: to love unconditionally is a miracle as well.

There is a question about it that bothers me, though: are the poor oppressed, and if one is an oppressor does that make one rich? I don't know of anyone who would strive to be poor. I don't recall times when I was a kid thinking "I want to grow up to be poor." A standing joke with my wife and her sister is that they used to play rich days and poor days when they were kids living out in the country. They seemed to play 'poor' more than rich.' I don't know, though, that either of them ever wanted to grow up to be oppressed with a lack of resources. Remember, poverty can mean more than just a lean bank book. So, is poverty a form of oppression? Yes, I'd say it is indeed a form of passive, uncoordinated oppression of the human spirit.

So does that mean that the rich oppress the poor? If you're blessed with wealth (itself another miracle), does that make you an oppressor? The verse seems to insinuate this...but not really. The verse doesn't tie the two together though they are mentioned together. Yes, there are rich who oppress the poor; yes, there are wealthy people who become or stay wealthy by taking advantage of the poor. But maybe there are situations where the rich oppress the rich, or the poor oppress the poor. I don't think it's far-fetched to understand that, when someone gets advantage, there is opportunity for oppression. The rich may or may not directly oppress the poor, but we'd be fools to think it doesn't happen.

And you know what about it? It misses the point. It misses the point because the verse is about the LORD providing, not people providing. It's about some very simple miracles making life as we know it possible. The verse talks about how He provides for all kinds of people. He provides miraculous gifts to us that defy nature and common sense, and He does so out of boundless grace that we can't even begin to really understand.

Chief of sinners am I. You've heard my litany before and I won't be repeating it today. Every time I sit to write one of these, I'm reminded of how I've bungled things in life, of how I've made mistakes and generally made a mess of some things. And then I'm reminded of grace, of forgiveness, mercy, understanding, second chances, and the love that binds all those together. I'm reminded that the God of our fathers whose almighty hand wove the starry splendor in the skies also reads our words and our hearts, and then He provides for us even when our words and hearts stray from Him. He does it because of pure love, because He is pure love. He does it for rich and poor alike, oppressed and oppressor alike.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 18 January 2012

If a king judges the poor with fairness, his throne will always be secure. Proverbs 29, verse 14.

Fair is a four-letter F-word. That's a saying that I tell my kids when I hear "that's not fair" or "this is so unfair." I hear enough of that other four-letter F-word that I figure it's only fair to fight fair with fair.

But let's face it: with or without entendres about profanity, we all want a fair shake. Despite the pessimistic bent of so many stories in the news these days, I still believe the good old US of A is a fundamentally fair country. It's true that there are injustices in the world and that's not fair...but that isn't what the verse is talking about. And it's true that sometimes the deck seems stacked in favor of the elites, the glitterati and the people with the Benjamin Franklins in their wallet...but that isn't what the verse is talking about either. And it's also true that it takes a very long time to dispense criminal or civil justice through our system of jurisprudence...and that isn't what the verse is talking about either.

Both rich and poor alike want fair interpretation before the law, and that's part of what the verse is saying. It's saying that the subjects of the king want fairness. To demonstrate this, they live peacefully under their ruler's charge when he administers government fairly. Justice in the courts, laws that aren't oppressive, conditions conducive to the pursuit of happiness: if a ruler administers fairly, these can result and, when they do, the subjects are happy. When we're happy, we're quiet and orderly. It's fair.

The verse is also talking about judging the least of the subjects. It's no coincidence that it talks about the poor and not "the rich" or even "his subjects." It talks, instead, about judging those with the most to gain from both justice and the king's favor. Could it be that 'the poor' might also be an allusion to you and me and our state as imperfect beings? After all, to be righteous is to be rich, and we've already covered the ground of how we're not righteous on our own. On our own, we're poor. The ultimate fairness is divine love in that it is just, it is even-handed, it is a gift of grace, and it is a constant. Maybe you and I are the least of all subjects. Chief of sinners am I; how about you? I don't always deserve real justice; none of us really does. But God gives it anyway.

And then the verse is talking about security, namely the security of the king. If a king judges the least of his subjects with fairness, they will keep his throne secure. He will have the reputation of being wise and even-handed. There will be that placidity and peace in the kingdom, and the king's reputation as a good ruler will grow. The wise king will see this and realize his fairness is a gift given to him that he is privileged and charged to share. The wise king will also see that keeping the subjects happy will be the easiest way to keeping his place on top of the pyramid. It's easier to rule when the kingdom is at peace.

This is one comparison, though, where 'the king' doesn't translate to God. God's throne is always secure whether he rules one way or another. He doesn't need our actions or even our loving fealty to make His place secure. He's God; He just Is. Yet because He Is and because He Is true love incarnate, He is just. He is just and fair in all things, perhaps the only real fairness and justice in this mixed up world. It isn't in His nature to be unfair, unjust, lying, or wrong in any way: He can't. It's impossible for Him because He is holy. Because of that, He gives His love as the perfect expression of his fairness, giving justice to those who least deserve it and setting things right when public life has set them very wrong. In God, there is no 'fair' and there are certainly no F-words. In God, there is only love.

What could be fairer than that?

We all do want a fair shake, especially the teenagers among us. Sometimes it's hard to give them that fair shake. They do things that aggravate us, and they cross the line with talk, smoking, drinking, getting in trouble at school, mouthing off, not doing their work...and it's only Wednesday. As parents, we want to both be fair and also be just (and sometimes we want to let the hammer fall too). In those times, though, we do best when we remember He who loved us first and loved us best. His fairness is shown in forbearance; his grace in giving; his love in loving where love wasn't deserved. That's the fairest shake of all.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 19 January 2012

The rod of correction imparts wisdom, but a child left to himself disgraces his mother. Proverbs 29, verse 15.

Listen to your mother. That's what most of us have heard at one time or another. Listen to you mother for a lot of different reasons. There's that 5th Commandment reason about honoring our mother (and father); that's part of it. There's the fact that she's experienced and she might just know what she's talking about. There's the history between you, and the fact (that mothers are quick to tell) that "I carried you for nine months and childbirth is no walk in the park!" There's also the biggest fact of all that, well, she's mom and she probably loves you. We should listen to our mothers because their correction imparts wisdom.

We should also listen to them because, when we disregard their advice, we disgrace them. Men who have affairs disgrace all the women in their lives, but first of all their mothers even if their moms are long gone. Women who lie to get ahead at work disgrace the women who mentored them, especially their moms whose example should be best in their lives. Boys who fight without reason disgrace the moms who love them best. Girls who act like cats or are catty with other girls disgrace the ladies who usually show the better angels of our nature (thank you Mr. Lincoln).

Left to our own devices, without boundaries, we cut loose. Moms instill those boundaries into us, teaching them and inculcating our lives with knowledge of them. That teaching usually always calls us back to walking the straight and narrow, and that's what God designed for them to do. Brush your teeth, do your best, try again, love your family, don't give up, be patient, listen, read your Bible, check it again, follow the directions, try to understand, forgive her, be a man: who hasn't heard things like this from their mother? There's a good reason. She knows what she's talking about. It's the unique, cherished and special mission given to her by God Himself. Left alone on your own, before you know your way in the world, would you stand much chance for success?

It hurts to be corrected. It hurts just as much to be alone and have our conscience be the one that corrects us, always pointing to us what we've done wrong. Moms know this, and it hurts a mom to have to correct a kid, grown or infant alike. Most moms do it, though, because most moms know it's better to have a wise child than a child who's unwise all their life. They do it out of the mission of their love, that mission of love imparted to them. I've said it before that the best compliment a child can give a parent is to be godly, independent and self-reliant. It's a compliment I learned from my mom.

Besides, who hasn't weathered a harsh stare from mom after we've done something wrong? Even the most bull-headed son can wither like a weed under a magnifying glass in the staring gaze of a mom who's been crossed. It's can be a real Tyler Perry moment...

...or it can be a Mary of Nazareth moment too. Even the Son of God had a mother. I wonder what it must have been like for Mary. We know the Nativity story and of the times she was mentioned in Christ's ministry, like at Cana and during His crucifixion. We can be sure that Christ didn't do anything to disgrace His mother, but I do believe that, being fully man, in learning His trade and how to live in the world He learned much from His mother. I wonder what she thought of these things? All we really know is that she kept things in her heart and pondered them. Mary wasn't just a mother, or Ave Maria, or the Blessed Mother of the Divine. No, Mary was a mom too. The rod she saw on her Son wasn't to correct anything, except maybe all the wrongs He had never done but we had.

I can't even begin to imagine how she must have felt about that. Can you imagine seeing your first-born son being tortured, after God Himself had chosen to have this miraculous relationship with you alone in all of history, knowing that He was enduring it for reasons you could only begin to fathom? Mary saw her Savior tortured on that cross, and she saw the awesome man born of that miracle decades before. But don't forget she also saw her little boy there being murdered. When God the Father Almighty chose to become a man, he could have done it by simply appearing in love and majesty. He could have done so in a way that demonstrated the full glory of His power. But He didn't. He chose to have a mom, and to live His life in ways to honor her and that. It made all the difference in the world.

One word for it: amazing.

We fathers look at the world in a certain way, and it brings me no joy to punish my kids or even to admonish them, especially since I've been gone so much of their lives. Sometimes that's necessary, though, especially since it truly grieves me to no end to think of them doing things that need correction and then how their behavior will disappoint their

mother. I don't like seeing that, or even thinking about it, so sometimes I've been known to be a harsh man, even a harsh disciplinarian. At least I was in the past. These days, since they're older, I don't discipline the kids as much; I don't need to. Still, occasionally it comes up and it's necessary and I don't like doing it.

I wonder how my wife feels about it. And my mom. I wonder how she felt. It's a loving thing to rebuke, to correct, and to do so wisely and in love. Moms know this best because they instinctively know theirs is a divine role and a divine mission. When we mess up our part our mission, we do so at risk of disgracing our mothers. They're one good reason for the constant gut-check of prayer, thanksgiving, and grace. Listen to your mother, and be thankful God put her in your life as He did.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 20 January 2012

When the wicked thrive, so does sin, but the righteous will see their downfall. Proverbs 29, verse 16.

Do you ever get through your day here and feel like you've been slimed? From the stories of drug pushers who make pregnant women work as prostitutes to all the constant ooze in politics to Jersey Shore every time you surf through MTV, do you ever feel like you're covered in slime? I think this question must mean that I'm officially getting old because it sounds like something that, in years past, I would have thought only an old person would ask. It's been going on for all time, since practically the beginning of things. We don't know how long Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden. All we know is sin started with their exit. And it's sin that marks our days.

That's a sad admission whether you're old or young. It's a sad thing that just living day to day can leave you feeling slimed, but it's been going on for almost as long as there have been people. The first sins were disobedience, lying and idolatry, but the next ones we hear about jump all the way to capital murder. I wonder if Adam and his family felt slimed. Years ago I toured Pompeii. In that tour you find that one of the best preserved buildings is a brothel, indicating that the ancient Romans took their sin very seriously (and this from just after the time of Christ). It was a creepy feeling, but, yep, there was that feeling of being slimed again.

Just last night, I walked through the city. Minneapolis is a fairly clean, polite and calm city, yet to get back to my hotel I had to walk past cabarets, sex shops and strip joints. Years ago, I used to frequent strip clubs, but I can tell you honestly that I haven't been in one in years. A friend told me that his wife thought they dishonored her, so he didn't go any more (and he was a macho athlete). That stuck with me and I've emulated his behavior. Seeing those places makes you realize why they look seedy, and I'll admit to walking faster when I walked by. Still, I felt slimed (and cold; it was below zero).

Do I sound like a prude yet? Maybe I do, but so be it. I feel slimed by pop culture these days because it seems like the wicked are thriving more than ever before. Perhaps every generation feels this way, and perhaps I'm only realizing the depth of something that's always been around; both are possible. It could also be that I'm learning to look at things through a different lens and I don't really like what I see. I don't like what I see because, unfortunately, I've seen myself in that mirror and I'm ashamed of that.

Consequently, to many who know me, I must sound like a prude and a hypocrite. I'm hoping that enough has changed of late in my life to make that impression solid because the changes are real. Not so long ago it wouldn't take much to convince me to shack up; I'm thinking differently now. Not so long ago, it wouldn't take much to get me to drink until I got my fill, but a look in the mirror tells me I want to keep doing better. Not so long ago, I would have done many things differently than I choose to do them now. Not so very long ago, I was one of the thriving wicked.

Know what? Here's the kicker: I still am. I'm still thick with sin. The things I don't want to do any more always tempt me, and the guilt I laid aside, laid at the cross, constantly taunts me to jump back in and get filthy. The little things trip me up, I still carry too much junk, I mess up and do wrong far too easily. I'm still a sinner; chief of sinners, in fact.

Know what else? The second half of the verse applies to me too, even more so because I'm a sinner and I've done enough of that that it can be out of control. I've been made righteous and without that I'd just be a six foot pile of nothing. Sometimes, when I'm thick in my sins, I imagine what God must feel in that moment, His shame and sadness at the things I'm doing and that helps me to steel up and say 'no more.' Sometimes, after I've done something wrong, I imagine that same thing, but almost always, hand in hand with that thought, is the thought of Christ here with me, wherever I am, holding out His hand and saying "let me help you." Even in my worst moments, He is always waiting there, beckoning me to come back home to Him and try again, change, do better.

I don't know if it's wrong or not but I have no interest in seeing the downfall of sinners. I am one, and I've been one. Some of the more depraved things a man can do I have done. In the space of my few years I've become someone I did not want to know, and I've been bought back to become someone better. I didn't do it on my own. I had help: God's help and the help of people who loved me, a wife, family, children, friends, fellow believers, even some unbelievers who know me well enough to love me. Please understand that, whatever 'there' is, I've been there, and it isn't always pretty.

Sound familiar? Would that story look familiar if you saw it in your mirror? Knowing that, I don't take glee or happiness in seeing the downfall of sinners. It hurts to watch good people you know living lives of frustration or unhappiness. You can't make someone do it, or believe, and George Strait was right: you can't make a heart love somebody. These days, I don't

enjoy seeing sin thriving in the lives of good people. So many of those people I know have said “there’s got to be a better way.” My friends, you know there is. What are you prepared to do to get rid of that feeling of being slimed?

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 23 January 2012

Discipline your son, and he will give you peace; he will bring delight to your soul. Proverbs 29, verse 17.

One of the prerogatives of writing a blog is that you get to choose the topic matter. With this verse, the Almighty made it easy on me. I'm a proud dad and as such, I'm proud of all three of my kids. I'm proud of my oldest daughter for overcoming odds and doing well in school while working full time and assuming all the burdens of adulthood on her own. I'm proud of the man she is marrying because I think he's the best example of any young man I've ever met; he's diligent, caring, devout, fun, hardworking and devoted. I'm proud of my youngest daughter for working so hard through so many trials of her own, for starting college last week, and for striving to find her own way in the world.

But today I'm honored to say how proud I am of my son. He's 16 and just started his first job. He has always been interested in earning money, and when he got a car for Christmas he took to heart what we'd been saying about "you need to pay for your gas and insurance." A few weeks ago, his future brother in law vouched for him and he landed the job. Since then, he's worked more than a few nights and is eagerly awaiting his first full paycheck. On Saturday night, despite that he had plans and we had things going on in our house, when the restaurant called and asked if he would come in, he didn't hesitate. He suited up and went.

I was SO PROUD of him. He could have stayed at home. We were having a big party at the house (a Bible study, actually) and he could have stayed for the fun. He could have just gone to his room to watch TV and relax (because he had worked hard the night before and was tired from muoy Thai that day). He could have joined in the study like he has several times before. He could have played with the little kids who came with their parents. Instead, he went into work and worked a full shift. His actions brought peace to me; his actions are a delight to my soul.

It isn't as if he suddenly got this inspiration all on his own: it's been building for years. He learned it at home, in church, at school, and from experience. He's a typical young adult: full of words and answers, sometimes mouthy, staying up to late watching DVRs, knowing much more than his parents, acting like school is a bore, wearing baggy pants that are holey and frayed, and he doesn't believe there was such a thing as music before Eminem. He's more interested in his girl friend than in unloading the dishwasher or doing his homework; he's quite content to live in a room where you couldn't find an elephant hiding in all the dirty laundry; he doesn't snack or dine but he does graze through the pantry; he always has a quick retort even when he knows he shouldn't say it.

And none of that really matters very much compared to the solid young man of faith who's emerging from all that typical teenage bluster. He asks to go to our church youth group because he enjoys the company of Christian kids there. On Sunday mornings, he volunteers to help in children's church, helping with both the little kids and the Tweeners. He has learned to manage his grades and work on areas where he needs help despite having severe dyslexia. He has watched other people make mistakes and he has learned from them. His temper has always been harsh but he's learning to channel it, to master it instead of letting it master him. And when you talk with him about serious issues and serious matters, if you talk with him evenly and as the young man he is, he gives serious responses and shows real depth and gravity.

Now he's starting to demonstrate a work ethic that's honorable and good. He's always said he would be a millionaire by the time he hits 25. If he keeps up these habits, maybe he will!

He's my son and I'm intensely proud of the young man he is becoming. When he was a young boy, we weren't severe disciplinarians, but when I look back now I see that I was harder than I should have been. I suppose every parent says "if I knew then what I know now" and now I understand why. If I could, I would be calmer, more reasoned, more controlled in how I disciplined. I would yell less, spank rarely, listen more, love always, not let my frustrations churn into anger. Years ago, I did those things and now I'm not proud of them. There was a better way, but I didn't know how and didn't do well.

Despite this, my son is growing into a spiritual man of substance. More often than not, he says and does things now that make me swell with pride instead of grimace in shame. He learned discipline first at home, but then from his church, his school, and others. He's far from perfect and doesn't pretend to be, but he's mostly disciplined. When I think of all the things that could have gone wrong throughout his life – and all the things that DID go wrong during his life – I shudder at how badly he could have turned out. So far so good, though, and when we pray for him every morning, now his mom and I each pray for him thankfully, glad he is a blessing in our life. He says and does things that make us proud and bring delight to our souls. God has blessed us through our young man, and we're thankful to now be a blessings to him as well.

Yes, his sisters and soon-to-be brother-in-law are delights as well, but this verse isn't talking about them. Yes, it's true that son is still sometimes full of bluster. Just a few days ago, I was talking with someone who said that, during a youth group meeting awhile back, the leader had to call him on his bravado; that's happened before. Rather than copping an attitude, though, my son learned from it and apparently accepted the criticism; listen, adjust, forgive and move forward. That's a recent development. It's a sign of maturing, and it's a good sign indeed. Yes, it's true that getting a job is commonplace; he isn't the first young adult to work. But it is a first for him. Like his sisters, he's taking himself and his life seriously without becoming too gravely serious in the process. To me, that's evidence, proof-positive, that God is hard at work Himself in this extraordinary young man He put into my life.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 24 January 2012

Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint; but blessed is he who keeps the law. Proverbs 29, verse 18.

This isn't a verse about the end of the world; it isn't THAT revelation...and yet it is. It isn't one of those verses that shame you into examining your own motives in life, sort of like guilt-tripping you into realizing you aren't all that and a bag of Fritos...and yet it does. And the verse doesn't really talk about prophecy or things that happened way back in olden Bible times...and yet that's true as well.

What is this verse about? Don't we all keep the law? What is the law this thing is talking about? And what are we blessed if we obey the law? Some exposition is in order.

The revelation the verse is talking about is prophetic. In such a verse, it is talking about something revealed divinely, by God to man. In the times when this was originally written, God revealed Himself both directly and through prophets. He made His will and His words known through His actions and a select few humans. Said humans then had the God-given responsibility to carry God's message to skeptical, unbelieving, even hostile people. So it only follows that, when there is no revelation of God's word, those skeptical, unbelieving, hostile people don't feel bound by God's word. They will do whatever they will. So will you and I. Hold that thought for a minute.

Part II addresses casting off restraint. Does God's revealed word restrain? Yes, yes of course it does. For the weak of spirit, it can be a harsh restraint, limiting behaviors and scolding the conscience. For the strong of spirit it can do the same. The catch is that the more mature you become in God's word, the more you find it is a restraint you willingly accept. It isn't a burden or a set of chains or fences: it is a privilege and a helpful reminder of He who is true love and how He wants to color our lives with it. The people of the Bible saw God in His miracles, then they saw Him through His words, then they saw Him in His Son. Those without restraint saw only scathing hurt; those who accept the discipline of loving restraint saw their hearts washed clean. Hold that thought as well.

Finally, part III of the verse addresses cause and effect of keepings God's revealed laws. It's not just those pesky 10 commandments: it's ALL His lessons of love, His directions on how to live our lives, His exhortations to come back to Him and abandon heathen ways of hurt. Throughout Scripture God spoke of how He would write His commands on the hearts of people, and it wasn't to keep them in line. It was to keep us in love. God knew what his all-too-human prophets didn't (along with those 12 men who abandoned Him in Gesthemene), namely that His love is the reason for His law, and that His law was given in love to bless us throughout our days. Whether it's honoring God Himself, honoring our parents, casting aside our weapons of anger, or loving our neighbors as ourselves, God wrote His love on our hearts so that we might be blessed to know that every time we fell short and were made aware yet again by the law we learned from Him. Blessed is he who keeps God's law because blessed is he who knows he is loved by the keeper of the stars, the great Jehovah. One last request: hold this thought as well.

But don't hold it for too long. Let's recall those held thoughts because I have a question about them: what's changed? The oldest parts of the Bible are between four and five thousand years old; even the newest ones are nearly two thousand. During all that time, despite innovations like airplanes, iPhones, natural gas for cooking and the Guttenburg press, what about people has really changed? Murder is even more rampant than Cain ever could have imagined possible. Rahab the prostitute was hardly the first or last to ply her body as commerce. Conspiracy was nothing new for Judas Iscariot and it's alive and well in our dealings today. Saul (later Paul) was hardly the first or last man to ever arrange the deaths of innocent people? And how about the government of Rome itself, which imprisoned and then murdered followers of Christ: was Rome the last empire to use force and killing to accomplish its purposes?

We're thick with it, you see...just as we're also thick with the ability to share that love of God which He gave us and wants us to share. The people of ancient times didn't have king sized beds, HBO, housecats or Kenmore appliances, but just like us they had blessings, abilities, talents, patience, grace, kindness, forbearance and love: all those things that God gives to us too. In another book, Solomon remarks 'there is nothing new under the sun.' As it was then so it is now. People then were like people now. Left to our own devices, just like our ancestors, we are prone to run amok. We need the caring discipline of God's word to keep from running amok. And when we accept Him in our lives, we are blessed to want to follow Him and give up what made us run amok.

I wasn't alive to witness Solomon's glory; I wasn't alive to see John's revelation on Patmos. Those men aren't alive today either, waiting for the new season of Mad Men to start. But even though the houses are different, the foods different, technology different and even our language, calendar and use of time different, the people back then aren't so different

from the people in our world today. The purpose of the verse is multi-fold, and what it says has different meanings depending on your point of view and perceptions. The God Himself who gives the verse has been unchanging, though, since before the verses were written centuries ago.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 25 January 2012

I am the most ignorant of men; I do not have a man's understanding. I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One. Who has gone up to heaven and come down? Who has gathered up the wind in the hollow of his hands? Who has wrapped up the waters in his cloak? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and the name of his son? Tell me if you know! Proverbs 30, verses 2 – 4.

I'm skipping ahead a few verses to cite some from the next (to last) chapter of Proverbs. I want to commemorate a special day. Twenty-one years ago today my oldest child, my daughter Gretchen, came into this world. Today, she's old enough to buy her first legal drink: a milestone so many of us anticipate, and it's satisfying for a moment. It's a fun birthday, and there's something satisfying in being able to finally take your place anywhere as a peer among adults, partaking in a ritual of adulthood. Once you buy the drink, though, it's past. The next milestone on life's calendar is nine years from today, and who knows what will happen in those nine years?

What I do know is what's happened in the last twenty-one. They've been eventful. We've lived in two countries and three US states. In 1991, I was a buck sergeant in the US Air Force; today I'm an overpaid healthcare consultant writing a blog about the Proverbs. Gretchen was born in Bedford, Indiana during the early days of the Gulf War, a few months after the Soviet Union disappeared and long before hope and change became political rhetoric to ridicule. She was born in Bedford because we lived overseas and, because Desert Shield had closed down the military hospitals in Germany to US dependents. Her mom and I didn't want her born in an Italian hospital, so my wife flew back home to Indiana during the fall of 1990. A few months later, I was able to be there to see my little girl draw her first breath.

All these years later, my little girl is all grown up. I'm very proud of her for the solid young woman she's become. She's hard-working, dedicated, loving, fun, and she still roots for Indiana's pro football team (or at least for Peyton Manning). On this important milestone day, I want her to remember the verses above so they may serve as a theme for the next twenty one years (when she turns 42, she'll be younger than I am now...and I'll be in my late sixties).

The world is much more than we know and we can't know even a small fraction of it alone. In a lifetime, we can learn much and still be ignorant if we know not God. Our ways are not His ways for His ways don't include our sins. But His ways redeem us from our sins, and His ways lead to another twenty one years (and another after that and more after that and so on until we come to the place where time no longer exists). My young lady is in college now, studying to become a teacher while working as a pre-school teacher full time. She teaches little children how to behave, count, socialize and be good kids.

Her biggest calling, though, is to serve as the example to them of how to live in love, God's love. All else that she has learned in life, will learn, or will ever teach matters little compared to this love. It's true, that kids learn useful things in school, and I thank God Gretchen is answering the honorable calling to lend her talents in teaching others. Yet that calling is to not just teach the three R's, but also to teach how to use them in fulfilling others' lives in their mission of learning to love God. To do that, one need not teach Sunday School, postulate online about Proverbs or Bible verses, or wear a breadboard on a street corner. Those things work, but they aren't necessary and I can't see her doing them at this age anyway.

Instead, part of her mission, her calling, will be to teach God's love through living it out in her life. Holding a child who needs a hug, instructing on how to live selfless but disciplined lives, teaching others to love without expecting anything back, and how to become good citizens without betraying what you believe in are all part of that. They're part of living out Christian love that will assume a more important place in her life the older she becomes. Sharing it through practical faith, through tangible grace, will be more important than grading all the papers for all the students in all the grades ahead. That's not to say those things aren't important, just that this Divine love is more.

After all, there truly is so much more to the world, to this life, than we know. Who among us can recount the amazing things in verses 2 through 4? Even when we know, we are not God, and we cannot be. All that we know here, all that we learn of the world and learn to teach about it is just a glimmer of what we know in God and what is to come in Him. Today is a day in which my daughter (and all of us) can stand next to other adults and enjoy a fruit of maturity. In a larger sense, today is a blessing to stand as a member of God's kingdom, to share the Savior's love, and enjoy much more fulfilling fruit. To live, then, in reverence for the God who lovingly gives us this life and the marvels in it is the greatest calling of all.

It's a greater calling than simply buying your first legal margarita.

But that's something we'll probably do tonight. We're having a family dinner at a very good Brazilian restaurant down in Addison. The kids have never been there, but their mom and I have, and we're going to share the experience with oldest daughter on her special day. Yes, part of it will be going to the bar to order that first legal drink, and that's a good thing to celebrate. Enjoying the fruits of adulthood – along with the fruit of the vine – is a blessing of time and circumstance. It is my hope and intention, though, that she would learn these other more important lessons that are the real fruits of life, then that she would live them out and pass them on to the children in her care. To do that would be honorably answering the highest calling of all. Happy birthday, Gretchen Marie, God bless you, and I love you.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 26 January 2012

A servant cannot be corrected by mere words; though he understands, he will not respond. Proverbs 29, verse 19.

We are to be servants and God works through all things. Just before He was crucified, Jesus taught His disciples the lesson of being servants, imploring them to live their lives (and shape their hearts) as servants. He wanted them to know it wasn't about them, and that to live they must die to the world. To be given a gift of living love they must give the loving gift of serving to others. In this, God was at work in their hearts and lives; tangible grace in its most perfect form.

After His resurrection, Christ kept telling them "Peace be with you." I don't know exactly how many times this phrase is recorded in the Gospels, but it seems like every time He greeted them as the resurrected Savior, He greeted them by imparting peace into their lives. He didn't say "how's it goin, guys" and He didn't say "love ya bunches." He said "peace be with you."

In other words, He wanted them to be servants and to have peace in living like that. He wanted this for them knowing that servants need more than just words to keep them on the straight and narrow. Servants need training, feedback, and sometimes correction. It isn't reasonable to expect that you can hire the help and just throw them into the job without setting expectations. Even a well trained worker needs to know what's expected, and what the boundaries are for performance and behavior. Everyone needs feedback now and then to know if they're meeting expectations or if correction is in order. In this there is constructive resolution; in this there can be peace.

The verse is saying that, saying that we need to say more than just "good job" or "you messed that up." If you want service to a set of standards, you need to communicate those standards. You need to establish the standards, communicate expectations about them, and periodically enforce them. That means measuring performance, communicating progress, and then evaluating results. Yes, I know these are fancy consultant buzzwords that seem like management theory; that's true. They're also the process for enforcing standards and evaluation whether you're inspecting nuclear weapons preparedness or common cleanliness in the coffee klatsch.

Christ knew this. He knew it because He understood His disciples and us. He knew it because He inspired this verse. Christ knew that if we wanted to talk the talk we needed to walk the walk. He knew that He wanted to grow His church in our hearts and that, to do that, His followers would need to minister as servants, not just as popes, ordained clergy, or called ministers on stage leading worship pep rallies. He knew that His words would be the inspiring fuel, but that occasionally servants would need evaluation and correction.

In a past life, I was a standards inspector. One of my jobs in the Air Force was to serve on an inspection team, visiting field units and inspecting their operations, standards, and training programs. We inspected against sets of universal regulations, looking at paperwork, evaluating line crews performing their jobs, observing tasks, and asking questions. Most of the time you were able to say, "good job. No problems noted." Some of the time, however, you found discrepancies. When that happened, you needed to research how and why it occurred because, if there was a genuine error, you needed to have your story straight. Without fail, when you found an error, you also had to provide some kind of corrective action. Corrective training, decertification, fixing paperwork, additional training, filing reports, etcetera: the actions depended on the error. If you think about it, though, this process is an extension of the verse, understanding that servants need more than just words. I suppose that someone, somewhere could use this verse to justify physical punishment, and perhaps that would be a bastardizing misconstruing of the verse. God in His Scriptures corrects living people, but punishes with death. To punish a servant isn't the way of the Word, but to provide correction is. In this, God can be at work through us, growing His kingdom and reaping glory.

Last night, we celebrated my daughter's birthday by slaying the fatted calf at Fogo De Chao. If you've never been to one of these Brazilian places, it's an upscale steakhouse where you can dine on some pretty high-powered food; vegetarians beware: beef, chicken, lamb, pork and seafood abound. Each diner is given a red and green disk, and the place is full of servers, servants of a kind if you will. When you want meat, you turn your disk to the green side and the servers rush to your table with long skewers on which is served the cooked meat. They carve off portions for you, and you get to dine on some of the most delectable meat you'll ever have; did I say vegetarians beware? I didn't see any of the servers carrying around skewers of tofu.

As we sat at the table, gorging on delectably roasted animals, I thought about this verse. The servers in any restaurant are there to provide you with what you want. In a way, the red and green disks are a kind of standard. They tell the servers whether to come or go and how often. I watched a group of twelve diners next to us as a swarm of gauchos with swords of beef descended on that table. Our server mostly abandoned us for them. I suppose I can't blame him because gratuity was built into the bill for parties over six, and that table surely must have had a tab of over \$1200 considering the food and drinks we saw. The servers there stood to make quite a haul.

We didn't get bad service, and our tip was quite healthy, so I'm thinking the folks who took care of us did ok. As mentioned, gratuity was built into the check, but I'm usually a generous tipper beyond that, especially if I'm traveling on someone else's expense account (too bad I wasn't last night!). I didn't leave our server much extra because he had chosen someone else over our table, but then I thought that I didn't really provide him with much feedback. Other than turning over the food disks, I didn't say or do much to set expectations or enforce standards. When the server left, I didn't speak up to him and say "hey what about us?" We were nearly finished anyway, so it wasn't that big of a deal. Still, we are to be servants in all things, and I see that I could have done a better job of serving my server who was serving my family. Perhaps this is the way in all things, and perhaps that's what I'm supposed to remember from the incident and this verse. Let there be peace in that, and peace be with you through it.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 27 January 2012

Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him. Proverbs 29, verse 20.

Think before you speak. Politicians need to remember this. Healthcare consultants need to remember this. Parent of teenagers need to remember this. Teenagers texting or online need to remember this. Teachers need to remember this.

Ok, everybody got it? Thanks for reading!

Really? Have you ever known me to not be verbose?

This is about judgment. It's about thinking before you speak. I'm a big one for making too many quick retorts or responding too quickly. I don't mind saying that I have a quick wit, and that I usually have a good comeback for almost anything someone can say to me. This can be a gift. Coming up with the words isn't the problem. It's lack of judgment in using them. Shrek could have been talking to me: "Donkey, you HAVE the right to remain silent. What you lack is the capacity."

Especially online. Just this morning, I saw a bit on the local news talking about Twitter and Facebook. It was about how people say things online that they might not usually say in person. How true. I find it easier to make comments online, to post opinions, links to things I think are important, or glib remarks if I do it online. It's really easy to do those things before putting much thought into it about what the other person might think. Yes, Dave/Donkey can sometimes run on at the mouth in person, but it's much easier – and a greater temptation for foolishness and ungodliness – online, where you can live within whatever personality you manufacture. True, it's not good to come off as a prude; some 'goody two shoes prude who has Jesus and faith but doesn't live in the real world.' The key is in being yourself, in presenting yourself as you are: an honest, interesting, vivacious person whose faith is a gift, not a burden, and who doesn't let the ways of the world drag them down any longer; someone who has something to say but shouldn't let that hurt other peoples' feelings. Online is something to watch out for.

I think it was about 2 years ago that my friend, Travis, brought up a good idea. One week, he decided to think before he spoke. Real 'duh' moment there, eh? It was for me. His idea was that, when someone asked him "how was your week," he would take a few moments, think it over, and then respond. His responses were better reasoned this way, and they came across as more genuine because, in fact, they were. He said it was hard to get used to doing, but that it helped him be more genuine and respond in a godly manner.

Brilliant advice, I think, especially if you're like me and prone to engaging the mouth before engaging the brain. As with other subjects, this is nothing new; we've talked about it here before. The angle for it now, however, is observing how it's better for fools than for even wise men who respond in haste. I remember working a decade ago with a woman who would respond within seconds to anything you said. It was shallow and annoying. And there was the NCO with whom I worked in Maryland and then later in Italy. He was insecure and always had a quick response. There was the know-it-all family member who couldn't let you get in the last word. There was the minister who always had a condescending answer, making me feel I was never good enough. And there was the woman I once knew, who could have been a kindred spirit to that minister, never letting me feel as if I was good enough or had been around enough, done enough, to rise to her standards.

I remember all these people and then I step back to see that, sometimes, I'm like them. If I don't watch myself, I can act like that. Gotta work on that. Gotta continually be a work in progress with this. Gotta remember that the way to address this is to keep coming back to the Cross and remembering that all this is paid for, but to do better I need forgiveness. Then it's just a matter of doing it. After all, the cure for the common sin is Christ.

When you put it that way, there isn't much left to say!

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 30 January 2012

If a man pampers his servant from youth, he will bring grief in the end. Proverbs 29, verse 21.

In many ways, high standards are what it's all about. I spent 11 years on active duty in the Air Force (and another 2 in the Reserves after that). Most of the work habits that I still use today are carried over from things I learned way back then. My career is now in healthcare consulting; I keep the cost of your healthcare high. When I started working in the 1980s, I worked in signals collection, and I didn't imagine I would end up working in what I do now. I didn't even know this career field existed. Yet the habits I learned wearing my green fatigues have served me well and are ones I still use today.

For instance, I still seek mentors. In my AF career, I sought out a number of them. One taught me how to develop training. Another taught me how to lead with integrity and command others. Another taught me the basics of collection and how to be a crew chief. Yet another taught me the basics of software development and still another how to deal with people fairly and honestly. I've worked for seven different companies since leaving the military, and in each I have sought out some kind of mentor. When I go someplace new, I seek to find men and women who do things well, who seem to understand how things work, and I try to model my work habits around theirs. I've consistently found that these people hold themselves and their work to very high standards.

Another habit is to hold myself responsible for myself and my work. Sometimes that means being super-critical, even perfectionist, about how I do things. I see how good people do things and I push myself to rise to their level. Sometimes that means honing in on details; sometimes it means focusing on strategy or a bigger picture. Either way, it's a matter of holding myself to higher standards and doing my best on every task instead of just a few or just the ones with visibility.

I learned these habits from others; they didn't come naturally, and it didn't happen overnight. The mentoring started at home, continued in school, and was put into practice in the workplace, reinforced in friendships and relationships. I didn't know it at the time, but this is a Godly thing to do, and a God-given blessing.

It's a God-given blessing because, if you read the verse again, you see that it's talking about these kinds of things, about upholding those standards, about setting good expectations and working hard to meet them. It addresses both sides of upholding those standards. First there is the mentor – the man – who should hold his servant – the person he's mentoring – to high standards. Pampering means being soft, not being unduly harsh. One can be fair and just while still holding very high standards. Demanding the best of people need not mean being a jerk, or a rough boss. In my experience, the best bosses (and mentors) are those who hold to high standards without compromising on them, but understand that it takes people to make those standards work. They teach and work with you, pushing you to rise to your highest level while not letting you slack off unnecessarily. They do this because they understand that compromising on those high standards will only mean grief.

The verse also talks about the other end, namely that of the servant. A servant serves; duh! A servant needs to learn, to heed instruction, to pay attention, and to be willing. Slaves can be compelled; servants can be taught. If you're a servant, you know you're in the employ (sometimes indentured even) of someone who has great sway over you. Without instruction, without guidelines and expectations, you won't please 'the man.' If you don't please 'the man,' 'the man' can make your life hard. In the long run, nobody really wants to do shoddy work. Nobody likes to preside over junk. If you can avoid bad work, bad living, bad anything and reap rewards by doing so, don't most people want to do this because, well, it's the best choice?

And doesn't that describe some of our motivation in understanding the lives God wants us to live? After all, God really is 'the man.' Bingo!

Not all the lessons I learned in Uncle Sam's service were good ones. People who knew me then would rightfully say I was rude, crass, profane, obsessed, sometimes ignorant and bull-headed. I also like to think that more than a few would also say I was good at my job, and that I served well. Both views are true, and from both I learned valuable lessons. The men who mentored me didn't pamper me, and I appreciated that. They held my fellow airmen and I to high standards, and we became good at what we did. When I look around at the military plaques on my love-me wall, I'm proud to have served, and proud to have learned under such good people. In the mission field of a now-missional life, theirs was the hardest mission of all.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 31 January 2012

An angry man stirs up dissension, and a hot-tempered one commits many sins. Proverbs 29, verse 22.

I can't think of a better lesson to teach kids than this one: kids, control your anger. You'll get angry, you'll lose your temper, you'll sometimes blow a stack, and sometimes that's ok. Sometimes that's even justified and healthy. Just don't let it make you angry forever. Don't let anger turn you into someone you were never intended to be. You were never intended to be someone who keeps grudges or breeds discord. You weren't intended to be someone who is angry all the time, angry even when good things are happening in your life. Keep your anger in check and make sure you only get angry when you should.

That's good advice because an angry man stirs up dissension and a hot-tempered one commits many sins. This is one of those common sense observations that even atheists could embrace. Think about groups you've joined, or teams you've been on, work, church, family. Have you ever known that grumpy old uncle who just couldn't get along with anyone? Or there's the person at work who just can't seem to say anything good about his co-workers? I was once a hotel clerk and I used to work with a guy there who just didn't have anything good to say about anyone else. He was nice to the customers, though he could also be curt. But if you tried talking with him behind the desk, he would complain about the rest of us, and the manager, and how he could run the place better than any of the people who actually did. I tried to befriend him and hang out together outside of work, but he was simply too negative. When I left Indiana, I lost track of him and don't know what became of him. I sometimes wonder what good all that negativity, pessimism and anger really did for him.

My son used to have a really short fuse; I think I've written about this before. And I don't mind writing about it now because he's growing up and has learned (or is learning) how to channel that anger. He grew up with two older sisters who enjoyed picking on him, and parents who sometimes babied him too much. Something small would set him off and he would throw record tantrums, or scream, or become sullen. We used to say that he was being a little ball of hate, and it was unfortunately true. Maturing has taught him much about how to relate to others; that was inevitable. He's also learned how to keep his temper under control, to walk away and cool down, not fighting every battle, learning to pick and choose what's worth fighting for.

He learned that hot temper at home, mostly from me; I've said this before as well. His grandparents taught his parents impatience, how to yell instead of calmly confront, and how to overreact and control instead of being pro-active and not enabling. I suspect that most parents, when they're facing the empty nest years, reflect on what they wish they had done better. Both my wife and I say that we wish we had yelled less, not been so emotional, been more faith-filled and calm. I like to think that this would have had a good effect on all three of our kids, but especially our son.

I think about this a lot these days, especially since he's the only kid left at home. We're blessed that his sisters live nearby and we see them quite often, but Son Terry is the only one of the chicks left in the nest. With only two years of high school left, I want to use our remaining time to mentor him, to train and teach him that he will always have a temper but that it need not temper him. He doesn't have to let it out all the time. He can learn to channel it effectively, use it to positive effect. It can energize and focus him in righteous ways instead of exploding indiscriminate hatred. Son doesn't need to be a man who stirs up dissension.

I don't want him to grow up to be a hot-tempered man who commits many sins. It's hard enough to grow up these days without taking on additional burdens. Smart aleck remarks can lead to fights; a bull-headed demeanor usually leads to nothing good. And if you store up your anger, it builds into depression and resentments that eventually burst out. If you think about it, anger really does lead to many sins, and I'm betting many of them are unintended. Ever punched a wall in anger? Or lied about something, gone off sullen and harsh? Have you ever had revenge sex, or said things that weren't true just to hurt someone who hurt you? You know that Christ said being angry at someone or hating them is the equivalent to murder, that wishing someone was dead or hating them is the same as actually killing them. That's a sobering thought.

I've done the things I described above. They totally suck. They started with at least some modicum of unresolved or unchecked anger. For too many years I carried around anger at small slights, past wrongs, or even unintended actions that happened to me. They festered as resentment, then depression, then manifestation. I don't want my son to live like that, harboring anger whatever its source. There is a better way. It isn't hard to learn, and it teaches you that anger never lasts but Divine love does. It has taken me a lifetime to learn this, to understand it. I want better for my son.

Last Friday, we watched the "Courageous" movie. I'd seen it before: my wife and I went to see it last fall. The theme of the movie is how to be a Godly father, that we only have so long to help teach and train our kids for a lifetime of Godly living. As a father, it's my special privilege to get to do this with my kids, with the young men and women they bring into their lives, and some day to my grandchildren. From now on, one of the first things I hope they will remember about me is that I learned how to hold my temper, and then how to love through it. I'm hopeful they will learn to let the angers evaporate, leaving only the love to share.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 1 February 2012

A man's pride brings him low, but a man of lowly spirit gains honor. Proverbs 29, verse 23.

I regularly pray for humility because I really need to and I really need it.

In my current project, I'm the lead. I'm leading a small team, planning out the implementation of the new ICD-10 diagnosis and procedure codes. We're working at a small health plan in Minnesota. You may not know it but, if you go to the doctor, this year that doctor and his staff will be getting ready to start using a new set of diagnosis codes. That may not seem like a big deal, but behind the desk, it means quite a lot of work. Every time you see your doctor, they write a diagnosis code on your worksheet (that eventually becomes a claim, which they send to your insurance company or the government or both). The codes they use have been around since the 1960s, but that's all drastically changing next year, and it will take over a year to prepare and implement the change. Consultants like me plan out that kind of work, then help doctors and insurers get it done.

Much of my work is "aneal (deliberately misspelled):" mundane, arcane, insane. In this particular change, expanding a set of codes from 7000 to over 160,000, the devil truly is in the details. One wrong code and many thousands of dollars (and much back-office work) will be wrongly allocated. The AMA is estimating it will cost every doctor in the nation \$83,000 to upgrade to ICD-10, and the Federal government is forcing them to do so. If we don't do our work correctly, things will go wrong, and that will eventually affect you, Ms. or Mr. Patient, because your claims won't pay correctly and things cost you much more. Those mundane, arcane, and insane details matter; I bet you can say something similar about what you do for a living.

The thing I like about this kind of work is that, when you do something well, it really goes well. When you do the right analysis, make the right and well-reasoned decisions, or help people in the right way, things fall into place. That's a heady feeling, and I'm proud of when I get it. I relish the feeling of doing something well, of meeting high standards (we talked about that just the other day), of getting praise for that job well done. You know me: there's never enough time for me to stand in the spotlight, especially when I've earned my time there.

That's where the potential for problems begins. It's so easy to get the big head, especially when you have produced results, but that's unGodly. Dizzy Dean said it best: "It's not bragging if you can do it." There's nothing wrong with righteous pride in accomplishments or abilities, but there's everything wrong with too much pride. Too much pride can drag you down, make you arrogant, create blind spots. It creates blind spots because the prideful and arrogant lose sight of small things, and those small things can trip you up. The devil is waiting in the details: he works best through them, creating doubt in our minds, creating little crises or problems that keep us from focusing on what God would have us do instead.

I'm proud of what I do, but all too often I've let it tear me down instead. I've lost my perspective, then lost sight of the details, and then I've lost control. When that happened, I've lost friendships, lost the respect of co-workers, even lost jobs. That's no way to live your life. It just means you feel like a loser.

News flash: God doesn't think we're losers. He loved, lived, died, and still loves & lives because He wants us to win. He wants our pride to be in Him and the grace-full love He gives. Our greatest accomplishment comes every day when He wraps His arms around us and says "you're extra special to me. I've got you." When that happens, we gain honor. And we gain honor by humbly loving God.

So these days I'm finding that it's satisfying to follow another path. I'm learning that there's something to be proud of in being humble. I've said before how that isn't my strongest suit, but I'm finding it's a comfortable suit to wear. I'm learning to take compliments but leave it at 'thank you.' I'm learning to think well of my abilities and achievements, but to view them in perspective of bigger pictures and other things going on around me. I'm seeing these things as paving stones on the road of a long journey instead of the destination itself. Despite what I'm learning and seeing, I know now, once again, that it's not about me. Most of all, I'm proud of what I do in the context of being grateful to be able to serve in this way, being grateful for talents and challenges given to me, and being grateful to be forgiven and to share that no matter what.

When you see what you do in that kind of light, it becomes easier to be humble. And when you're humble, you pray for more humility. You pray in thanks for the love, the people, the life you're given, and you pray to remain humbly grateful and Godly confident in these things. That kind of pride is good to have. That kind of pride humbly brings honor back into your life. Praise God for these blessings.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 2 February 2012

The accomplice of a thief is his own enemy; he is put under oath and dare not testify. Proverbs 29, verse 24.

Other versions of the Bible don't say "is his own enemy." Other versions say "hates his own soul." The 'original' King James version of the verse is, "Whoso is partner with a thief hateth his own soul: he heareth cursing, and bewareth it not." That's pretty heady language. Hate is a word we shouldn't throw around lightly. I hate Mondays; I hate cauliflower; I hate Fox News; I hate my clothes; I hate sheets that aren't Egyptian cotton; I hate this show; I hate my job: do we really hate these kinds of things or are we being too dramatic, trivializing a word that isn't meant for trivia?

Can you hate your own soul? Absolutely. Can you hate bed sheets? I'm guessing hyperbole. But your soul and what grieves it? Yes we can (and that isn't hope you can believe in).

See, you can't be a person of conscience and do something like covering up someone else's crimes and not hate your own soul. It just doesn't work that way; we aren't wired for that. It's bad enough to do things that you know are wrong and regret, but to know and condone someone else's indiscretions chips away at your soul. It erodes your integrity, gnaws at your sense of right and wrong. It's like a thread that the enemy can use against you, pulling it to unravel the fabric of what makes you into you. Should it be any surprise, then, that you would hate your own soul if you helped someone else feed their pet sins?

Yes, I know the verse talks only about thieves, but isn't all sin stealing? Just as all sin is idolatry, murder, disobedience and coveting, I've come to see all sin as a form of stealing. We steal goodness. We steal the righteousness, reputation, or something else from other people, and we try to steal it from God. Bad language? Stealing decency. Adultery? Stealing fidelity. Hatred? Stealing peace and love. Lying? Stealing the truth. See the pattern? At the very least, when we do wrong, we sully God in the eyes of men. Our sins make us thieves. I've always thought most thieves secretly despise themselves because stealing is the physical manifestation of envy. Is it any wonder that thieves and those who help them would hate who they have become inside?

And what about that part about being under oath. It's true, and in the view that all sin is stealing, I think it sounds so much more condemning. I've never been sworn to oath in a trial, but I have given depositions, and I have sworn other oaths and taken vows. In violating those vows or oaths, I immediately knew the depth of my guilt. Sometimes it was more than I could bear. Again, you can't be a person of conscience, even a dulled or bruised conscience, and not feel the weight of your wrongs. If you're confronted, what will you say? When the truth comes out, it will hurt a lot. If you keep quiet, you're tortured in silence. If you aren't asked at all, then you've doubled down on your stress. It's a no-win situation.

Perhaps the best option is simply to not play the game. Perhaps the best option is a better way. You know what that is. Hope and change apart from God are simply meaningless political rhetoric. In God they are the promise of life. We don't have to steal; we can turn from our sins and learn from them. The cure for the common sin is Christ, and in Christ all things are possible. Hatred can be turned to love; thievery to giving; despair to rejoicing; guilt to innocence. Does that mean that getting Jesus in your life makes everything better? Actually, yes it does, and if you examine your life and your feelings, I believe you'll admit that truth. Maybe it starts with your outlook, or peace of mind. Perhaps He gives you love to heal your soul's hurt. It could be that He'll give you the strength to overcome your pet temptations and turn from your own sins. How He works on you will probably be different from how He works on me, but He works all the same. God Immanuel isn't some wish factory, but He is real power in a real world.

And He can turn your heart and hand from stealing and enabling those who do. He did for me. John Lennon was only partly right: Give Him a chance, for He is real peace. He is peace for those who would steal and those whose hearts have been stolen. Take Him and take yours back.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 3 February 2012

Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe. Proverbs 29, verse 25.

When was the last time you avoided doing something because of fear? I'm not asking whether or not you're afraid of things but I did ask when you last avoided doing something because you were afraid? Read the verse again and then ask yourself why that matters.

It matters because it's an important distinction. It's important because I believe everybody is afraid of something, and some things are good to be afraid of, but none of our fears are necessary. Still, we each have pet fears; mine are different from yours. For instance, I am still afraid of being alone. Even though I know I'm never alone, and even though my marriage is so much improved over what it was just a very short time ago, I still find myself feeling afraid of being alone. I spend ¼ of every year, and 4 of 7 days of each week alone in far away cities. It's an irrational fear, and talks, communication, regular devotions, personal study time and these words all help alleviate that feeling. But some times when I can't sleep, I lie in my hotel bed and realize that I'm afraid of being alone without another heart to love.

Another fear I have is being afraid of the dark. I'm a grown man. I've been trained to take care of myself physically and emotionally. I can handle myself in a fight, and with good reason I can say that strangers would have greater reason to fear an unknown me than I would have to fear them. I can handle myself. Yet I'm afraid of the dark. I don't like to walk down dark streets, and I don't like driving lonely highways at night. When I'm in the house I like to have lights on because there seems to be comfort in the light. I sleep in the dark, but when I'm awake in the night, I like to be where it is lit. Again, it's an irrational fear because even the dark is full of God's presence. Were I in solitary confinement in a dark, closed off cell I would still have no reason to feel afraid because even there God would be very much with me.

And failure: I'm afraid of failure. When you've been in a dying marriage, when you've been fired from jobs, when you have lost work and felt unsure of yourself, and when you've felt the world of depression closing in around you, you realize how failure can soak you to the bone. This is perhaps the most understandable fear of all my fears. It's almost justifiable...almost. I rarely failed courses in school; I don't think I ever brought home anything lower than a D in 13 years of grade school. There simply was the expectation with my parents that neither my sister nor I would fail, that it was beneath us to fail, especially in school. Our parents weren't punishing for low grades, but they were disdainful and cold about it, almost bordering on arrogance. Since school came easily to me, I rarely had to struggle to achieve. I threw myself into it to avoid friendships because we moved around quite a lot. Years later, when I finally did fail at other things, it was spectacular; shattering even. Working in corporate America, where you have to fight for work and for your time in the sun, my fear of failure manifests as perfectionism, intolerance, and restlessness. Those aren't always healthy traits.

I think you see that verse resonates with me and I hope it does with you as well. You have your own fears. Fears are evidence of the places where our faith, our trust, could be weakest. They may be your kid fears, the things that fed the monster under the bed or the ghouls in the closet. Adulthood, maturity, and short-sightedness sometimes rationalize our fears away, telling us that our misbehavior as adults is an expression of inward-focused fears. There's truth in that, you see, as old as Solomon and this verse.

Fear can be a warning sign, but fear can be a lie. Fear can be a deception meant to hide you from something good. Fear can be a very effective weapon of spiritual warfare used against us by the serpent who was craftier than all the other creatures. After all, as King Solomon was divinely inspired in another book, there is nothing new under the sun. And because that is still true, just as it was in Eden, today fear can be a trap to keep you where you are. The devil doesn't attack us where we are strong: he attacks where we are weak. He uses our fears and our weak spots against us, trapping us in the other traps he's already sprung on us, convincing us to hold back when we should advance.

How do we avoid the snare? Trust in God. It isn't that tough. After all this talk about what fear is and why it's so difficult, the solution to it really is very simple. Trust in the LORD. Trusting in the LORD will keep you safe. Fine lot of good that will do for the soldier driving along the road in Kabul, or the mule trying to cross the border at night, or the suburban housewife who lives in fear of her husband, or the husband who lives in fear of losing his job. Or you or me. Fine bit of good that is, you know. Really?

Really not. Really not because the way to face your fears and overcome them is to trust in God. God doesn't give lottery tickets or luck: He provides patience, strength and confidence. More than that, an active relationship with Him provides

peace. In my experience, that inner peace is the key to overcoming one's fears and replacing chaos with outward peace. When we trust in what God says about loving us, forgiving us, making us alive, replacing our angst with peace and our anger with joy, we are empowered. Suffering, perseverance, character, hope: see Romans 5 for what that means, but they are actions in which trust in God is key to turning human suffering into both temporal and eternal hope. Then read Romans 8 about being more than just conquerors: more than conquerors of the things that vex us, and that starts with our fears.

With God in my life, it's getting easier to face my fears. Like I said, there are some things that it's good to be afraid of. If I'm living a life of riskiness or deceit, then I have good reason to fear the consequences because they will be dire. But if I trust in the LORD to renew me, then I can have the inner stuff to change my habits in that life and own up to the risk and lies. When I trust in the LORD, He lives through me to turn those things around, keep me safe, and empower me to do better. It always works; that's His promise, and the proof is in the pudding. And it really isn't too tough after all. The tough part comes when you realize that, the bigger the sins with which you're dealing, the bigger attack you are under. God in you must be pretty valuable if the enemy works so hard to try to hit you in the chinks and bring you down. Believe it or not, knowing that makes it even easier to face my fears and get back in the fight to conquer.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 6 February 2012

Many seek an audience with a ruler, but it is from the LORD that man gets justice. Proverbs 29, verse 26.

I'm not litigious by nature; are you? Like many folks, I've watched courtroom dramas, and I've heard the statement that we've become a litigious society, that we're quick to run to the courts to resolve disputes that our ancestors would have accepted without the aid of attorneys. Perhaps that's true. But I don't watch Judge Judy, and I have only had a few brushes with our system of jurisprudence. Several times I've been to court proceedings to be there for others; once I had someone arrested; more than once I've had to go pay tickets. And in college I spent a day auditing trials in a criminal court in Cupertino. I've had to deal with the courts on a few other matters, but I've never been on a jury, and though I've been through jury duty several times, I've never been selected. Still, I have seen that the system is complex and busy.

Notice that this verse doesn't take the pop culture exit and say "everyone seeks an audience." It says 'many.' Perhaps that's why I don't have much experience with the court system. Maybe it means I don't lead a very eventful life, or that I'm a clean Marine. So be it. Yet don't we ALL still seek justice? Wrongs have indeed entered our lives, sometimes by our own hands, sometimes now. We seek justice for them. I think you've seen this is a common theme throughout the Proverbs: seeking justice. It's mentioned time and again. Don't we all seek to be understood, to have 'fairness' set back in place, be vindicated? Authorities have been instituted in our lives for reason, and we seek redress for grievances through them. That's the system and it's why we have it. Despite what the utopians want us to believe, man is imperfect and can't be made perfect. We mess things up and as long as we have skin we'll always have sin.

The best we can do is seek justice when others wrong us. Those wrongs obviously don't make a right, but we crave to have our grievances, legitimate and otherwise, addressed. Yet the verse today says that only God can dispense real justice. The more you know God the more this makes sense. Our system of justice is imperfect; ask anyone who's been through it (and even those of us who, as I mentioned, haven't dealt much with it). We need processes, procedures, protocol for us to weave our way through things. We need attorneys to argue our case; we need judges to be impartial (and that can be a struggle); we need detailed laws to specify behavior; we need legal protections from the tendency of government and authority to be oppressive.

God needs none of that, and I think that's one of the reasons why it's hard for some to grasp God. To those watching Him from the outside (instead of in a relationship with Him), I suppose God looks imperious, overbearing, even selfish. Who is God to set Himself up as God over us? Who is He to tell us what to do? I think a little kid might say it as "you're not the boss of me!" Who is God to be over us?

The mysterious answer to all that is the same one He gave to Moses. He simply is. "I AM" is what He called Himself. Not Yahweh, Jehovah or even just God or Eli Manning. When Moses asked God for His name so that the Israelites might know, God replied "I AM has sent me to you." He simply is. Again, from the outside looking in, it would appear that this imperious being sets Himself up as deity, judge and jury. From a human perspective, that's even an understandable statement. It's also misleading, because the closer you get to God, you see that the Great I AM is pure love, and that this pure love is holy and blameless. He doesn't need the rules, laws, and justice to keep His love holy: we do. We're the imperfect ones, and so that we might be brought back to His love, we need the boundaries of the law to show us when we've been imperfect. God doesn't need a courtroom to do that.

But for our understanding, He uses one. He uses our understanding of courts and justice to model what He does for us. His holiness says "your choices have led you to do wrong. I'm holy and can't tolerate that if you're going to be in complete union with me." The more you read Scripture, the more you see that's God's primary goal: to bring us into union with Him, so that He can share this perfect love with us. But we've messed it up with our junk. So He set up the rules. What's more, to account for our wrongs, to bring us back into right with His courtroom, He gives us the ultimate attorney, Christ. Christ not only argues our case, but accepted our legal consequences before we could even walk into the courtroom. God judges us, God finds us lacking, God argues our case, God accepted our damnation and took it. Instead of looking at us with imperious, sobbing eyes at how badly we've fallen short, God looks through Christ at us and sees perfect love. Our dispute with the court is settled and we're no longer free to go away: we're made just and now free to go to Him forever.

Try getting that from Judge Judy.

And I don't even watch Judge Judy. Or any of the other legal reality shows. In fact, I don't watch much legal TV at all. Quite honestly, I find it dull every year when the new TV schedules come out and, yet again, there are more shows about

cops, doctors, and lawyers. Good for you if you enjoy them; do so with my blessing. It's not for me; not my cup of tea. Maybe that's because I haven't had much in-depth experience with the courts other than my civil matters. Or maybe it's because I don't worry about those kinds of things now. I don't need to. I know that, if the time comes, there are systems in place to handle earthly matters. More importantly, though, I know that, WHEN the time comes, there is a Savior in place who already atoned for my earthly and earthy matters and will welcome me home to the place of perfect justice. It's the same for you, and other litigants, and even Judge Judy as well.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 7 February 2012

The righteous detest the dishonest; the wicked detest the upright. Proverbs 29, verse 27.

Yin and yang: at least on the surface, that's what this verse seems like. Because the righteous detest the dishonest, the wicked detest the upright. Because the dishonest detest the righteous, the upright detest the wicked. One feeds off the other; one can't do without the other. As you can read, the verse still works, still holds true, if you swap 'righteous' and 'upright,' and 'dishonest' for 'wicked.'

But that's not what was written. It may work, but it only works so far. And as for the yin and yang part, that bears a further look. What is it really about?

First, it's about differences. Righteous people are usually upright. Righteousness is upright, but being upright doesn't always include being righteous. The two concepts are close, maybe even related, but one doesn't necessarily lead to the other. Someone who is righteous may be detestable in the eyes of the world, but upright in the eyes of God. But someone who is upright in the eyes of the world may not be righteous at all. To hundreds of millions of people, the Ayatollah Khomeini was an upright man, even when judged in the western sense of upright piety. Was he righteous? You decide. Dishonesty is wicked, but wickedness isn't necessarily dishonest. One can be completely forthright and honest about one's desire to do harm to someone else, and there isn't dishonesty in that, but who in his right mind could say that a lie of any kind is not a form of wickedness? In this light, the terms are independent. Switch things around, and it's only on the surface that it works for long. Underneath, the meaning would change.

It's also about attitude and behavior. If you're righteous, upright, dishonest, or wicked, you carry a certain attitude. Certain behaviors can be evidence of that. Indeed, I've read that Adolf Hitler was, in social company, a soft-spoken, even gentle man who loved the company of women (who apparently loved his company in return). Was that humble gentleness a ruse, or was it simply another side of a truly wicked soul? Few in our society would doubt that Martin Luther King was an upright and righteous man who stood for mercy, justice, and what is good in the character of men. He was also a flawed man who carried on an extramarital affair while conducting his public ministry of reconciling the races. The behavior may not necessarily evidence the person behaving. Yin and yang most definitely don't universally apply here, and perhaps the best thing that can be said is that we're all sinful in our attitudes and behaviors.

The verse is about being made one thing versus becoming something else. Those aren't the same thing. We can choose to be dishonest or upright; our behavior can be described as righteous or wicked (or dishonest or upright too). But as we've discussed before, only God can make someone righteous. We as men and women try to justify our actions in terms of the world, but only God can justify the soul. Only He can make right the condition of sin that our choices make wrong. Only holiness can make holy that which truly isn't, and even the most upright person is saddled for eternity with their wrongs unless they are made right by God. Without that forgiveness, even the upright are wicked and detestable.

Finally, there's the ultimate yin/yang proposition, and it's something of a segue off the previous point: God can live with us but we can't live without God. In the late 90s and very early part of this century I belonged to a church where the minister seemed to take harsh joy in hammering home the point that, without God, we are all worthless, weak toadstools. I've gone to many churches where there seemed to be more law than gospel being preached and in the long run, if all you ever hear is what a damned dirty soul you are, it won't take you long to internalize that. God doesn't need you but you need God. You'd better get right with God before you get an eternal butt-whoopin. Hell is full of people like you and me. These were all things we heard in this small church on the edge of the mountains.

The hard part is that there is loving truth in that. God could wipe us out with a thought, and though we could wipe God out of our thoughts, because we're spiritual as well as temporal beings, when the temporal returns to the earth it is our spirit that will be left with His Spirit. Where would we be without God? To reject God is to reject all of nature and nature's common sense evidence. The world could exist without humans, but humans couldn't exist without a world. In this same vein, God exists without us (in fact He once did) but we've never existed without God. We couldn't. And, yes, I know all about the arguments of evolution and how some view God as a psychiatric reaction to our human condition. I think you can see where I stand on that. God may not need you and I, my friend, but we're fooling ourselves if we think we really don't need Him.

Things are written the way they are for a reason, and sometimes the handy word substitutions work and sometimes they don't. I like to do them now and then to gain better understanding of what the verses say. As you can see, though, content matters, and things have a certain meaning that doesn't always hold true if you monkey around with it. Would the

president be president if he said any other oath? Would you be married if you took any other vow? Saying "I will" verses "I won't" leads to different conclusions on the witness stand. So it is with this verse. Maybe it helps to break it down and rephrase it, but when all that's done, it is the way it is for a reason. That reason is pure because it is God's. All the logic tricks and word analysis in the world don't change that.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 8 February 2012

Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Proverbs 30, verse 5.

Flawless, like a gem; flawless as in without error; flawless as in trustworthy; flawless as in having no defects; flawless as in beautiful and spectacular. All these are descriptions of God's word. If you read them again, you'll see they're descriptions of God Himself.

It has always been this way. The Gospel of John talks about the beginning, the beginning of everything. It talks about how God was word, the Word, in the beginning. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." It's no irony or coincidence that God is both words and the Word, and it's no irony or coincidence that verse 5 talks about how those words are flawless. They are the only true beauty in the universe.

So it will beg the inevitable questions that ask "what about those parts of the Bible that talk about smiting X, Y or Z?" Or, "what about all the dysfunctional people in Jacob's family?" "Why did so many people have to die in God's word?" And, "how come so much of Scripture is so preachy?" Is there merit to these questions? Is God preachy? And how can His words be flawless when they were written by people?

Without going too far in depth, I'll leave it that Scripture is all divinely inspired. Think of the authors as transcribing the words God put in their hearts and ears. Some of it is historical; some of it is prophetic; some of it is parable; some of it is narrative; some of it is praise and prayer; some of it is teaching. All of it is inspired and because it is given by God himself, it is flawless. In His way, God set-right wrongs done by forebears and appointed one group of people as the example He would use to teach the rest of history. By our reckoning, it's sad that people had to die for this to happen, and we don't really understand the reasons after all the self-justification and navel gazing. If it's so wrong for God to have smitten so many people, then I challenge you and I to bear zero malice, anger, or even petty envy against our fellow human beings for the rest of our lives. Those emotions, those choices, are the start and equivalent of death towards another. If we're so much better than God, then ought we not act that way as well? So much for that.

As for the divinity of Scripture, let me ask this: is it any coincidence that so many ancient Biblical manuscripts have come down through many centuries to this one essentially unchanged? I don't think it is. I don't believe it's any coincidence that great comfort and peace is to be found in reading, contemplating Scripture. Try doing that with Sandra Brown, Tolkein, Shakespeare or (especially) anything I have written. They may be entertaining, even uplifting, but they won't give you peace. God's word is a mysterious, flawless truth that crosses unknown dimensions from the supernatural to here.

God is love is truth is beauty is justice is perfection is holy is human is spirit is eternal. It is also the perfect shield. My wife and I were just discussing this very thing in devotions last week. God's word is a shield, protecting us from attack, from the elements, from influences. And it's a flawless shield at that. Imagine a shield of pure gemstone, a man-sized diamond of pure strength and impeccable beauty that could resist any attack, deflect anything thrown at it. That's what His word is. It doesn't just act like a protecting force: it performs.

It's interesting that the verse mentions taking refuge. When I think of taking refuge, I think of going someplace safe, someplace peaceful and natural. There's harmony in a place of refuge because it's a place to find your center, to recharge in safety. I think of wildlife refuges. Have you ever been to one? On a warm day, you can park there, walk out a ways, and just sit. You'll hear birds, insects buzzing, and nature at work simply being itself. If you stay there awhile, the white noise of regular life gives way to tranquil peace.

That's what God wants for us. He wants to protect and shield us, and keep us in His peace and give us refuge. Time with Him in His flawless words brings that same kind of peace, that same kind of refuge from a world of combat and junk. There is refuge in His flawless word, and peace in his protecting, shielding love. It is that way now just as it has always been and always will be. God's word is without error, without defect, without price and without end.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 9 February 2012

Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar. Proverbs 30, verse 6.

Yesterday's Proverbial was about how God's word is flawless, shielding and a refuge. It would have been appropriate, probably even preferable, to include verse 6. We're in a new section of the Proverbs now, a section not written by Solomon. My translation says these are 'sayings of Agur,' and we don't know who Agur really was. He was a man of wisdom as all we can surmise, and maybe that's good enough on its own...just like God's word. What God left us through Agur is, after all, flawless, shielding and a refuge.

God's word is all those things and it doesn't need you or me to add to it. I've said before what I say again now: if you get any encouragement, good feeling, understanding or peace out of these words, it's not me or my words doing it. I pray you understand that it's God working on you, His Spirit moving in your life. Maybe He's using these words to communicate to you, but it isn't Dave. I'm not that good.

If I say any differently, I'm a liar. Don't forget that. If I claim that these words are written just by me, then I'm a liar. No, I'm no Biblical prophet or even a Biblical scholar. I'm just some guy from Texas who recognized something put on his heart, namely to share what verses of a common-sense book mean to him as he lives life in a confusing world. The words here have been a comfort to write, and from the many messages and kind words that have been given to me, they have been the same to folks who read them. It's an honor, not just a God-given duty, to write them. I want to say that now because in a few days we'll be done with the book of Proverbs and it will be on to a new subject, wherever God leads you and me.

And I wanted to say that now because the verse strongly reminds me that it's not about me. Again, any encouragement you get from these words (or any words in fact) is God at work in your day, in your then and now wherever you are. Any peace you feel from God moving in your life is a gift from Him, not from me. I'm not insignificant: I'm a scribe and a friend, and I'm fortunate to have been given a gift to share with others. But it's not all mine to give, and I'd be a liar if I ever told you otherwise.

Years ago, I read "Death Be Not Proud." You may have read it, the story about John Gunther's son, Johnny, who was dying. One quote from that book stuck with me over the years: God is what is good in me. The dying boy wasn't saying that God was a figment of his imagination or some psychiatric construct that allowed him to cope. He recognized that God was active, good, and in him, working even through the debilitating terror of cancer. In a testament that has lasted for decades, the words of a terminally ill boy were a strong statement of faith even in the darkest moment.

God was at work in him. God is at work in my life, and He's at work in yours too. Sometimes, perhaps, He speaks to you through words like these. Sometimes, He speaks to you in different ways: in a look, in a conversation, in a touch, in your own way. Only you can know, but if you admit it to yourself, you do know. God is not idle and He isn't disinterested in you. He, in His Son, extends peace, love, mercy and grace in every Word He left behind for us. He did it not as a memorial to Himself but as a way to reach out to us centuries later. He then uses you and me, communicating as we do, to reach out even further. God is what is good in you, and God is good in all things, in all things around us.

Including words spoken to you. They're not about me, and they aren't for me. They're about God, and about you, and about serving Him through serving others. They're about learning how to love Him into eternity, about sharing that because eternity matters most. I find that, the more I write about God's word, the more I find it easier to talk about, especially in situations that might have been uncomfortable not very long ago. I can easily talk about what Christ means to me with close friends, and that faith to me doesn't seem like just a Sunday-morning matter, or something personal, just between me and God. Believe me, I have zero interest in standing on a street corner, wearing a "judgment is near" breadboard; knock yourself out if that's your calling. And I'm not interested in proselytizing; I don't like it when people ram their faith down my throat and assume you wouldn't either. But believe me, too, that I'm comfortable talking about that message now, and even more comfortable talking about the God-man, Jesus, who will finally come back with that judgment but even NOW is here at work in lives like yours and mine.

To quote the brilliant Master Van Pelt: "that's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown."

I'm very thankful every time I get a message from someone saying, "thanks for writing this" or "this really helped me." Whether they know it or not, I'm also thankful for the people who message me to take them off my email list and those who challenge me on the things I write. I'm thankful for those people because they rebuke me and remind me that it isn't

about me. More than that, they remind me that these words I'm blessed to write are ones they read, and that the message in them somehow touched them, even if it offended. That means God touched them somehow, made them think. Even if their reaction is to push away, it's proof that they got the message, and maybe that's an opportunity for God to work in them in other ways. At that point, I remove them from my email list – I've removed hundreds – but I pray for them because they're my brothers and sisters too. It IS about them because it IS about Christ and they need Him as much as you or me. Maybe they just need Him in a way that doesn't involve me. I'm cool with that.

So I'll ask you, my friend, to feel free to rebuke me now and then because I need it. If you're doing so in friendly affection, you're doing His bidding, I believe. These words have been a blessing, but they aren't to add to God's word because every word of God's is flawless and full on its own. They don't need my embellishment and they don't need me to add to them or take away from them. His words are fine on their own. I'll ask you to remember that and remember that He matters most, even more than getting the kids to school on time, that spreadsheet you're working on, the angry bill collectors who call, starving people in Africa and Asia (or Appalachia for all that matter), memories from Disneyworld, or posting the latest status on Facebook. He is what it's all about, not me or you, and the moment I stray from emphasizing that, I ask for your help in bringing me back between the lines. Eternity in our lives now and in our lives yet to come is what matters most because God is what matters most: all on His own without any encore.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 10 February 2012

Two things I ask of you, O LORD: do not refuse me before I die. Proverbs 30, verse 7.

This is an impassioned prayer. You can imagine the man who first prayed it, imploring God to grant his request. Agur surely understood that he was talking with the great I AM yet he boldly asked for things. We'll discuss what he asked for in the coming days, but rest assured they weren't in a Jabez-like prayer, asking for more stuff, belongings or prosperity. What he asked for is almost irrelevant though because he knew that God was listening. That's a fact worth stopping to consider.

How do you know when your prayers are heard? Answer: in human terms, you don't. You simply don't, that is, if you don't let yourself believe the promise. "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us - whatever we ask - we know that we have what we asked of him" (1 John 5:14-15). And if you don't want to jump up to the New Testament for proof, then start at the beginning. Genesis is replete with instances of God speaking directly to men, even walking with them. That means God listened and heard...and that people listened and responded to Him as well. Not so many years after, when speaking to Moses through the burning bush, God said he had heard the cries of His people. Are your prayers heard, even when you don't get the response you want? Yes, of course they are.

Agur the praying man knew this, and from just these first few words, he understood a few other things as well. If you read the prayer closely, you get a whiff of humility. Prayer should be humble. In the start of the prayer, he didn't say "gimme gimme gimme." He asked instead of demanding. That's a humble thing, and it takes a humble heart to act in this way. We'd be correct in saying that, if we're going to approach the all-powerful creator of all things, we should indeed be humble. That isn't the point, though. Instead, to be effectively communicated, prayer should be humble, even penitent. God is love, and most times when He sends that love He does so quietly, patiently. If we want to open our hearts and really talk with God, it's easiest to do that with an attitude of humility.

Next, prayer should be confident, Agur's prayer is confident; ours should be as well. First he asks of God, then he asserts that He knows God can refuse him...but that He won't. He is confident that God can do something about his request, and he is confident of his situation. Was Agur terminally ill, dying? We don't know. The prayer obviously mentions "before I die," but that could be rhetorical. Still, Agur knew what he knew and was confident of it, sure of his predicament. That allowed him to be confident in asking God because he understood that God was trustworthy. Shouldn't that be our posture as well? I'm confident in my work abilities, my love for my family, in the ability of right to best wrong (and Left), and in many other things. As I grow in faith, I grow more confident in it, looking at prayer as a way to openly, confidently tell things to God and ask things of Him. I know He will respond in the way that is best.

Prayer should be bold. I'll admit that I struggle with this one because, after all, He's God, the all-being, the omnipotent and amazing God of my fathers. I'm just some puny guy. But prayer shouldn't be puny. Being confident means being bold in asking God of Him. If you need help making ends meet, be bold and ask for His help. Will He send you patience, opportunity or a stack of Benjamin Franklins? I don't know. All I know is that He will answer in the way that's best. Besides, I'll go back to my realization that He's God and I'm not. It's a bold thing for sinful man to ask perfect God of anything, but that's the example Agur, Moses, all the prophets, Christ and His apostles ask us to follow. It takes a bold person to humbly but confidently stand in front of God, so remember that and boldly talk with Him. Pray to ask, to repent, to praise, to exhort, or just pray to talk with Him. No matter what we do, pray boldly.

Most of all, prayer should be what is on your heart. Agur asked God for some things that were on his heart, things He needed and things that mattered. Isn't that what we should do as well? This will sound strange, especially if you're new to believing in God, but this is the one that I find most difficult to do without regular practice. I am bold, confident, and I'm learning humility, but even with all those good things, I sometimes struggle with praying to Him what is really on my heart. It's easy to pray in church when someone else is leading and you're praying along. And it's easy to pray in a devotion when what you're praying for is written in front of you. When it's just you and the Almighty in private, sometimes it's tougher. Just like it can be difficult to open up and really write well or say what's really on your mind to your spouse, I find it can sometimes be difficult to open up and tell God how I'm really feeling; what's really on my mind, and what I really want. It becomes too easy to cloud those things with fear, shame, avoidance, or procrastination.

What's the best way to get around these things? Do like Agur and practice. It won't become easier unless we keep practicing. Prayer is like writing, playing an instrument, driving, or even laziness: it comes much more naturally if we do it regularly. Maybe it's in the car, acting like you're self-talking when in reality you're just talking out loud. Maybe it's a

quick prayer in a public place to thank God for food or just the moment at hand. Perhaps it's silent prayer at your desk, waiting in line, or some other opportune moment. Always it's time in a quiet, private place, finding you in a submissive posture of penitence, telling God about what matters to you at the time. The more we do it, the easier it becomes.

Whatever works best for you. Agur the proverbialist knew he could go to his God and that his God would have both the answers and good comfort. We don't know just how God answered Agur's prayer, only that we can be sure God listened. That's enough to start with. Next time we'll talk about what he asked for. Until then, especially if you haven't done it in awhile, I challenge you to give prayer a chance. Give it a whirl today. I guarantee you'll feel better and that it will make a difference in some way.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 13 February 2012

Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Proverbs 30, verse 8.

If you remember, last Friday's verse was an impassioned prayer asking something of God. Said Agur: "Two things I ask of you, O LORD; do not refuse me before I die." Here, now, are the things Agur asked for. Perhaps there's something significant about them. I mean, Agur the compiler of maxims and sayings, didn't say "help me pay my taxes." He didn't demand healthcare or health insurance, he didn't ask to be cured of any diseases, and he didn't ask for money. All that matters.

I did some research about Agur of the Proverbs. Wikipedia says that he was a "Massaite," the gentilic termination not being indicated in the traditional writing "Ha-Massa. "Agur," and the enigmatical names and words which follow in Prov. 30:1, are interpreted by the Aggadah as epithets of Solomon, playing upon the words as follows: "Agur" denotes "the compiler; the one who first gathered maxims together." "The son of Jakeh" denotes "the one who spat out," that is, "despised" (from אִקַּח, "to spit"), le-Ithiel, "the words of God" (ot, "word"; El, "God"), exclaiming, "I can [ukal] transgress the law against marrying many wives without fear of being misled by them." Another exposition is that "Agur" means "the one who is brave in the pursuit of wisdom"; "the son of Jakeh" signifies "he who is free from sin" (from naki, "pure"); ha-massa ("the burden"), "he who bore the yoke of God"; le-Ithiel, "he who understood the signs" (ot, "sign") and deeds of God, or he who understood the alphabet of God, that is the creative "letters" (ot, "letter")^[2]; we-Ukal, "the master." Later on, Wikipedia also mentions that the name, Agur, may actually just be a pseudonym for Solomon. Imagine that.

Imagine anything you want, actually, because it really doesn't matter who Agur was. What matters in this verse are two things (three if you count the things for which he asked). One is those things Agur requested and the other is what he didn't ask for. Why, in particular, does that matter? Think about it (and this is all the more pressing if said Agur actually was Solomon himself): you have all the blessings of the world possible through God and instead of asking for wealth, good health and other worldly things, you ask for only honest living. It's better than finding a genie on the beach because the genie only grants you three wishes. God promises all things, and that all things are possible through Him.

Agur knew this. He knew that he could ask anything of God and that God would deliver what is best in return. Not wasting words, Agur asked to live an honest life. His request not only implies that he wants to live an honest life, but that he asks for God's help in keeping lies, liars, and the consequence of lies far away from him. We don't know why. Maybe Agur was bothered by lies he had told, or maybe someone close to him had lied. Maybe he was simply perceptive and understood the destructive power of lies. He obviously understood, however, that he lived in a world where lies were commonplace – and what has changed in 3000 years? – and that they were everywhere around him. Our man Agur wanted none of it. He knew he needed help and asked for God to provide it.

When was the last time you asked God to keep all liars away from you? Chances are, unless you've been caught in lies or lived with them, it isn't high on your prayer list. It isn't on mine, and I've told and been affected by some real whoppers. There's a lot we could learn from Agur.

And the next thing he asked for was just simple provision. He understood that all he had was from God, that God provided everything. It is implied that Agur could ask God for anything, including riches and even poverty if he so wanted. Hand in hand with that is understanding that God provides food, nourishment to us. Does he ask to eat until he's stuffed? He asks to simply have what he needs. It takes a thankful attitude to ask for this. Is Agur asking for real food or nourishment for his soul? Answer: yes.

Ponder that one while I go back to research the verse and get a bowl of chili.

But, seriously, the writer of the proverb understood that if he asked for anything from God, that God would answer. He knew God loved him and provided for him, and that God would listen and answer somehow. It's natural that Agur, as a man, would ask to have some basic needs fulfilled; they must have been on his mind as much as they are regularly on yours or mine. Earlier I asked "what's changed in 3000 years?" That's a good question to end with. If it was true for Agur, whoever he was, 3000 years ago, isn't it still true for us today?

The moral of it is "pray anything to God." Ponder the question about what was good for Agur, and then ponder that last statement as well. Then, perhaps it would be time to listen to your heart and share a few words with the Almighty. Agur would.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 14 February 2012

Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God. Proverbs 30, verse 9.

Finally, the last of the initial prayers from the long-ago man known as Agur who implored God to grant his desperate prayer. Please bear with me while I recall what we've said here before. First, Agur prayed earnestly to God, knowing God held the power to listen to or grant Agur's prayer. Next Agur prayed for something meaningful, praying for peaceful living and contentment instead of simply more possessions. Today, Agur's verse talks about consequences. He knows God listens to his prayers, and he knows God holds dominion over all that is. He knows God provides, he knows God is supreme, and He knows God simply is. Now he acknowledges something more human. In this, Agur is the man in your mirror.

And face it: you know what I'm talking about. It's not the usual Christian guilt-trip motivation: this is closer to home because it's true to you even without the trip. When things are going well, at first you're probably grateful. If you're like me, though, the farther you get from that moment of thankfulness the easier it becomes to not be thankful. It isn't overt resentment: it's something more insidious that leads to the same slippery slope of which we have been warned since we were little children. When things are rough, we turn to God. When they get better, we give thanks, and I believe that's usually a genuinely grateful outpouring. The longer things go well, however, the easier it becomes to forget to be thankful. We allow ourselves to get wrapped up in our daily lives, and that moment of initial thankfulness recedes into the past. After not very long, it looks pretty dim in the distance; before much longer, you won't see it at all.

At that point, is it much of a stretch to say "who is the LORD?" You're responsible for your life; you're living the dream. It's all on your shoulders. What you have is thanks to the sweat of your brow and little else. When you get to that point, who is the Lord that you should take notice of Him?

That's reality check time: you're at a turning point. You're at the point of one more last chance. Whether you know it or not, every day is one of those 'one more last chances' but maybe you haven't recognized that yet. Here's to hoping you do, maybe even that this moment is when you do. If you allow yourself to get too big for your britches, you won't 'need' God. You'll have outgrown him like Wynken, Blyken and Nod, night lights in the hallway, and warm cookies when you get home from school. You're in danger of downgrading God to being a fairy tale, a coping mechanism or psychological fascination. You're in danger, not Him. He is what He is. You're in danger.

And you're in danger because it's a slippery slope from forgetting about God to debauchery. Yeah, you heard me right: debauchery. Not long ago, maybe you just wanted to get by. You just wanted some peace in your life. It didn't take much for you to curse God and turn from Him. Job's wife wanted him to do that; if you read the book of Job, you might wonder why he didn't! Job knew better. He knew that there was a thin line between Saturday night and Sunday morning, from taking advantage of God's goodness to spurning it altogether and putting yourself in God's place. Self-focus can be a dangerous thing because self-focus is a chink in our armor. It's a weak place where Satan attacks us, senses our vulnerability.

When you get to that place, make this mantra your daily chant: it's all about me. It is all about ME, not you, not anyone else, not your kids, your spouse, your girlfriend (or boyfriend), kids, job, neighbor, buddy or dog Spot; certainly it won't be about God. It is about YOU, my friend. You will have become all that and a bag of Fritos.

Not really.

If you're happy in that place, my guess is that you won't be for long. If you aren't happy, maybe it's time to ask why. Maybe God is trying to tell you something. That you-thing soon won't be enough. Putting yourself first is like smoking weed: it's a gateway to other things. Many drug addicts start with pot and graduate to harder drugs. So it is with sin as well.

Agur said he would become poor and steal. Was he talking about literal poverty and theft? Maybe; those things would certainly dishonor God. But, you know, any sin dishonors God. Any sin is theft from God, theft, indeed, from others. We steal from each other, from God, on a daily basis when we steal from him the honor due to Him in thanks for His mercy and grace. Those who steal are poor. They are poor in spirit, poor in faith, poor in practice.

They, my friends, are you and me. Ouch! That hurts. One poor person to another, I'm glad it still hurts. To me, that means you still have a conscience, that the spark of faith is still in you. The joint is in your hand, but maybe you haven't lit it. Or maybe you tried and are having second thoughts. That's good. It's good because the alternative is scary. The alternative is a hard heart; the alternative is sliding into deeper addiction. Do you really want that? Is that what God put you here for, or could it be that you're here for bigger and better living?

I think you know the answer.

Thousands of years ago, back in Agur's time, I'm pretty sure they didn't say "whatever" but I'm betting there was some term that conveyed a similar meaning. Whatever, my friend. If you're happy in your sins, then I wish you well. Mine have only made me miserable. I had enough of putting myself first and making it all about me. When I did that, I hurt the people I love, and when I did that I turned away even the new people in my life who valued me. For a time, I even asked "who is the LORD." I found the place where I asked it to be dark and lonely. I was a thief of love and a thief of things; not someone you would want to be around. To be honest, I'm not sure you'd want to be around me even now because I still get the big head now and then and there's more that I don't know than what I do know. I'm nobody's hero. Thank God for that, I'd say. Thank God for His mercy that lets me ask now "who is the Lord" so that I can anticipate the answer: He is my rock, my strength, my friend and my Savior. Agur knew this too.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 15 February 2012

Do not slander a servant to his master, or he will curse you, and you will pay for it. Proverbs 30, verse 10.

Be nice to folks who work: that's the first lesson I read from this. Face it: if you work, you serve, and if you serve, logic follows that you are a servant. Your master is your manager, or your task, or your obligation. It's always a good thing to remember that. Everyone works for someone. I'll paraphrase a John Wayne quote (from McClintock): "I work for every man who goes into a restaurant to get a steak." Even if you work for yourself, or if your job is working around the house, you work for someone. That being the case, be nice. We should each try to do our best to be kind to each other, to be patient and listen. That's not only good for the workplace, but it's a Godly thing to do. It's very 'Golden Rule.'

Because of that, we shouldn't slander our co-workers. There are very few people in my entire career with whom I wouldn't work again. Sure, there are many with whom I didn't work well, and there are some who I never want to see again because they did me wrong either in or out of work. But I think there are only two or three people who I would be angry enough to slander. I am ashamed to admit that, in my field, there is one person who I would gladly blacklist from working for any of my clients; his work was despicable and his demeanor even worse. That shame is a good thing, you know. Anger over what was done in the past may be justifiable, but retribution in slander wouldn't be.

We especially shouldn't slander people who work for others. Whether they are hired help, employees or peers, we shouldn't slander them with bad talk or gossip. That's another lesson I learn from this verse. We shouldn't spread the gossip. It's easy to ignore gossip when you work from home, which I do half of the time. In an office setting, as a consultant, it's also easy because you generally don't build up enough relationships to hear the intimate details on which gossip thrives. Still, when I hear gossip, I try to put in my ear buds and turn up the radio. Gossip is hurtful and destructive, and it's counterproductive to working. More than that, it's ungodly. The verse today offers a different and still practical reason for not slandering other workers: retribution. The worker may take revenge; certainly, our actions will come back to bite us somehow.

Now, does that mean you shouldn't ever send an undercooked steak back to the kitchen? Of course not. But should you be surprised if you wonder whether or not the waiter or cook spit on it after you did so rudely? Criticism can be delivered constructively, and feedback can be given pleasantly but firmly. That's Christ's example and shouldn't it be ours as well? Picking on others isn't right.

Finally, the last thing I see from this verse is about cursing. Is the verse talking about profanity, or is it talking about an actual curse? Does it really matter? You probably don't want someone swearing at you any more than I want someone swearing at me. It sounds bad enough coming from me; I don't need to hear it from others. But are there still supernatural curses in the world? Our post-modern world seems to rationalize many things, trying to explain away past specters as primitive, ignorant, or even psychological.

Forgive me, then, if I cling to being primitive, ignorant, and maybe psychologically defective in the eyes of the world. I've often wondered if some of what we explain away as mental illness (excuse me, disability) isn't actually demonic in nature. If that's true, doesn't that open the door to other matters of the supernatural, namely things like curses? Scripture is replete with instruction on how living through faith empowers individuals with supernatural ability to overcome, to use power, or to forgive or bar. That being the case, if I gripe to my friend about one of his or her servants or workers, perhaps that servant is a believer who might just be able to call down help to use against me. There's something sure about that, and something to rightfully hold in dread.

That's quite a lot to learn from just a few words, and they're good reasons to be kind to the help. Every job is important; it's important that we remember so.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 16 February 2012

There are those who curse their fathers and do not bless their mothers; those who are pure in their own eyes and yet are not cleansed of their filth; those whose eyes are ever so haughty, whose glances are so disdainful; those whose teeth are swords and whose jaws are set with knives to devour the poor from the earth, the needy from among mankind. Proverbs 30, verses 11-14.

These verses are sort of harsh, aren't they? I mean, they are true observations even they are millennia old. Back in the day when it was written, technology was much simpler; duh. Technology might have been simpler but isn't it ironic that the descriptions of people still apply in our post-modern age of so many conveniences. Computers, iPhones, and the internet do not our people make wise. Why do you think that is? You know. Back in 1985, I was asked to write the preface to a writing project in my senior English class. The students in the class each had a different take on what we would be like in the year 2000. One said we would live in a totally computerized world; another said nobody would be left after World War III; another said they simply had no idea. Me? I said that we would basically be the same, that we would be 15 years older but basically the same. I'm proud to say my prediction was borne out.

But it really wasn't my prediction, was it? I mean, the Proverbs said basically the same thing thousands of years before, didn't they? Ecclesiastes, the book after the Proverbs, continually repeats, "there is nothing new under the sun." Today's particular verses painted a blunt, pessimistic view of the people of that day as well as the people in our world, and our view of today shows how little has changed.

Think about it: what has really changed? Do you know people, even people who are active churchgoers and supposed believers, who hold grudges, look down their noses at people who are different, who make you feel unwelcome, and who talk behind your back? Agur of the Proverbs did. Back then, there were obviously people who lived lives that did not honor their parents. They said and did things that sullied the reputations of parents who simply wanted to raise their kids to be good citizens. What has changed? The verse sounds like Lindsay Lohan to me, or maybe the TCU football team (and their drug suppliers). Or perhaps it sounds like kids you see walking into church. Or even some of your close friends.

Back in Agur's day, there were people who lived public lives of upright behavior, even good and faithful servants of the faith. Pastors, teachers, elders, deacons: good people who serve God with one half of their lives...and with the other half they got drunk when nobody was looking, or maybe they were sleeping with the neighbor's wife, or perhaps they swore like sailors when the Bible was closed up for the day. Whew! That sounds like some of my own personal experience, I'm ashamed to admit. I must be older than I thought!

In the days of the Proverbs, there must have been people who thought they were better than anyone else. Maybe they were high priests, men of high standing in the faith who oversaw the church; Levites of an ordained priesthood whose task it was to cherish and teach the very words of Jehovah Himself. God had spoken to some of these people first-hand, and didn't they think it made them better than anyone else? Might I ask what has changed? From the pastorate that spans back through generation after generation of pious holier-than-thou's to the upright citizens who seek the safety of the country club where they don't need to associate with the rabble, is there anything really that different? I've gone to church with many good believers whose regular prayers could easily have started with "thank you Lord for not making me a sinner like Z over there." Really nice people, don't you think?

And long ago when the Proverb was written, there must have been people who took what they wanted without regard to anyone else or what God wanted from them. There must have been people who sought to get wealthy at any cost; people who did whatever it took to score points and get ahead. Whether it was dipping into the treasury, throwing a friend under the bus (ok, under the ox cart), or selling positions of advantage, there must have been people who bowed their heads low during prayer while scheming for gain in quiet. Agur's time had them; we have Congress, the White House, pop culture and the suburbs.

Boy, I'm sure glad we live in a modern world where our technology has so vastly bettered us and made us into such upright, improved people. Imagine internet porn, Us Magazine, and Big Brother (both the TV show and the US government) back in the Bronze Age...oh wait...that's today. Gee, we're so much better than they were, aren't we?

Whatever. What's changed, my friend? It isn't cynical to ask that question. If anything, it's an eye-opener, a warning shot across our bow to never forget that there is a God in Heaven who wants us to live lives of love and mercy because those are the gifts He bestows. He wants us to be better than the people these verses describe. Not just our outward

behavior, no, He wants us to be better from the heart. How disappointed He must be to watch our post-modern world of partisan squabbling, government that runs amok, the Daily Kos, and citizens who celebrate the debauchery of celebrities while trying to model it themselves. What has changed? The better question is “why haven’t we become different?”

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 17 February 2012

"The leech has two daughters. 'Give! Give!' they cry. "There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say, 'Enough!': the grave, the barren womb, land, which is never satisfied with water, and fire, which never says, 'Enough!' Proverbs 30, verses 15 and 16.

Full disclosure here: on my own, I had exactly no clue what this means, or how to put it in the context of living in 21st century America. You know that I sometimes research other translations. Here's another time when that came in handy.

After reviewing a number of them, I think the New Life version says it in the most understandable way: "The one who lives by the blood of another has two daughters, "Give," "Give." There are three things that are never filled, four that never say, "Enough": The place of the dead, the woman who cannot have children, the earth that is always thirsty for water, and fire that never says, "Enough."

Do you hate it when people suck the life out of you? You know them: they're life-suckers. They are always gloomy, or they don't have much good to say about anyone or anything. Being around them is a downer. It can be draining. And when you ask what's on their minds, you immediately regret it because they steal your joy. News flash: we all have a little bit of the life-sucker in us. It's something I know I have to watch, especially when I get to ranting about politics (and in this year, that's no easy task). Another news flash: they need God in their lives just like you do, and it's part of our mission every day to help with that where we can.

But think about the rest of the verses. We all pay a death for the life we are given. Only one person has ever said He would come back from death and did so; you and I aren't Him. No matter how much money he has or how many ways he shields that prodigious income, Warren Buffett will still die some day. No matter how many face-lifts she has, Phyllis Diller will still be in the grave some day. No matter how many times I argue with my friends on the other side of the aisle, we will all be dead one day. None of us can escape death, whether we're joyful or a life-sucker.

In Bronze Age Mesopotamia a childless woman was considered desperate, even a pariah. In that time, all income was tied, in one way or another, to producing from the land. And, just like today, a fire could destroy everything you own in an instant. How did God destroy Sodom and Gomorrah? It was with fire. Keeping in mind when the verse was written, these statements make sense even all these years later.

And we're reading them much later. Knowing that, just what does this set of verses really mean? They're vivid allegories, and they're sobering. If you take them in the context of the verses around them, you see they're appropriate commentary on the people of the day (and still us today as well). The author is discussing the depraved nature of mankind and how, left to our lonesome, we act despicably. Put lipstick on a pig and you still have a pig; put new technology and time between our day and that when the verses were written and you still have people who act in despicable ways.

In fact, maybe they were better off because they didn't have Jersey Shore.

What's a God to do? Have mercy, that's what. He's God and He has mercy on a bunch of people who don't deserve it. Left alone, we would be hopeless, living lives of hopeless depravity, sucking the life out of every moment that could have been otherwise good. Without mercy, we would be bound for the grave and bound for the fire. That simply wouldn't do. The writer knew that his God was a god of saving, love, and mercy, and that God was the antidote to the human condition that just never changes. Thousands of years later, nothing much has changed because God is still the antidote to the predicament we bring on ourselves.

You don't need a different translation to see the sense in that.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 20 February 2012

The eye that mocks a father, that scorns obedience to a mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures. Proverbs 30, verses 17.

What a Monday verse; eeeww. The vindictive part of me says that this verse should be read to all kindergartners, sixth graders, and graduating seniors. Throw in workplace agitators, rebellious twenty-something's, and hypocritical church council members. At 7 AM on a Monday morning, the last thing I would primarily choose to think about would be having my eyes plucked out by hungry (angry?) birds.

Yet that's where today's verse has me (and now you). You've probably detected that these verses in Proverbs 30 are pretty harsh. They're sobering reminders that life can be pretty hard. Do we need reminding? You and I both know it's a hard old world. The worst war so far is brewing in the Middle East. People regularly commit heinous crimes in our towns. Our government is growing more and more powerful (and in doing so threatening your very freedom). Husbands beat wives; wives cheat on husbands; kids still disobey with more and more disastrous effects. Most all of us can think of people who have lied, cheated, or stolen from each other and that's just in church. This particular verse excoriates people who disobey and dishonor their parents. If you think about it, doesn't every kind of wrongdoing dishonor our parents? The penalty for this is more than just being grounded: it is heinous pain.

On top of that, I HAVE TO go to work to pay my bills, service my debts, and push those papers around. The week ahead promises to be a mid-winter cold snap, and I really hate the cold. My feet hurt because I'm carrying around 20 more pounds than I should. There are never enough hours in any day, and I'm really not where I want to be in my career. Sound familiar, and could it be that some of these complaints aren't much different from your own? Perhaps there's a reason for that.

So, I'll ask again: did we need reminding that the world can be a bad old place? Yes, my friend. I'm afraid we did. Years ago, Daniel Moynihan coined the term "defining deviancy down" to describe society's acceptance of greater and greater (formerly) unacceptable behavior. The myth of the placid, boring, simple 1950s (or any era before that) is just that: a myth. There were serious problems in the world back then, yet you didn't see Teen Mom or Kardashian mugs posted all over checkout tabloids. There weren't TV shows called "Weeds" (a comedy about a suburban mom who can't make ends meet so decides to become a slimeball drug dealer), "Revenge" (a very well made drama about, well, revenge), and "Mad Men" (about the lives of people who have the world at their feet yet are all starkly despicable); let's not even discuss anything else on MTV. I like some of these shows, especially if they're well made; you probably do as well.

In just my own immediate sphere of influence, I can name good people who have cheated on their spouses (in ongoing multiple affairs even), done time in jail, dealt cocaine, committed hit and run drive-by's, aborted children, stolen from their companies, defrauded the government, held high positions in church while flagrantly breaking the law, crushed their co-workers to get ahead, and even people who have killed others. None of that is justifiable even as some of it is understandable and, sadly, commonplace.

Our world has defined deviancy down. Perhaps now you'll start to see why I think the verse applies, even on a Monday morning. Eye-ballers watch out: those birds may be flocking.

Man, we really need some hope. Repeat my oft-quoted mantra yet again: the cure for the common sin is Christ. It doesn't get much harder than that.

No, I won't go all Pollyanna on you and say how wonderful and rosy your life can be if you'll only get Jesus. Face it, my friends: believers and un-believers alike both live in the same world, and this side of Heaven that just isn't going to change. Do you ever wonder why, even when we're happy, we sometimes get blue? Or why something can come along and try to steal your joy? You know why: it's because we live in a world where disobedience reigns and there are consequences for that. Sometimes, those consequences mean having our eyes pecked out and dying in the wild where the vultures will rip us apart. It's just the way things are. Don't ask me why: I simply accept and share that it is the way it is.

I choose to not live, therefore, as if this is the way it has to be. We were meant for better, designed for more, built for love. Let God transform your thinking and see where it takes you. Instead of dreading the Monday work-week, how about giving thanks to be able to work, to have a job? Instead of talking, how about you and I each listen? Instead of another

drink, how about we order a glass of tea instead? Instead of worrying (which, according to a quote I heard over the weekend, is a form of practical atheism), how about we focus on what's in our control and resolve to simply do our best, plan for what we can? Instead of anger, grudges, hurt, guilt, anguish, and resentment, how about we resort to kindness, gentleness, patience, understanding and love? We have choices to make, and choices can lead to bad things you know.

It doesn't have to be this way. Instead of letting the birds come for us, how about we change some of our disobedient behaviors and swat the birds away? After all, Angry Birds is just a game. It's easier to live through faith than you'd think. I find it was harder to give up wheat products than it is to share my faith in Christ with strangers. Be warned, though: it takes work, real work, to make the changes stick. It takes reminding yourself of things, holding your tongue, and walking away from some situations. More than these somewhat self-serving tasks, it takes developing a relationship with God. It takes getting into His Word and contemplating it. It takes talk and prayer and seeking to understand. It takes getting started.

But it's worth it in the end. Besides, I have a bird feeder in my back yard where the birds can come to get all they want to eat. I don't need to feed them my eyes or the rest of me just because I'm too stubborn to change my ways.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 21 February 2012

"There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden." Proverbs 30, verses 18-19.

I'm with the writer of the verses: these things are too amazing for me. There are probably people smart enough to fully explain them, but I'm not one of those people. After a little research, the only thing I can say for sure is that there isn't real agreement on what these verses really mean. My Concordia says that the meaning of the verses is unsure because there aren't any other direct correlations to them in the book; very true. The nearest contrast is verses 15 and 16 (that talked about the three things never satisfied); again, true, but it's a contrast, not an explanation. Matthew Henry's online commentary (at <http://www.studylight.org>) talks about how the verses are a contrast to verse 20 (which we'll discuss tomorrow); so far, no explanation. One resource (at <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries>) said "Hypocrisy is illustrated by four examples of the concealment of all methods or traces of action, and a pertinent example of double dealing in actual vice is added." Again, that fourth item we'll look at tomorrow. I looked at a number of other resources but couldn't find anything else that quickly shed light on what they could mean. I'm left still scratching my head at just what the verses mean in the context of the book around them and am left feeling that maybe they are just a standalone point that God was trying to make.

And then came this thought: there is one lesson that can be drawn; perhaps it is the best one. God's creation is bigger than we can understand and more fantastic that we can really bear. I laugh when I hear about how people think we can affect the weather, the forces of nature, or (really) the planet. It's not only implausible, but it's arrogant stupidity. Man's innovation and ability to use our resources is impressive. To be sure, the same people who shape the land into cities, fill in the seas to build artificial islands, and harness atomic energy are the same people who fell forests only to replant them for later generations. But change the tides? Affect the forces of gravity and light? Change weather patterns? Not a chance. We are men, not God. The supernatural harmony of nature itself is beyond our ability to manipulate. When there are things we can't explain (like these verses or how the planet really functions), it's ok to say "I don't know" and just accept it as it is.

That means accepting the truth that there are simple miracles abounding in everything. Where do eagles fly and how do they know where to go, or even how to fly? They simply know. Does a snake leave any trace as it slithers across stones? I haven't seen one, but that doesn't mean it isn't there (or that it is). Give me a few minutes and I can explain the very basics of celestial navigation: how ships steered across the seas for centuries. My explanation, though, doesn't account for how the stars were set in place, or the brilliance of figuring out how to use that for navigation. And young love? How do you explain the feelings between a man and woman? How can poets, artists, or lovers even really put into simple words the miracle of love that passes between women and the men who love them? Even atheists understand love but unbelief doesn't explain it while belief does. It's a miracle.

There are miracles everywhere. In the middle of a world that can be rotten, harsh and cruel, it helps to remember that. Just yesterday, that was the theme. Skip back only one verse and one day and you'll remember that, once again, God reminds us how this is a cruel world stained by sin. He didn't make it that way, but we tolerate it that way. It's mucked up, tossed around, frustrated in creation because we've allowed it to become something it wasn't intended to become. Just like us. And yet, in the middle of that, there are wonders, small miracles, hidden mysteries that serve to remind us that He is still at work here, buying back what we and our forefathers corrupted.

Even in the middle of a modern world that seeks to rationalize away God as something we don't need any more, God sticks to the simple and makes it into the amazing. We can't manipulate the tides, but we can sail on them. We can't control where the eagles fly, but we can learn from them. We can't trace the invisible, but we can learn how to pattern it. And in the middle of chaos, war, and death, we can still love and make love out of nothing at all.

If that isn't a miracle, then there are no such things.

Me, I wouldn't want to live in a world where miracles are impossible. They are touch-points where the divine meets the human, where the supernatural becomes natural and the impossible real. I may not understand why the verses said what they do, or why the planet warms and cools, or how chlorophyll is made for natural plant food while meat is food for other creatures. There's more I don't understand in the world than what I do. But, when it comes to love and God, aren't we all just a little bit Forrest Gump? I'm not a smart man but I know what love is.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 22 February 2012

"This is the way of an adulteress: She eats and wipes her mouth and says, 'I've done nothing wrong.' Proverbs 30, verse 20.

Today is Ash Wednesday. The partying is over and we're into a time of reflecting before we rejoin a better party. To me, the verse for today is a verse of reflection, not just an observation. Verse 20 is actually the completion of the thoughts from verses 18 and 19, but it is distinct enough that I thought it would stand on its own for discussion.

You see, I can't speak for the adulteress, although I've known and been with a few. Even though I've written about it before, it's still tough for me to admit that I can speak for the adulterer because that was me. Some folks would say that Scripture is sexist; by the measures of our so-called modern society they would almost have a point. There are many verses that condemn women and seem to paint women in a negative light. So if that makes you uncomfortable, men, substitute "adulterer, he and his" and then read the verse again. Take it from me: it still works and is just as damning.

That's the way it is with affairs. They're damning. The adulteress sees someone who she thinks will make her feel the way she wants to feel. Cherished, wanted, nurtured, loved, sexy: name your adjective and put it here. She wants something that she isn't getting from her marriage, whether it's satisfaction, a thrill, or validation. It might even be something else. For awhile, she gets what she wants and it feels pretty darn good to be bad! If you confronted her about it, if she told you the truth, she would probably say she's done nothing wrong. She might even rationalize it, trying to justify her unfaithfulness as something she needed; or worse, deserved. She's dangerous that way.

That was me. More than once I was that dangerous & damn dirty dog who decided I was too good for what I had and wanted more. There's a curious thing about affairs: they don't have to involve sex. If that's the measure, being a terrible flirt and being someone who tried to take on the problems of others, I found what I was looking for. If sex doesn't even have to be involved, I could say I've had many affairs. Many more times than I can count I've thought of holding someone I wasn't married to, and as I said, when I got brave and crazy enough, I crossed the line.

They were good women; they really were. I thought they were the kind of women I would want to have in my life forever; maybe they were. Leaving my marriage was what was on my mind, and more than once I did leave. I wanted to be wanted, to just love and be loved, and that's what I wanted with someone. That's not how it turned out, though. It's not that real feelings weren't involved, and it's not that we didn't genuinely share them. It's just that, well, it was all wrong from the start and nothing could take that back or make it right. There's a reason why adultery was included as one of the things God forbade in His commandments. God isn't a prude, or a control freak, and believe it or not He doesn't have hang-ups about sex. Indeed, God wants us to have sex but within a framework that uses it to glorify, not gratify. No, God wired us a certain way and He knew how adultery cut to the core of so many things that would cause problems. Everyone affected by it would be hurt. God knew it before it ever happened.

He certainly knew me before I ever did that, and He knew me when I was flirting, trying, being tempted, seduced, enamored. God knew me when I jumped into the hot water and when we gave into temptation. He knew me when I was the self-justifying man who did as he pleased and ignored what was wrong about it. He knew me when I was hurting my family and theirs too. God knew me when it all fell apart, and He knew me when I finally absorbed the body blows to my soul that are the consequences of that particular sin. God knew me enough to weigh heavily on my conscience and to send angels bearing forgiveness to me in good people who wouldn't let me go, especially the lady I hurt most of all.

She didn't have to take me back. She could have, maybe should have, dropped me like the radioactive adulterer I was, but she didn't. You see, she was listening to Him as well, and she saved me, saved us, when she did. Twice in the space of a few months someone literally saved my life, and hers was the gesture that mattered most. "God isn't done with you yet," she told me. My precious wife told that to me: the adulterer who had savaged her heart, done as he pleased, and blindly, foolishly said "I've done nothing wrong."

Amazing love. Truly amazing love that I didn't deserve but that made all the difference in this life and the next. God had guarded and cherished her, and she reached out to guard and cherish me. Me, the SOB who had hurt her so badly. The adulteress(es) couldn't or wouldn't do that, and as I'd said, they were good women. But they didn't do what she did. It was amazing love that was a gift from God, and she knew she wanted to share it with me.

I look back on that guy I was and I don't want to be him anymore. I don't even want to know him, even though he was me and is still a part of my past. It's hard work changing, but letting God take control of you isn't difficult at all. I've given up

addictions before without backsliding; that's how I looked at this: as an addiction I could kick with God's help. I'd be lying if I told you I wasn't tempted now and then, or that things are always easy. But what keeps me going home after so many times of nearly giving up is that amazing love of hers and His. A Godly marriage isn't a partnership: it's a triumvirate of real love. It was real because He was real through her. He reached across the breach and healed it.

Here's the real kicker in all this: adultery doesn't have to be your pet sin. The verse is talking to you, my friend, even if you've always been faithful to your spouse or significant other. If you think the wrongs you do are always alright, I challenge you to read the verse again. It's talking about you whether you want it to or not. The verse is talking about each of us, pointing out where we fall short. Hopefully it's pointed that out to you, and pointed out that there's a problem. You know what to do about that. What are you waiting for? I can't speak for the adulteress, and I can't speak for you either. But because someone spoke up for me and told me that God wasn't done with me yet, maybe it's time I spoke up for Him and said He isn't done with you either. Knowing that, I'll ask it again: what are you waiting for? Wherever you are, you know in your heart it can be better. Today is a good day to reflect on that. Then, it's time to move forward to where He wants you to be.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 23 February 2012

“Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up: a servant who becomes king, a fool who is full of food, an unloved woman who is married, and a maidservant who displaces her mistress.” Proverbs 30, verse 21-23.

If you read the rest of Proverbs Chapter 30, the majority of it offers more comparisons like this one. Including today's set, they are offered in groups of three things, four things, and two more sets of three. Until today, we've also seen this pattern in a set of two, a set of four and two sets of three. Why is this? Answer? Beats me! In fact, nobody knows. It's poetic rhythm, a literary device perhaps. Knowing that Scripture is divinely inspired, perhaps the Almighty wanted to record His thoughts in a poem. I've written poetry, and it's meaningful and cathartic. It can be a pleasing and enjoyable way to make a point, both for the writer and reader alike. Mind you, I'm not God and this is just speculation, but if it works for me, maybe it also is one of the reasons why God wrote this like He did.

It's also speculation for anyone to say there is some kind of pattern in it. Maybe there is some kind of Proverbs code; I'll put on my tinfoil hat and read it backwards. Maybe that will reveal something I didn't see before, but I doubt it. No, I prefer to stick to the idea of the poem.

But perhaps the best way to interpret the verses is simply to take them at face value. Like the verses before them, they make sense if you think of the Hebraic world of 3500 years ago. In ways of technology, it was simpler; duh! That being the case, I like to think that things we think of as simple today had greater weight and meaning back then.

For instance, how bizarre and politically shattering would it be for a servant to suddenly become king? If you were a slave and all of a sudden you were made king, wouldn't that be a truly amazing thing? People would talk about it for generations. In fact, if you think of the verse as inspired by the story of Joseph (Jacob's son), then that's exactly what happened. A slave became vizier to the king of Egypt. Even more improbable, a slave in prison who had been accused of assault! Yet His Godly wisdom and unshakeable faith in God placed him as second in command in the most powerful kingdom on the planet. It happens now as well. For a more timely example, opinions of ideology withheld, think of Barack Obama. The guy was typical a decade ago; a true political nobody. He was just an average Joe, a state senator of very little prominence and even fewer real new ideas. But he had something. Today he is the president, the most powerful man on the planet. People can rise from obscurity to prominence in a flash, especially now in such an electronically interconnected world.

Then there is the fool who's full of food. I read that to mean a fool who is satisfied. Maybe it's food for the stomach, or liquor for the alcohol Jones. You could also put another spin on it and think of the obsessed man who thinks he's finally found the answer he's been looking for, or the control freak suburban mom who is juggling all the balls in the air while helicoptering over her kids. And what about the friend who parties all the time, thinking it's the way to make friends and live a happy life? For some folks, it is; nothing wrong with a good party, that is, until it overtakes your life. If our eyes aren't on what really satisfies – namely a life of serving the God of true love – then we're just fools satisfied with elusive lies. Those things can fill us up, but it's like being filled with empty calories of junk food. They fill us up quick and burn off just as quick and all we're left with is unhealthy fat.

And what could be worse than to be unloved in your marriage? If you aren't married, then what could be worse than to be in a committed relationship with someone who you don't think is really going to be with you when you're down for the struggle? Haven't most of us been in unloving relationships with controlling people: nothing good comes of them. It's a lonely, earth-moving moment when you realize that the relationship you're counting on isn't based in love. Those times can really rock your world. Since that's true, then temper that knowledge by remembering how much more earth-shattering it is to realize that you ARE loved. We're loved by God, and so often we're loved by others even when we don't fully grasp it. To quote Mr. Paisley, “I live for little moments like that.”

Finally, there is the palace coup. Personally, I've never been involved in one of those. I've never been in a relationship where a servant displaced a master, though I have been in companies and projects where upstarts came quickly to power. In those situations, generally things don't go smoothly; think of that Obama example again. Shamefully, I was involved in relationships where I almost replaced my wife with someone else. It seemed that, every time I would get close to having it all, I wasted it. Or somehow things never quite lined up the way I wanted them too. Stupid Dave: maybe God was trying to tell me something. Every day now I thank God for His mercy and my wife's patience and love. I'm more thankful than anyone knows that I came to my senses after being given so many 'one more last chances.' It was almost like a palace coup, and had it happened, I can't imagine how different things would have been. Yes, there's the possibility things could have turned out good. Personally, I wouldn't want to know because I wouldn't trade where I am in

my relationship now for anything. We're living proof that you can build back and that God does restore life out of lifelessness. THAT is the real palace coup.

It's true that we may never know why the rhythmic pentameter of these verses clocks off the way it does. They're constructed in ways that is fascinating, but more fascinating is contemplating how God is talking through them, what He's saying, and what it means. We may never know why things are the way they are, but thank God THAT they are. On a cold winter's Thursday, that'll be good enough.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 24 February 2012

"Four things on earth are small, yet they are extremely wise: Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the summer; coney are creatures of little power, yet they make their home in the crags; locusts have no king, yet they advance together in ranks; a lizard can be caught with the hand, yet it is found in kings' palaces. Proverbs 30, verses 24-28.

Yep! It's another of those times when the verses come in sets to make a point. Just what that point is, though, may be a bit easier to discern today because I think the examples are more easily understandable by disparate audiences. It's about the animals. God's glory is displayed in nature. It doesn't take an environmentalist to see that nature is full of simple examples that reflect that immense glory. Here I think of John Muir, looking down into the Yosemite Valley. I think of the intricate beauty of an oak leaf, with the veins that carry moisture and nourishment and how it looks like it was knit together by the caring hand of a master weaver (it was). If you've never been to northern Minnesota (or Northern Michigan or even Northwestern Montana), you're missing the vast natural beauty of mile after mile of beautiful forests and sky blue waters.

Yes, God's glory is reflected in the beauty of nature but that's not just the in pristine wilderness. The writer of these verses knew that. He saw how it was reflected in the animals as well. Animals can be smarter than people; indeed, especially during this election year, I look at my dogs and realize that statement is especially true. We assign human attributes to animals, so maybe we can learn from them. You don't have to watch a Disney movie to relate to that.

Dogs love unconditionally. My cats are creatures of personality and habit. Spiders weave their beautiful webs not just to fill up the corners of my house, but to benignly gather their food. And who doesn't like to watch otters swim and play? We can learn a lot from the animals as the animals live out their God-ordained lives using their God-given talents. Take those ants. They are strong and dependable, almost obsessive in their work ethic and what they do for their rather large extended family. I never had an ant farm, and I'll admit that I might even now yet buy one. They're fascinating to watch. Ants carry food and timber from far away to aid the rest of the colony. They do it selflessly, even being willing to give their all to bring home the bacon (or the picnic food). A pessimist might say that ants are diligent little communists, and I suppose there is a modicum of truth in that (except I've never seen an ant union boss or commie overseer sitting on his fat can eating donuts while the rest of the worker ants do the work). Still, even with that, there's much we can learn from the ants. If you don't believe me, watch teenagers at the mall sometime and see if you don't wonder about what they could learn. I'm betting you might then want to buy your own ant farm.

Coney are wild rabbit-like animals that live in the remotest parts of the Holy Land. I can picture this one because there are wild jackrabbits all over the area in my neighborhood. They live anywhere they can. That's the thing about nature: even in terrain we would consider barren there are animals who live there and have adapted to it. Like men, they, too, might have been created for something better or different, but they've adapted and make do to survive where they are. If you travel out west, you can still find wild horses and donkeys who forage off the land, seeking shelter in rocky places where predators can't easily get to them. Some might say that's a feature of survival, namely that they live where they do because they can't live anywhere else lest they be taken down by those predators. I wonder if we could apply that lesson to people who live in the suburbs. You'll see wild jackasses there too. God is with both.

If you live in 21st century America, you don't hear much about locusts. Here, they are now more pest than pestilence, thanks to chemicals and modern farming. But they still plague other parts of the world, and I understand it's an amazing thing to see a cloud of hungry locusts descend on a field. They jump all over, covering everything in ravenous, frenzied terror, and they eat every plant alive. When they finally move on, they leave barren destruction in their wake: once fertile and abundant crops reduced to stinking, threadbare ruin. I grew up in the upper Midwest, and I remember reading stories of how settlers in the 1800s lost everything when the locusts descended like a thunderstorm of demons. There was no stopping them, and they seemed driven. Today's only parallel might be campaigning Congressmen, or perhaps swarming media throngs. Both will eat you out of house and home, and both usually leave only wasteland when they're finished.

And then there are lizards. I live in North Texas where we have lizards everywhere. They're usually no bigger than your little finger, and they tend to hide from people and other animals; it's that whole natural predator thing again. When we moved here 7 years ago, my son was still young enough to be fascinated by them, and more than once we'd find one and then son would go outside and try to catch it (if only to terrorize his older sisters). I sympathize with them. Usually, the lizards don't bother me; I'm not scared of reptiles or snakes. But once I opened the back door and one of the sneaky little so & so's dropped down into my shirt and I about launched into orbit. They're everywhere, and even now I will

occasionally find dismembered lizard parts around the house thanks to the two cats who call my house home. I can just imagine that they were all over ancient buildings, even the palaces of kings and other wealthy men.

Whether it's cats, lizards, locusts, coney or ants – or any other animal you can think of – God shows us little snapshots of His glory in the nature He created. Do you remember the movie "Oh God" with George Burns? When God was finished making his point with John Denver's life, He said He was taking a long trip to visit animals. "I like animals," said God. It must be true because He created many kinds. He created them to be wise in their ways and to serve purposes in His creation. Even as that creation was frustrated by our sins, they still serve those purposes, bringing harmony, balance and more. Thank God for that.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 27 February 2012

“There are three things that are stately in their stride, four that move with stately bearing: a lion, mighty among beasts, who retreats before nothing; a strutting rooster, a he-goat, and a king with his army around him. Proverbs 30, verses 29-30.

Please bear with me, my friend; one last ‘set’ of things to discuss. We’re almost done with the sayings of Agur.

I’m a common man, a simple man. In some ways, I will boldly admit that I have been given extraordinary gifts, talents not given to other people and advantages not seen by others. Please do not misunderstand me: I’m not bragging yet I am stating, thankfully and confidently, that I have been blessed in many ways. If glory is due for these blessings, gifts and advantages, don’t give it to me. All glory to Him who bestows them for He can use them as He sees fit. For a short time, my life has been blessed that, in small but extraordinary ways, He has used a miniscule portion of Himself through me. It’s the same for you.

That’s a pretty tall claim, you know; perhaps the tallest anyone could make. I’m not God; I don’t pretend to be. Yet the Almighty Himself has touched my life and given me awesome charge, oversight, talent, and blessing to be those things to others, to use what He gives me in service of something much bigger than myself. Years ago, my dad told me, before I went in the Air Force, that it’s a wonderful thing to lose yourself in something bigger than yourself. His words have always stuck with me because they’re true.

I’m proud to say I’m self-educated, possessing three college degrees I have earned through hard work. I’m a survivor in a difficult career field that often consumes better people. Before this, I was one of the best of the best in another career, doing wonderful, amazing things that quietly and confidently did our part to make our dangerous world a safer place. Bigger than any of this, I count hundreds of good people as my friends and confidantes. And prouder than that, I am a husband and father in the best family a man could ever be blessed with. All these are blessings, not mine to give or even own, but things bestowed to me through grace not mine to give, from Him who gives all things. Again, I believe it’s the same for you.

But I’m not usually stately. I’m not beautiful, majestic, patrician or awe-inspiring. I’m not Mufasa the lion king. I’m more like the hornbill, Zazu; “I’ve got a lovely bunch of coconuts...” I’m the tiny vizier, assisting the king in carrying out his duties, but I’m not the king. I’m a soldier in His army, sometimes a corporal and sometimes a colonel. Whatever pride God has given me, whatever wonderful blessings He has imparted into my life, in some ways, I’m still just small fry. I’m a bundle of contrasts all rolled up into one. I’m an ordinary man, living in ordinary ways, but living an extraordinary life with extraordinary blessings. But I’m not stately. I’m not flash and glitz. Dress up a dog and you still have a dog; dress me up and I’m still me, even if I’m not a dog (or if I am). And one last time, even though you may just be better looking than me, I’m betting you have your moments like this as well.

From today’s verses, I take away both these lessons, the yin and yang of them. I cannot live the life I do without being cognizant of the blessings I have been given. I cannot be cognizant of the blessings I have been given without remembering that I live in an extraordinary life. And in both, I am usually common but sometimes uncommon. I’m just an average joe, more chicken than rooster in some ways, more lion cub than lion king. And yet, there are still times when I’m called on to be the king and not the cub, man-goat instead of just the stubborn billy goat gruff. Life presents moments to each of us when we may have to be one versus the other, and that’s a good thing.

That’s how it was for the God of the Bible. Sometimes He was the majestic powerful deity, smiting the Egyptians at the Red Sea, displaying awesome power. Another time He was present not in the force of the earthquake for the rushing storm but in the whispering wind of encouragement. Best of all, He came as the man Jesus not to smite, oppress and lord Himself over us but to walk beside us, cry with our tears, and love. He was and is both, and He uses both roles for good, for His glory in whatever situation is most appropriate.

And that’s the lesson I pull from these verses today, keeping the set of them in context with the other sets from Proverbs 30. Previous verses talked about harsh realities of life, some of them being shortcomings. Here they talk about majesty and stateliness, about how some things are that way naturally, just the way they are. You and I carry the essence of both because we were made in God’s image. He who is the all-powerful creator of the universe comes to us as a man, personally. God’s encouraging, subtle Spirit moves in our lives, transforming us to do small things that have big effects. We are common people living uncommon lives. The world changes through ordinary people living extraordinary lives, not because of Barack, Mitt or Newt, but because of God working through you and me and all the people like us.

It's true, there are times to dress up, to put on the Ritz and look your best. The Oscars were last night. It's quite a show, one where the dogs dress up well. Ordinary people called 'actors' are dressed elegantly, stately even, to be at their best and act out their current roles in a way that at least shows some respect for their art. It's nice to know there are some times to look regal and some times to not. I really like going to a church where there isn't the peer pressure to always wear a suit and tie and be so formal...but I also miss going to a church where people don't wear blue jeans because they can but instead wear their Sunday best because they want to look their best. I don't know that I'll show up to church any time soon wearing my tux, but maybe just to mix it up one morning I will. It depends on the situation, whether I'll be commonly uncommon or uncommonly common. Either way, let it be to His glory and not my own. Either way, let me walk in stride by walking with Him.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 28 February 2012

If you have played the fool and exalted yourself, or if you have planned evil, clap your hand over your mouth! For as churning the milk produces butter, and as twisting the nose produces blood, so stirring up anger produces strife. Proverbs 30, verses 32-33.

Notice that the verse pairs exalting ourselves as foolish AND planning evil. That's no coincidence. Then, after giving practical examples, one of producing a desired luxury and the other of producing an undesired pain, it links the exalting and evil with anger and strife. That's a lot to digest for the last verses of this chapter but let's give it a go, shall we?

First the no-coincidence. Fools exalt themselves and people who exalt themselves are often fools. On this day, a political primary day, that's a good thing to remember, don't you think? A number of high-profile fools are exalting themselves so as to win the right to run against another high profile fool in the highest office in our land. By the end of today, someone will have won more delegates and be that much closer to their party's nomination. Rah. I wish someone would clap a hand over their mouths, as well as the mouth of the man they're trying to replace. Personally, I'd be quite happy to send most of our high government officials away on an extended vacation to, say, Greenland. More good things might get done in their absence and there would be fewer exalted fools to suffer.

Gotta be careful, though, because yours truly is officially close to the fool-line now for spouting off political opinions. See, you don't need to vote in Arizona or Michigan to see a fool. Me, I saw one in my office yesterday, namely me; that really isn't very surprising. For the last 8 weeks, I've worked part-time in a client office in Minnesota. The room we've been using has been mostly empty, but the client is staffing up our project (which we've been helping them to plan and arrange). The four new people who showed up yesterday kept asking me questions all day long, both complimenting me on my work and, well, bugging me. I kept reminding myself that they were new members of our team, and that we all need help getting started. But I had work to get done and instead of getting it done, I spent a great deal of time acclimating them and getting them started in their new jobs. That was frustrating. My selfish nature interfered with a great opportunity for mission.

To top it off, I had a long online discussion with a friend over lunch. The subject was, of all things, Christ's forgiveness and how we are declared not guilty. In many ways, we were gently arguing over saying similar things, chafing over fine points about the doctrines of law and gospel. What all this had to do with the price of tea in China I really don't know because my friend made good points and I made good points. We disagreed on some things, but I took away from it that they had a good point, only they came from a different background than myself. They weren't necessarily wrong and neither was I; neither were each of us necessarily correct. I think, though, that we were each getting annoyed because they disagreed with some of my points and I disagreed with some of theirs. It was a failure to communicate. At the end of the day, they deleted the discussion thread. When I went back to read it, it was gone, and that bothered me. I hope I didn't give offense as none was intended.

Stupid me: I wish I had just clapped my hand over my mouth (or in this case, put down the iPhone). As regards the office, I'm a manager and that's what managers are supposed to do. Not only, but I'm learning that it's more important to build relationships with good people than to simply clock off hours on the time-clock. I felt like a fool at the end of the day for basking in their praise of my work, and for being selfish about wanting to do my work instead of helping good people who needed my help. As regards the online thread, does it really matter how or when we're declared not guilty by God because He declares us so whether we know it or not? The spiritual guilt is gone forever no matter what happens here on terra firma. Next time I'm getting out of line, feel free to call me on it. Believe me, you won't offend me.

You won't offend me because I spent too much time in life looking to be offended, and when I didn't clap my hand over my mouth, it brought on anger and strife. That's no way to live a believing life in Christ. My friend was correct: when our sins are removed, they're gone. We don't even need to remember them because God doesn't. Romans 8:1 says that there is no condemnation now for those who believe in Christ. That doesn't mean we won't do more sins in the future or even that the ones from the past will have no earthly consequences, but as we focus more on God and what He wants of us, we get to remember that the spiritual penalty for our past is done and removed. There is peace in knowing that, so it becomes easier to turn from our past ways and live in ways that reduce our exposure to temptation and bring glory to Him. Nerdy? Perhaps, but it's cool to be a nerd like that. Or, as Huey Lewis said, it's hip to be square. That kind of square living is what it's all about.

It's not about living as a fool anymore, either saying or doing foolish things. And it isn't about doing things to stir up anger in others. Sure, stand up for your side and defend your positions with conviction, purpose and honesty. There is honor

in doing so, and the issues before us are important; if we don't stand tall, my friends, who will? Just do that with your eyes on the real prize. As for me, I'll keep working to do that holding one hand high in the air to give praise and make a point, and holding the other at ready to clap it over my trap in case I start to venture too close to the foolish zone.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 29 February 2012

O my son, o son of my womb, O son of my vows, do not spend your strength on women, your vigor on those who ruin kings. Proverbs 31, verse 2.

Today is Leap Day, that once-every-four-years occurrence we undertake to accommodate our understanding of time. And on this Leap Day, we're finally at the last chapter of the book of Proverbs. In a few more non-Leap days, we're going to venture into what I think will be uncomfortable but rewarding territory by talking about the Proverbs 31 woman. We'll finish out this commentary on the Proverbs by discussing what it means to be a woman of noble character. Men, stay tuned for next week.

But first...

...But first let's talk about the sayings of a king named Lemuel. History doesn't say who Lemuel was, but my Concordia says that verses 1 through 9 are the sayings of King Lemuel. As you can read, though, verse 2 appears to be written by a woman, maybe even King Lemuel's mother. Why is that? Again, I don't know! Nobody does. <http://www.learnthebible.org/king-lemuel.html> says "Lemuel is mentioned only in this passage in the Bible. This has left the door open to all kinds of speculation as to his true identity. He has been thought by interpreters to be imaginary, to be Solomon himself, to be Hezekiah, to be a Lemuel who was king of Massa (a play on the Hebrew words), or just some petty Arabian prince. In other words, no one really knows. The name means "to God" and has the implication of "belonging to God." El (the basic name for God in Hebrew) on the end of Lemuel shows the name to be a compound of God. Personally, I think the name and context points to a poetic reference to Solomon. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon never uses his own name but presents himself seven times as the "Preacher". The shift in emphasis in Proverbs would call for a different construction. Through most of Proverbs, Solomon is giving words of wisdom to his son. In Proverbs 31, King Lemuel is repeating the words of wisdom given to him by his mother.

So, like the Agur in Proverbs 30, perhaps Lemuel is a pseudonym Solomon used, or perhaps he really was another person. In the end, we don't really know. Quite honestly, it doesn't matter much. What matters is that someone was making a wise observation about something that's still true today.

On the obvious surface, the author is imploring her son to stay away from loose relationships. In the time of Solomon, the vast majority of women in society would have had children within a relationship, most likely married. To have a son of her womb would mean having a son after those wedding vows she mentions. Clearly, the mother who's writing is telling her son to not be with a woman to whom he's not married. To do so would be to invite the kind of sin, trouble, and scandal that undoes even royalty. If you don't believe me, think about Tiger Woods, or Ashton Kutcher, or Bill Clinton. If celebrities (and presidents) still get in trouble that starts with infidelity, how much more so with you and me who aren't celebrities? Heck, I know first-hand of the trouble caused by infidelity.

If that's true for adultery, then it's true for other sins as well. Do not spend your strength on liars, your vigor on what ruins kings. Do not spend your strength on murderers, your vigor on what murders kings. Do not spend your strength on those who covet, your vigor on what undoes kings. Friends, do not spend your strength on those who do not love, your vigor on those who do not love even your kings.

Like so many other verses in Scripture, it works if you simply substitute one sin for another. Yes, again, the mother is clearly speaking against adultery. And doing this substitution is taking liberties, but it's to make the larger point, one out of reverence for God. The author's saying, her lesson, means much more than just keeping your pants up. It is about self-control, honor, honesty, commitment, perseverance, endurance, and fidelity. It is about doing something as an act of honoring God by honoring a relationship. And if you take out the particular sin of adultery, it is STILL about honoring that relationship even if you substitute lying, stealing, killing, anger, coveting, jealousy, hating, gossip or watching anything starting Bam Margera. I think that's the biggest lesson from this verse. I think that's borne out by the verses in the rest of the book – which we'll discuss soon – because those deal with subjects other than adultery. It works no matter what sin you insert. The lesson points us back to God no matter what.

And isn't that the point of all Scripture anyway? To point us back to God by showing how much He loves us? Whoever wrote the sayings of King Lemuel seemed to understand it was. And they did it without Leap Day.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 1 March 2012

It is not for kings, O Lemuel – not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer, lest they drink and forget what the law decrees, and deprive all the oppressed of their rights. Proverbs 31, verses 4-5.

Moderation in all things; I think that's the underlying message of this verse. If you stop at the end of the first section, you'd think it was saying that rulers shouldn't drink alcohol at all. We can debate the merits of that idea – and there are some – but that isn't what the verse is saying. It is speaking against intoxication. "Crave," "drink and forget," and "deprive all" speak to the idea of a king being under the influence of something. Not only is unbecoming: it could be dangerous. For someone to be under the influence means they lose control and act in ways they might not normally act. Moderation in all things, especially with intoxicants, is therefore good advice for everyone but especially for leaders because leaders' actions affect much more than those of ordinary people.

Naturally I don't want to leave it at that.

How about people drunk on power? Hmm. How about a rather subjective list: Joe Stalin. Bill Clinton. Newt Gingrich. Barack Obama (and his big sister, Pelosi). Richard Nixon. Fort Worth Jim Wright. Huey Long. Adolf Hitler. Bill Maher. George Soros. David Rockefeller. My fourth grade teacher. The config lead I worked for in Rhode Island. The minister at the church where my kids attended school a dozen years ago. My last manager at Perot Systems. Give people in charge a little bit of power and it doesn't take much for them to get the big head about it. If you give a leader too much power, or if they aren't mature enough to use it, they can deprive others of their rights or more. In the case of some, at the very least, they can be abusive. I mean, you never saw my fourth grade teacher take anyone out, but he did yell quite a lot. And you didn't see that config lead exile anyone to a gulag (although if she had that power, I'm sure she would have used it). Even people in small roles of leadership can misuse their power if they aren't well-grounded in how to wield it. If you're Whitney Houston, Elvis Presley or any other celebrity who died of overdose, you saw first-hand what power out of control when intoxicated can do.

How about people drunk on affection? Here's another list: Marilyn Monroe. Brangelina/Braniston. Monica Lewinsky. Me. If you are hungry for affection, you're liable to overdo it, and that's easy to do. It doesn't take much for someone to go over the line and get into the land of using your craving for affection to control over affect others. Doing that deprives others of their rights. Everyone just wants to love and be loved, but this isn't loving. This is insecurity coupled with lust (pardon the pun). Some people get so drunk on affection – on love, affection, sex, you name it – that they lose control of themselves and hurt other people.

How about people drunk on doing something? Don't you know people who just can't seem to relax? Are they control freaks, or are they afraid of intimacy or getting close? We each know people who can't seem to sit down, who always have to be on the go. I have family members like that; it's exhausting. You could even say that I've been one of those kind of people myself. Folks who don't relax like that are drunk on doing, and they don't realize that it affects the people around them. Whatever they're doing, their hard at work doing it. I used to visit a field site in England where the commander was a workaholic; we called him Skeletor because he looked like the cartoon villain. Anyway, this man was at his desk at 0600 and still there at work at 2100 (9 PM for you civilians) every day. When someone is in command over you, you are pressured to perform at their level, to be there when they are. Anyone seen "Horrible Bosses?" I think you get the drift.

The better way is to heed the verse and follow God's example. In creation, at the end of every day He concluded His day's work. At the end of the week, God rested. When He came as a man, He didn't misuse his power, and he didn't get drunk on power, action, lust, work, control, or anything else. Christ taught diligence and 100% commitment but not on letting anything intoxicate us. He wanted a full heart and full devotion, not full avoidance of problems (that, in itself, also causes further problems).

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 2 March 2012

Give beer to those who are perishing, wine to those who are in anguish; let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more. Proverbs 31, verses 6-7.

So, yesterday the verses were about moderation and today's are about consumption. Really? Really, really. If you recall, yesterday talked about how a king shouldn't imbibe too much (in any kind of intoxicant) lest he make unjust decisions. Today's verses, however, are a bit more generic and render what would seem to be the opposite advice. Notice to those who would use Scripture to rail against consuming alcohol: Scripture forbids and stigmatizes intoxication, not consumption. Taken literally, this verse (like others) advises consumption of alcohol under certain circumstances. Alcohol is a gift to us, given so that we might use it wisely and judiciously. That wisdom means that it might be good for some but not for all; cite the Apostle Paul's admonition that if something leads a person into sin, then what might be healthy for one person is sinful for another. Centuries after this was written, Christ used alcohol to transubstantiate His blood. If that isn't a Divine acceptance of the stuff, I don't know what is.

So much for the idea that the Bible forbids partaking in the fruit of the vine...but I digress.

Give beer to those who are perishing and wine to those who are in anguish. I like my beer and I like my wine. In fact, I like almost any kind of alcohol. If you look at the extra pounds I'm carrying around you'll see that it likes me back, too much in fact. It took years to put on the pounds that came from hundreds of tasty pints, bracing shots, and glasses of good red wine. At my advanced middle age, with all those drinks behind me and the prospect of decrepitude ahead, I'm working my backside off to lose it...literally! Even today, I enjoy a drink now and then, though I've recently cut my consumption way back. You can't lose weight if you're still taking in too much of what made you heavy to begin with. And the beers are usually ultra-light beer now. I mostly switched to Michelob Ultra several years ago; hey, if you're going to drink beer, at least drink one that isn't overly bad for you!

But the thing is that, if you keep drinking the way I used to, you're not only going to get heavy. You're going to venture into sin. Rewind back to the reality that drunkenness and intoxication are the primary sins that God forbade with alcohol. He didn't say to not drink, but He repeatedly said to not be sinful about it. Drunkenness clouds your judgment, lowers your guard and resistance, and weakens your resolve. In a world stacked against us, we need all the resolve we can get. Here endeth the preaching.

We can stop talking about it because, let's face it, alcohol isn't all bad for you. You've probably read about the health benefits of red wine. There can be good in having a drink to relax, loosen up, and relieve stress. It can be useful to help block the full-frontal assault of stress on us until a point where we're ready to handle it. I think that's one thing to which the verses today are pointing. Life really is hard. Keeping a positive outlook isn't really all that difficult, but sometimes even the most positive, cheerful and happy among us get down. Sometimes things just get to be too much to handle.

Don't beat yourself up if, when that happens, you have a drink to steady yourself, to numb things just for a little while. No, I won't go all Dr. Laura on you and chide you if you have more than one or more than one a day. Just learn your limit, know it, and respect it. That's what the verse is saying. It's saying that it's ok to escape and recharge and then to help keep that positive outlook, to remember misery no longer.

If you find yourself doing that too often or if you find you 'need' it more than 'want it,' you may find its time for a gut-check as to why. There's a line to cross for everyone, and mine will differ from yours. Yet we both have one, and before getting to close to it, it's the right and honorable thing to do to check ourselves on it.

But there's another lesson to be had in these verses, though, and it really has little to do with alcohol. I will ask you to please indulge me in one more review. Verses four and five encourage the king to not overdo it, and verses six and seven talk about how to properly use it. I think that, if you read the four verses all at once, you see that the section is also talking about compassion. Two verses encourage us to self-control, and then the next two encourage us to help others. It's no coincidence that the first word in verse 6 is "give", while the first verse of 7 is "let." Those are words of action and incarnation. They remind us that leaders don't just lead: they give and facilitate. Leaders use their talents, what is given by God, to a higher purpose that isn't all their own. The true purpose of a leader is to give glory to God, and the first and foremost way of doing that is to give and let others. That alcohol is the vehicle used to make this point is ironic because alcohol, taken in excess, robs us of the ability to give and let. It's poetic justice and justice made poetic by the just poet of the ages. So, while on the surface the passage may be about the potential dangers of a sin, completing that passage is yet another verse of how God has compassion on us so that we might share that compassion with others.

And since that's the case, let me be the first today to offer a toast to Him who gave us the grape for our happiness. It's five o'clock somewhere, even if it is closer to five AM, and I think I hear Jimmy Buffett. I'll offer the toast, then put it on ice for a few hours until I can share it with someone in thanks.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 5 March 2012

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Proverbs 31, verse 8.

Over the weekend, my wife and I went to see "The Artist." By the way, if you haven't seen this movie and you want to see something that's truly entertaining and extremely well done, go see "The Artist." We occasionally enjoy Indie movies, and after all the awards it received, we wanted to check it out. It's a really 'back to the future' movie.

Naturally, before the movie there were quite a few previews, and one of the movies in the preview lineup was a documentary called "Bully." You can guess the subject matter. Apparently, the film follows the stories of a number of kids who are bullied in school and how they deal with it. The website for the movie says that 13 million kids in America are bullied in school every year. To be honest, I'm always suspicious of statistics; I believe they're usually reported liberally and designed for shock effect. This one, however, is one with which I'm familiar. It doesn't really matter how many are bullied: it matters that it's happening.

I've mentioned here before that I was bullied as a kid. Eight schools in thirteen years and by the fourth one, I had become an insecure, overly sensitive, and easily picked-on vulnerable boy. By the time I graduated from high school, I had learned to compensate for being scorned, taunted, hit, and threatened by displaying a sometimes over-confident demeanor. Sometimes I wonder how life would have turned out if I had made different choices and stood up for myself earlier. Would some of the choices I've made turned out differently if I had become wired differently? I'll never know and, like the movie's statistic, perhaps it really doesn't matter as much as the fact that what is done is done.

It's in the past and now, in middle age, I admit that even now I think about things that happened. From the vantage of being years-removed, I can analyze it, confront it and accept what I did and what I didn't do in response. Bullying is as old as Cain and Abel and we know how that one turned out. I believe that's one reason why today's verse says what it does in the time that it did. Even 3500 years ago – many centuries after those first two children – there were problems with men bullying other men. I suspect that, way back in 'the day,' society expected that learning to adapt to things like bullying was simply a rite of passage; you adapted and overcame or you got crushed. Whoever wrote this proverb understood this and saw how it was in conflict with the harmonious way in which God wanted us to live.

They saw it and saw that it is the duty of every person to stand up for those who can't stand up for themselves. People who are bullied, people who are impoverished, people who are beaten down, people who are oppressed, people who are outcast, people who are hurting: God wants us to stand beside them because He stands beside us. The writer understood that freedom is a gift from God, that even 'the destitute' have rights and that bullies will prey on the vulnerable to oppress and deny them their rights. It is our privilege to speak up for each other, to stand up for each other and stand in-between the oppressed and the oppressor, not to solve the problem but to stop the affliction. Is it our business to stop every fight, oppose every bully, and fight every battle for those who can't? What does this mean in our schools, or writ larger, in our affairs as a nation? Just how far should we as a nation go to stand up for a tiny nation that can't defend itself? Would you be willing to do it for a kid in your neighborhood, or one spouse being bullied and abused by another?

You won't get the answers to such questions from me. They aren't above my pay grade but they are out of my control. Only God has the answers, and perhaps it's time we pressed the questions; doing so is also our privilege and our duty, and it's fully within our pay grade. Standing together, we can inquire of Him, understand His response, and stop the hurting. You and I can stand in-between and allow things to cool down, letting the bullied build up and get their bearings, and letting the bully cool down and find a better center. At just the right time, God inserted Himself into human history to do something like this, standing in-between us and our sins and the spiritual death due to us for them. Satan is a crafty bully, you know. He's a damned coward, hitting us where we're vulnerable, bullying us with doubt until he finds an opportune time to beat us down in other ways. God With Us stood in the breach, allowing us time to cool down and find in Him a better way.

The verse for today was written thousands of years ago. May I ask what has changed? For most of planet earth, bullying is still accepted and nations are filled with people who make their way in life by bullying; hello President For Life Vladimir Putin. Or anyone remember when Saddam marched into Kuwait, Hitler into Czechoslovakia, or John Edwards onto the political stage? Anyone listened to some of talk radio lately, or watched "The View"? Neither of those are "The Artist." They're more like "Bully," often times showing what happens when the stronger feed on the weaker and people don't have an advocate who can speak up for them.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 6 March 2012

Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy. Proverbs 31, verse 9.

Verse 9 goes with verse 8, which (as you'll remember) said, "speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute." I broke them into two parts because I thought the ideas presented in them were distinct enough to discuss separately. Where verse 8 directs us to take action and advocate, verse 9 calls us to a slightly different action.

Here we are being told to speak, to be fair, to defend. We aren't just to stand up for someone: we're to fairly advocate for them. That word 'advocate' has strings. We are to champion their case, intercede for them, be wise counsel for them. For lack of a better analogy, we're supposed to be like a lawyer for the poor and needy, defending their rights. What's more, we're an unpaid lawyer, providing our services pro bono, doing something because it's what God asks us to do instead of something from which we hope to gain.

But lets' also remember a few things about our condition around those rights. First, in America, our rights are endowed by our Creator. They are inalienable and given to us, just because we're alive, given by our Creator. If anyone has a problem with this, please read up on your Thomas Jefferson because, while I wholeheartedly agree with the good Mr. J, the words are his and not mine. He acknowledged God as the source of rights and freedom, meaning that Jefferson both acknowledged God and acknowledged the obvious existence of His action in our lives, and that one of those actions is to give us natural rights. Every citizen, poor or rich, has the same rights. When you find yourself in the way of standing up for the rights of the poor, you're to do so fairly and to defend them. It's one of the things God intended, and thanks to our Founding Fathers, it's still at the center of our republic today.

Another thing is that we are supposed to do this whether we like it or not. It is an act of service that we are to perform regardless of our feelings, or even our feelings about the poor. You and I don't have to like poverty or be poor ourselves to defend. There is no more nobility in being poor than there is in being wealthy. We can be 'down for the struggle' even if we haven't been down in the depths. We get to do these things even when we're afraid, or when we don't really know what to say. In those times, God tells us to rely on Him for what to say. His grace and His word will be enough.

Finally, we get to do these things in the model of God Himself. He protected the poor and rich alike through active interceding in the time of Solomon and in all the years before. Centuries later, God came as a man and actively interceded for us to demonstrate how we need Him to keep doing so. Alive and kicking today, living in the body and soul of every believer, He still does this. One way He lives is to live through you and me when we defend the rights of those who can't defend them on their own.

I was on a plane bound for Minnesota yesterday, and I watched a documentary about Charlie Chaplin. It was about how he made "The Great Dictator" in 1940. If you aren't familiar with the movie, it's a send-up of Adolf Hitler. The show went into detail outlining the similarities between Chaplin's and Hitler's lives – there were many – and how Chaplin grew to detest Hitler as he saw all the people around him deferring in admiration to what the German dictator was doing in the late 1930s. Read up on your history and you'll see that what Hitler did for Germany economically, socially, and politically was nothing short of amazing. Before the gloves came off, many around the world saw Nazi fascism as a good thing. Not so Charlie. Chaplin saw Hitler for the anti-Semitic, power-hungry monster he was and made a movie that openly ridiculed him in the face of great opposition from the studio system in Hollywood. The movie's ending is a monologue given by Chaplin from the heart, playing himself, not the Jewish barber character he played in the movie. It's a brilliant speech, and shows how one man could stand up and passionately, willingly fight for the rights of others even when he had much to lose himself. I'm going to rent the movie when I get home.

Later, when I was at my hotel, I was reading a book about George Washington. Here was yet another example of someone who risked everything he had to not only defend the fledgling rights of others, but courageously fought to secure them. In this time of weak leaders and petty squabbles where liberty is very much in danger from within and without, we could use a few more men like General Washington and Charlie Chaplin.

We could use a few more men and women to stand up for the poor, to stand up for the rights of the needy and actively defend them when there's nothing here to gain from it. In His word, God is telling us that He wants to use you and me for just this purpose. What say you, my friend, and what are we prepared to do about it?

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 7 March 2012

A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Proverbs 31, verse 10.

So begins the last section of the book of Proverbs, and I'll admit that it is one I've been both anticipating and dreading. This section will bring to light the ideal to which me and most other men aspire in a mate: a wife of noble character. I'm uniquely qualified to give my perspective and yet I'm also singularly disqualified from it was well.

Catch this if you can: Frank Abagnale Jr. Does the name ring a bell? Ever see the movie "Catch Me If You Can?" Frank Abignale Jr. was Leo DiCaprio's character, the check-frauding forger who ended up working for the FBI to catch other forgers. If you read his bio, you learn that Mr. Abagnale's life is one of fall and redemption, yet he was unique in his abilities to be able to help others. The early part of his life – the catch me if you can part – is also the story of my life and the life of every other sinner who let themselves get tripped up in some particular kind of wrong. Who better to prevent forgery than a former forger? Who better to teach about killing than a murderer? Who better to talk about adultery than an adulterer? And I thank God every day now that I'm one of the people who has been given the gift of talking about a wife of noble character because, too many times in my marriage, I tried to desert mine.

It wasn't always this way; a marriage doesn't dissolve overnight, and even when one partner is clearly in the wrong it doesn't mean that the other partner is always right. That disclaimer having been said, for my wrongs and my sins, only I was responsible. She didn't push me into them; I was tempted, I put myself in those situations, and I stepped over the line. I've said it before that things are different now, that I have learned and that I don't want to be the man I was. I don't even recognize him anymore. I don't want to because I don't like what I saw, who I was.

I was a damnable fool because the kind of wife I wanted was a wife of noble character, one who wanted to live up to the ideal encapsulated in this chapter of Proverbs. I was that fool because I turned away from seeing that this was the kind of wife I had. She was aspiring to be that same kind of person, a woman of noble character, and she already was worth more than precious jewels. There were ups and downs in her journey, but there was always progress, always working for more, trying to be better. Long before I even knew what the verse meant, my wife did. Even back then, she was struggling to always become better, always become more, learn from our past, grow with God. I was the one who didn't.

The first person who ever talked with me about a 'Proverbs 31 wife' was, ironically, one I cheated with. She was a woman who wanted very much to be someone of noble character, a strong and reliable partner, one who did her part in her marriage with Godly honor and inner peace. That she wasn't one (and, for a number of reasons, could not be with me) should have been a clue about how things would eventually turn out; that I wasn't a Godly man in what I was doing should have been another. When we were getting to know each other, she often discussed wanting to be a Proverbs 31 wife, and I looked it up to read on the qualities to which she aspired. If you've never read this particular chapter before, as you'll see, those qualities are the hallmarks of someone worth far more than precious jewels or treasure. I don't know if that woman ever became what she wanted to be; we don't talk anymore and that's a good thing.

It's an especially good thing because the woman she wanted to replace in my life already had become that Proverbs 31 wife. Strength, diligence, shrewdness, trustworthiness, talent, blessedness, faith and add to this mercy: these were the qualities my wife already had but then built on in her walk with God. All my life I had wanted someone like this yet all too often I refused to see that she who was given to me had those qualities and was fast becoming stronger and deeper in them. God was moving in her life, reshaping and remolding her, guarding her heart, improving on the gifts He had already placed in her care. The troubles we had – the ones I caused, the ones she caused, the ones we caused together – were making her into a better person than I was. They were making her into someone of noble character.

When I think of that word, character, I can't help but think of her. I think of Romans chapter 5, verses 3 and 4. If you aren't familiar with them, they say, "but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." Not coincidentally, those verses are my wife's favorite, her life's theme verses that she chose when she was a teen. Suffering produces perseverance; that should be no surprise. Nietzsche vainly stated, "that which doesn't kill you makes you stronger." God, through Paul, more lovingly wrote how any suffering, even that well short of death, strengthens us, building our resolve. Then, perseverance produces character. If you subscribed to Nietzsche, that perseverance would turn to anger, or hatred, or maybe internalize into depression; that's what happened to Nietzsche and it killed him.

But in a wife, or a spouse of either sex, when God works through that perseverance, character results; character that is deep, ethical, and Godly. Character is what comprises the features and moral traits of a person. When God works on

us, bad character never results. And at work in the wife of noble character, God makes someone like my wife: that lady of strength, diligence, shrewdness, trustworthiness, talent, blessedness, faith and mercy. Her sufferings produced perseverance, which then (like Paul described) produced character: noble and Godly character.

And her character gave us both hope enough to reel us back from the abyss...several times in fact. From there, we are building a better foundation than what we had before. Character turned into hope and hope here is a promise, not a wish. It's something to rely on because it is of God.

You've heard me discuss some of our troubles before, and in the days to come I will discuss a few of them again. Steve Harvey, if you're out there, I hope you're reading this message because I think you'll agree. Mr. Harvey currently has a book on the shelves called "Act Like a Lady. Think Like a Man." I couldn't agree more. Every man wants a wife of noble character because the wife of noble character is the most valuable person in your world. She is Godly, wise, and loving. Catch her if you can. She isn't a forgery. She is the kind of person we all work hard to be. She is my wife.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 8 March 2012

A wife of noble character: Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. Proverbs 31, verse 11.

My home has become a refuge. It has always been a place to live, a gathering place for my family and friends, and an address on a map dot. That wasn't what I wanted, though. In my life, I have moved 26 times, lived in 9 states, and owned four homes. I've spent much of my life searching but for what I didn't really know. Some of it was circumstance; some was just that search. What I wanted was a refuge, a place to truly relax and seek rest and comfort. These days, I travel for a living, so coming home to a place of rest and recharging is especially important to me. The place I think of is Monticello. Jefferson built his palatial home on a mountaintop as a refuge. Even as a 'retired' sage, Mr. Jefferson usually had some kind of visitor in his house. He would serve as a good and interested host, then he would retire to his private sanctuary – which comprised a good chunk of the building through a secluded entry – and he would rest. Jefferson understood he needed a refuge, a place to refuel, reload and recharge.

Men, you can't have that kind of refuge unless you have a wife of noble character in whom you can have total confidence. It's not just that you need someone to come home to; I believe that's true as well. No, a man cannot find rest to recharge and be a man for those he loves without having someone in whom he has full confidence at home. This is NOT to say that a woman should work at home, be just a stay-at-home mom or wife, or be 'barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen.' Those are stereotypes forwarded by narrow-minded people. I defy anyone to find even an inference of such things in this verse. Instead, the verse says that the wife of noble character is someone in whom a husband can find a true partner, someone who is reliable, loving, and diligent.

What is the 'nothing' of value? It is both worldly goods and the good, Godly traits that provide them. It's not just that a spouse furnishes the home, provides food and safety, or tends to children. It is that a partner who gives and gets full confidence is one who can also provide the things that matter most in life. These are faith, love, devotion, security, empathy, caring, honesty and reliance.

When you have full confidence in someone you have full trust. They are a peer and partner, not a competitor or a threat. And confidence is more than just assurance or guarantee of attitude and behavior. Confidence is the quality you find in someone where they will listen to what you say and be non-threatening, even when they criticize you. When you have full confidence in your partner, you can be sure she will hear you out and communicate with you honestly. She will keep your secrets as you keep hers; she will give and get in life with trust and virtue.

And men, what about us? How can we be men and husbands of noble character? Should not those same things (just described) apply to us as well? Any marriage, any relationship, evolves over time. Over that time, reliance and 'the lead' changes, ebbs and flows. Sometimes the man is the leader, and sometimes the woman is the leader. Both should be trustworthy and earn the confidence of the other. Both should work to live in a Godly home where faith and hard work produce spiritual and physical plenty, where we can live to celebrate and share how God provides for us. Men, these things apply to us in our own ways, through our own roles. There is much to learn and model from the wife of noble character.

That character matters because our behavior won't always match our it. I get a chuckle over folks who say that Christians are hypocrites because they keep on doing those same old sins all while claiming they are redeemed. The chuckle comes in realizing that detractors are right! It's true! Duh! That's really not a thing to laugh about, but I feel like laughing and smiling because the Cross means everlasting forgiveness and real ability to turn away from the things that tripped us up in the past. Our human nature sometimes breaks through faith and we fall. When that happens, we think of the Cross and how it continually gives the strength to begin again. Christianity wasn't invalidated because we messed up. When character is based in God, it may get bruised but it's always there, waiting to encourage us as a strong foundation again even after we've done things to disgrace it.

And when we've seen our sin, we seek a place of refuge. Where God is at work, I would hope for you what He provided to me: a refuge made possible by someone who was better than me and in whom I learned to empower total confidence and love.

A wife of noble character is a wife whose character can endure the storms of life because she has the confidence of her husband. A husband of noble character is a husband who entrusts all of himself to his wife and loves her as Christ loved him. Together, such a couple can build a truly happy home and can overcome anything life throws at them. A couple

like that can build a home into more than just four walls. All of that starts with involving the Lord, and He does it first through the wife of noble character in whom a man should have total faith and confidence.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 12 March 2012

A wife of noble character: She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life. Proverbs 31, verse 12.

"God isn't done with you yet." Please remember those words. Please remember them because my wife of noble character once told them to me when I was at my lowest point, and she saved my life. Commit them to memory and we'll get back to them in a moment.

I was raised in a home where both parents worked. I was born in the mid-1960s and, from that time until I left home in 1985, both of my parents worked. Sure, there were times when one or the other of them was in-between jobs, that happens. But for most of my childhood, one or both of my parents worked. This isn't unusual now, but it was then. My mom didn't always want to work. She was independent and professional in an era where that was only then becoming the norm, and after we started moving around she wanted to stay at home. Circumstances dictated differently, however, and she usually worked at a hospital or nursing home because she was an RN.

It can't be said that, when my sister and I were growing up, my parents had a wonderful marriage. Things were rough, we had our share of conflicts, and money was perennially tight. Ours was a stressful life in a time of relatively little real stress for most people. But we lived a good life, the best that could be had for the income and schedule my parents provided. Still, my parents fought from time to time, usually when the bills were due. What I think they both failed to see was how God always provided just what we needed even when it was tough or it wasn't all they wanted.

In large part, He provided what we needed through my Mom, who was a wife of noble character. She was a strong, independently minded, educated, sometimes overbearing and even controlling person, but she had noble character. Our family needed income, so she got a job. Despite personal disappointments, constant struggles with low income and high debts, personal struggles with physical issues, and always starting over in a new place every few years (meaning we knew very few people), she did what she had to do all the days of her marriage. For me, she has all the days of her life. It takes someone living their life in Godly ways to do that. It's more than just motherly love. It is a gift from God, who empowers people to bring good, not harm, all the days of our lives.

Or there is my mother in law. My mother in law is the best cook I've ever known. My aunt in Philadelphia (ok, all three of them) could give her a run for her money, but if someone asked me 'who's the best cook you've ever known' my answer would be my mother in law. She could make dog food taste like a feast. My wife tells me that, when she and her sister were growing up, their family did ok but there wasn't always a lot left over; that sounds familiar. The girls always had good clothes, though, and the family always had good food on the table because my mother in law went the extra mile. She made homemade clothes (stylish ones in fact. She's also the best seamstress I know of), she cut hair, she worked extra jobs, she raised a garden, she worked hard. Oh, and did I mention that she's the best cook I've ever known? We haven't always seen eye to eye on everything, but I'll always say without hesitation that my mother in law is a wife of noble character who brings good into the lives of those around her.

Just like her daughter, my wife. Next month, we will have been married for 23 tumultuous but good years. Much of the tumult was caused by yours truly; not all of it, and maybe not even half of it, but certainly much of it. My wife is a wife of noble character because she walks her daily journey with Jesus with determination and faith. Yes, she nags about some things. Yes, sometimes I don't understand her. Yes, she can be as determined with me as she is with the kids at school and sometimes that ticks me off (though I'd be lying if I didn't also admit that I'm no ride in the park myself). Yes, she has her faults and I can't and won't make light of them.

Despite all that (and maybe, in part, because of it) she is a woman of the most noble character of anyone I know. God has enriched her life in numerous ways, blessing her with healing, health, and the ability to foster those in others. She works hard for our family, bringing in extra income at a time when we need it. She is a confidante, shining beacon, trusted friend, and woman of faith in God. My wife makes grocery lists, keeps us on schedule, works as a pre-school director, serves as a strong shoulder for those who need one, cooks, (sometimes) cleans (but she hates to iron; join the club!), keeps food in the pantry and is always someone the kids and I can talk with. Even in the times when we nearly gave up on our marriage, I could honestly say that she always did her best and worked hard to bring good, not harm, into our family. I'll shout it from the rooftops. Not every husband can say that, especially one who tried to walk away time and again.

But the proof of her character is in those words with which we started: "God isn't done with you yet." We were separated, and we were on a fast track to divorce. The affair had fallen apart, she had moved out, our family was in

tatters, I was having a nervous breakdown, and I thought I felt the hand of God against me; really did. In a moment of supreme compassion, when we'd been talking and I knew I didn't deserve mercy, she said those words to me. Amazing; truly amazing. She was someone who brought good, not harm, in even the hardest days of her life. It took time for us to reconcile, move back home, try to work things out, develop new out of the old, but we did it. We did it because she helped me to see that God wasn't done with me, or with us, yet. We were able to do it because she is a Proverbs 31 wife.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 12 March 2012

A wife of noble character: she selects wool and flax and works with eager hands. Proverbs 31, verse 13.

These days, we don't worry too much about what our clothes are made of. I mean, if you want good clothes, you can generally buy them at many different places. You don't need to spent \$200 at Brooks Brothers to get a good man's shirt (although I'll admit I'd really like one of those some day). But if you want a good sweater or wool skirt, you might want to be willing to pay more – maybe a lot more – understanding that, for more money, you're probably going to get better quality. Generally speaking, if you pay cheap, you get cheap. That doesn't mean you need to buy that Brooks Brothers shirt, but if you're feeling generous, I'll gladly send you my address. It's not a bad thing to spend a bit more if you're going to get good quality. Higher price usually means higher quality, which usually means better handiwork.

The Proverbs 31 wife of noble character understood that. In Biblical times, you wouldn't go to JC Penney, Macy's, or even Target to buy clothes. If you had means, you might have them made for you. If you didn't (in other words, if you were like most people), you probably had to purchase the cloth and make them yourself, or be willing to spin your own thread to do the same thing. I've never spun thread before, but it looks like hard work. Outside my hometown there is an authentic pioneer village where people 'live' in buildings of the period and daily recreate life as it was in the 1830s. If you're ever in southern Indiana, check out the village in Spring Mill State Park.

Anyway, one of the things you can see done is women spinning wool and flax into yarn. This, in turn, is woven into cloth for rugs, clothing, and such. Sometimes the spun thread and yarn could be sold for a profit. In America, most of Europe and most of Asia, we don't realize how hard it is to make clothing. Technology and capitalism have largely made this a task we can 'sub out.' That makes it easy to forget that there is quite a long tail of work behind that pair of jeans you buy at the store. You spend \$60 on a pair of Levis, but did you ever think about what had to happen to make them? A farmer plants, tends, and grows cotton (as well as the dye, which used to be made of indigo that also needed to be grown). That cotton is harvested, baled, shipped to market and purchased. At a mill, it is ginned and combed, then washed, dried, separated, spun and lengthened into thread. That thread is woven into cloth, which is then dyed. Once the dyed cloth is dry, it is cut to just the right size, sewn, checked, and sorted. From there, the denims are tagged, boxed, shipped, received, unpacked, sorted, and placed on a rack for you or I to peruse in the store.

To be honest, I'm probably even simplifying that process but I think you get the picture. Much work takes place just to prepare a pair of blue jeans for sale to you or me. It isn't much of a stretch to see that similar processes take place for our shoes, shirts, food, books, paper, furniture, pencils, underwear, pets, computers and almost any consumer good you can think of. Someone better educated in such things would probably call this "the economy," and it's bigger than you, me, or some pointy head in Washington DC. It takes a lot of work just to produce one thing, let alone many of them, and it takes many things to help make a house work.

And, again, the Proverbs 31 wife of noble character knew this. Just to clothe her family, she would work many hours to select good wool and flax. Why? Same reason as today, I suspect: buy good quality, get good quality. The difference between now and then is that scale of economy (and the fact that Sears wasn't yet in business). The wife of Biblical times probably had to make her own clothes, and that meant making her own fabric. Doing that meant either growing the flax or raising the sheep (or goat) for the wool, then the requisite shearing, combing, washing, spinning and weaving and sewing (just like the cotton described above). Most people probably didn't have closets full of clothes; most people probably didn't even have closets. Stop me if I'm wrong but it would be quite an adjustment for most of us (especially teenage daughters) to flashback to Bronze Age Israel or Mesopotamia, and that adjustment would start with simply keeping durable clothes on our back.

I think that's why the Proverbialist said what they said about the wife of noble character. It took hard work – as well as knowledge, skill, shrewdness, diligence and patience – to do all that was required to make fabric for clothing. Like I said, I've seen it done as it was done in the 1830s and it looked like rough going. I can't imagine how much more difficult it would have been 2500 years before with even more rudimentary tools and machines. Such things wouldn't have troubled the wife of noble character because she dealt with it, doing what needed to be done to provide warm, durable, good clothing for the people she loved. She understood that it meant hard, long hours of work to gather the materials, spin the thread, weave the cloth and sew garments with it. A man looking for a wife would keep this in mind; a man with such a wife would do the same, remembering her talents were worth more than treasure.

Today, it takes different work to keep a family well-clothed. I don't know too many good Christian beauties here in north Texas who shear sheep to make thread, but I do know many who work hard to generate income to purchase good

clothing. It's more than just that, you know. In church yesterday we learned from my friend, Mark, that, in the Lord's Prayer, "give us this day our daily bread" means much more than just three squares in a pan. It meant all our provisions, relying on God to provide us with everything we need to sustain life. One way God provides is through that wife of noble character. I don't know many today who spin and weave, but I know many (and one in my own home) who work very hard to be one way through whom God provides for more needs than just their own. It was hard work all those centuries ago, and it's hard work still today.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 13 March 2012

She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar. She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls. Proverbs 31, verses 14 and 15.

Yesterday we talked about clothing; today let's chat about food and more. In fact, I'm writing this early in the morning after getting up with my wife while it was still dark out. That's our routine. More appropriately, during the work-week, that's her routine. She gets up VERY early, usually about 3:30 to prepare for the day and be at work by 6 AM to open the pre-school where she works. We spend part of the morning together, sharing a cup or two of coffee in bed, doing a couples devotion together, and sometimes having breakfast. When she goes to work, I usually head to the gym or get started on my own day.

This is a routine we've done since she moved back into the house. Two years ago, we separated but during that separation we decided to start doing some kind of devotion. When we got back together, it made all the difference in our marriage because it's been one way God has worked on us. Even though we've been through some rocky times since then, we've kept up the routine. It's not just because of her work hours: it's because of God, her and us (pretty much in that order). That's such a good thing that my paltry words have a hard time really expressing it. Those of you who like to sleep in are probably thinking we're insane. 3:30 AM? Are you Terry's crazy? Well, maybe a little bit, but I prefer to look at it as doing my part – doing our part too – for her to be a successful Proverbs 31 woman.

For that to happen, she likes to attack the day on her own terms. I think this helps to position her – emotionally, spiritually, physically – to be pro-active in things instead of always having to react. Very often, I'll get up to make that breakfast, and we use that time, too, to talk over things, sometimes pay bills, watch the morning weather, maybe even play with the dogs (we have two). When I don't get to spend this time with her, my day is off. I won't speak for her, but I'm betting she could say something similar. If she gets to work with a few small successes already in her pocket, it becomes easier to stay on top of small crises that develop in any workplace (especially in one where the teachers like to ask for time off on the same day).

I don't know if she realizes how her working helps provide food for our table. As a couple and family, we're doing better than we have in years, but it still is a huge help to have her extra salary. Her job is a good thing, both to provide her with meaning and calling of her own, and to provide us with extra income that is more than just handy. It means that, in these tough economic times, our pantry is always full and our cupboards are rarely bare. She's always been good at making weekly menus as well, which helps to plan both our grocery shopping and keep variety in our lives. Sometimes, I get grouchy if we have to spend hours going from store to store to get the best deals; our weekly shopping usually involves some combination of Target, Kroger, Sam's Club, Market Street and Aldis. She plans the shopping to not only economize our income but also to spend some time together. This past weekend, she was home sick; got that way after pushing herself too hard. That gave me the opportunity to help out and do the shopping. Four stores and a bunch of those reusable bags later, I was exhausted.

It gave me an insight. I don't get to do it all alone very often, though I usually go to the store every day or so to pick up a thing or two. I'm not one of those husbands who would fall apart if he had to do all the shopping, cooking and house-tending by himself (nor is she the kind of wife who would fall apart that way either). Both of us have survived on our own, so it's nice to know that someone will do such tough work for me and our kids. I work all week, too, and I got a reminder of how tough it can be for one spouse to do all the shopping and provision for the other. Kids of every generation have to learn anew that life is a tough, working proposition. If you don't work, you don't earn income. If you don't have income, you don't have a place to live, or car to drive, or food in your belly. If you don't have those, it becomes awful hard to enjoy that party-all-nite-lie-of-a-lifestyle that Snooki and her pals seem to glamorize. I think many of today's American kids have an especially rude awakening when they discover that it takes work to run a home, even a small one of their own.

That work is what my wife of noble character does all the time. Her work at the school provides money for our family. Her work at fulfilling our needs for food and clothing provides us with basic necessities. More than these, however, her work provides portions for her servant girls. I'm maybe reaching a little here in saying this; we don't have servants at my house in Middleclassville, North Texas. Heck, we have teenagers who demand to be served on; good luck with that!

Instead, I'm talking about her vocation and her calling in the community. The work she does on her job – scheduling, billing, working with kids, personnel management, staffing – provides a productive, safe, and structured workplace for people who provide a childcare and education service to customer parents. Very often she comes home frustrated,

downloading her hectic day into my waiting ears, talking about how she had to shift people around to keep classrooms in ratio because the company is chronically short-staffed. It takes real effort to make sure 160 kids are all taken care of while trying to meet the desires and needs of people who usually don't take that into account. Lately I've taken to my own kind of work, trying to encourage her that she's in a calling, witnessing God's love in a practical manner through her efforts at the school, through her always smiling face, through doing what she does every day. If you have little kids, you'd want them to go to the school where my wife works because it's a fantastic place to get a good start. One of the biggest reasons for that is because of her and the work she does.

As long as she keeps to this schedule, I'll do my best to support her in it. Even when I'm away on travel, we still spend time together on the phone in the morning. It's our fueling time, sharing that coffee, God's word, and some conversation together, fueling us for the day ahead and how we get to feed and nourish others. It takes work to prepare for work, then to do work, and it takes work to maintain and grow a relationship. But this kind of work is a pleasure. The adage is true that, if you make what you love into your job, you'll never work a day in your life. When you work to feed your family and you feed them on God's love in your life, it isn't work at all, even so early in the morning.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 14 March 2012

A wife of noble character: she considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard. Proverbs 31, verse 16

At my house we like our wine, so when I first read this verse, I found myself wishing we could interpret it as literally true! For her birthday last year, my son made my wife a wine cabinet. He did a really great job on it, and it safely holds a dozen bottles behind wood doors that are hand-painted with her initials. The Terry's aren't yet wine collectors; you won't find a bottle in the cabinet that cost over \$20. But there are plenty we like, and we usually share one on the weekend.

I think it would be fun to own a vineyard. I used to make my own beer, so making wine wouldn't be that difficult. My wife of noble character and I have toured a number of wineries (and will be touring more this year). Indeed, when I've indulged my more Luddite fantasies, I've often thought of chucking it all to buy a hobby farm and raise specialty vegetables, and grapes to make into wine. It would be maddeningly pastoral to own a vineyard. Have I mentioned that we like wine in our house? I think that, if I were a farmer, I might start drinking more of it.

It's telling that the proverb talks about a noble woman buying land to plant a vineyard. The Bible has numerous stories and admonitions on the place of wine in our lives. Raising, making, selling, or drinking wine (or any alcohol) isn't a sin for most people, but drunkenness always is. Even as recent as a hundred years ago, in America you might have gone to a frontier town and had beer or alcohol instead of fresh water. The alcohol was safe to drink while the water might have been chancy. Such was the case in Biblical times as well, and the people who first read these verses many centuries ago would have been intimately familiar with why it meant something for a woman of noble character to purchase land to plant grapes.

Then as now, land and wine have value. In any country in any age, landowners have wealth. Even the least choice pieces of land have value and holding power. Land values rarely sink drastically. The buildings on them may shrink in value, but the land itself holds its own. A shrewd, wise, woman of character would survey fields and purchase one when she could. That took time, you know; time to earn money, time to save, time to select. When she got the land, it took more time for farming is a function of it. One can't plant seeds or raise crops and immediately harvest a reward. It takes months to raise annual crops, years for something like a vineyard or an orchard to produce. When that happens, wealth is generated. The writer of the proverb understood this.

Wine is associated with life. I've mentioned before of how Christ used wine to institute Holy Communion, but did you ever think about some of the other references in Scripture to how wine enhances life? Melchizidek brought wine to Abram to celebrate. The psalmist (in Psalm 104) describes how wine is given to us as a gift, and the Solomon advised (just a few verses ago) giving drink to those who need to steady their nerves. Christ's first public miracle was turning water into wine. He described the "new wine into old wineskins" parable, talking about how one wouldn't put fresh wine (or a new belief) into old wineskins (or believers who couldn't accept it). Years later, Paul advised his acolyte, Timothy, to use a little wine to settle his stomach. In all these references, wine is associated with active, thankful living. For a wife to plant something that would contribute to such a life would have been an act of praise and service.

Wine has seasons. It takes elements of soil, air, light, and water to feed the vines that produce the grapes. It takes the vintner weeks and months to tend to those grapes, then to harvest and process them. Seasons pass while wine ages, matures, grows better while at rest. Very often, if you open a good bottle of wine, you smell hints of the plants and the way in which it was made. I like to enjoy a mellow glass of red and imagine what it must have been like where the grapes were grown that year. You can home-brew beer on Monday and have it ready on Friday (though it probably won't be very good). Not so with wine. Good wine takes seasons.

Finally, knowing all these things, our lives have seasons and value. That's how God designed it. He didn't design life to exist all in one single day. Our lives have days, months, seasons and years. He made us to love him and share that love with each other so as to grow His presence in the world. That takes time, you know. It takes time, tending, and tenderness...but it's worthwhile. And sometimes it takes celebration. In a Biblical celebration, there would have been wine. The woman of noble character knows this, so she takes her time to select ground on which to raise good crops for her loved ones. She plants a vineyard because wine is of value for enjoyment, profit, and even medicine.

I can't really picture my wife being a farmer (or even a vintner). She lived in the country when she was a young girl, so I suspect she had her fill of farming. In the places where we've lived and I was able to raise a garden, I did most of that work, mainly because I enjoy gardening. No, I can't picture her living on a farm even though we talk of retiring to a house

on a country lake. What I can picture her doing is raising 'crops' in another field, namely the field of her vocation. She's been a pre-school director, church secretary, company principal, professional student, childcare provider, customer service representative, and work at home mom. There weren't fields of earth involved in any of those positions, but there always was a harvest. There was a harvest of children raised in safety and love. There was a harvest of knowledge gained and experience shared. There was a harvest of friends, and planting the seeds of friendship in many others. And there is the harvest of the wine of life, pressing out the vintage of our marriage and tending it while it ages, ripens and matures into something spectacular. We like our wine, and I have always wanted to raise my own crops. While I can't see my wife living as that farmer, I have always seen how she raises something of much greater value than just the good fruit of the vine.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 15 March 2012

The wife of noble character: she sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks. Proverbs 31, verse 17.

This may tick you off. I think women who don't know how to work are unattractive. Not just unattractive but ugly. They may be the most beautiful creatures to ever walk a red carpet, but if they don't know how to work (or, worse, are deliberately lazy) then I'm more interested in dental surgery than I would be in them. A woman using her talents is attractive (and let's purge the thought now: I'm NOT talking about anything involving skin). Whether it's working in a construction zone, doing yard work, working in an office, tending the house or doing whatever, I think it's attractive to see a lady at work. I get quite a few free magazine subscriptions – airline miles – and I see the lines in Redbook, Cosmo and the like talking about how some women find it attractive to see men hard at work. News flash: men find that attractive as well.

What's more, it can be Godly.

I'm not one of these "barefoot and pregnant" believer stereotypes; such ideas are fostered by small minds. I wouldn't want a wife whose sole vocation was procreation and subjugation. Women are better than that. Our convenience-oriented 'now' culture has had the effect of allowing us more time for ease. We all need some time to download and rest, but I think there's very little that's more unattractive than someone who leads only a sedentary lifestyle without other purpose. Get some rest, but then get up and get going!

That's not to say that what's good for the gander isn't good for the goose. Several years ago, I lost A LOT of weight, getting down to 175 pounds and I looked pretty good. I lost it by pursuing divorce, and it was mostly worry and no appetite. In repairing my marriage, I've sadly gained about 30 of those pounds back, and this despite exercising even more and eating less. Call it the weight of contentment. Maybe it's inevitable: I'm middle aged in a family with a history of obesity. It's also unattractive and not long ago my wife pointed that out to me. It made me mad, but I had to concede she had a point. Yet I also think she finds it attractive to know I'm working, not just working out. My job is pretty sedentary: I work in front of a laptop in information technology. To keep fit (or get fit again) I need to do other things and I do them as best I can. I think she's pleased that I do the work I do, but probably finds it potentially unattractive. I mean, how sexy is it to watch someone sitting at the computer? When I'm doing other things, say working on our house or doing other tasks, I suspect she's pleased. I would be too. It's that same appeal I mentioned in the paragraph above.

We weren't made for all rest: we were made for giving praise through vocation. I'm generalizing when I say that men find women who work attractive. It's a guy-thing, to be sure, but it's also acknowledging that a lady at work is a lady with purpose, with spirit. We all seek meaning in life, and much of that meaning is sought in work. The real purpose, however, is seeking meaning by doing Godly work. Just ministry? No, of course not, but we can give praise both by giving praise (walking the walk) and by exercising our God-given talents. The writer of the verse perhaps saw this, and he illustrated work (and the willingness to do it) as a character trait for the Godly, noble wife. She has things to do and she gets them done. Her 'arms' are her talents, either physical or intellectual, and she is wise in how she does her work. Whether it is designing new configuration, cleaning an oven, driving a school bus, running a team, managing a schedule, gardening or writing, the wife of noble character knows that her talents are gifts from God and that she's giving Him glory by using them to their fullest.

Ladies, that goes both ways, doesn't it? You want a husband who will do his work well, right? In marriage, there are times when we have to rely on each other. A lady wants a man who will pull his own weight and work hard to provide. I believe a lady also wants a man who will trust her to do the same. We all want a partner who will pull their fair share. What's more, we find it desirable to have a partner who enjoys work and does it well. Next time you see your significant other hard at work, remember that your taking pride in them is a blessing from above.

Not to brag too much, but this week I ran farther than I've run in months. And I have done a few things around the house that I've left unattended. The desk is clean, several closets are organized, and later today I'll clean up the yard for the first time this year. And I've done this while putting in full days on the project, finishing budgeting plans for the next two years while making great strides in project planning as well. I'm hoping this pleases the lady of the house, and I believe it does. She finds it unattractive to have a husband who leaves things unattended just as I find the same thing. That's not just the way we're wired: it's a matter of faith as well. It may be a bit of a stretch, but it's also somewhat appropriate: faith without works is dead. We show our faith and our love by doing something with it. That starts on the job. So, with a busy day ahead, let's get up and get going, shall we? We'll look great in the process.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 16 March 2012

The wife of noble character: She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night. Proverbs 31, verse 18.

This is a good segue on yesterday's verse which, if you remember, talked about work. A wife of noble character is one who isn't afraid to get her hands dirty and get to work. If you remember, too, I said I thought that was an attractive thing. Today, we get a glimpse of why that's so. The wife who isn't afraid to work will, more likely than not, see her work result in profit. Her lamp will not go out at night: the bill will be paid to keep the power on, and there will be light in her home.

Nuff said, right? Almost.

The verse seems to insinuate that all hard work will be profitable, or does it? Notice that it says "trading" instead of work. That's important and we'll cover it shortly. The second half of the verse seems to imply that hard work pays off. It's reasonable to assume that keeping one's lamp lit means you've earned enough to pay for that to be so. That or someone has paid your bill for you. Either way, it's a blessing. These days, we keep lights on at night to ward off burglars and threats. Three thousand years ago, it was no different. A wife might keep her lamp lit to give light to a room so as to let people know someone was at home. Back then, the light was a candle or, more likely, a wick dipped in oil (maybe olive oil, castor oil, or possibly some kind of fish oil). It wouldn't give off much light, and once it was out it would be difficult to re-light; remember, there were no matches. You would have to re-light it from another fire or from a flint and metal. For the verse to say that the wife's fire does not go out at night meant she had provided both the oil and wick, as well as tended it to make sure the fire didn't blow out.

But I want to hone in on that 'trading' word because it carries several other meanings with it. I'm not much of one for horse-trading. I don't have the patience for it, and I think I have too much Yankee stubbornness in me. When I go into a store, I want to get a good deal, but I want for what I see to be what I get. That includes the price.

Years ago, I lived in southern Italy, where haggling and negotiating on price are a cultural norm. Except for food, meals, and items in stores, at a market it's common to haggle over a price. During my first weekend there, I spent 30 minutes haggling with a rug vendor over the price of a rug my wife liked (I eventually got him down to half-price). It's theatrical: you make your bid, the vendor huffs and puffs and says 'no.' So, you walk away and he waves you back to propose a counter-bid. You might take it or, counter again. That commonly results in more huffing and puffing, sometimes in (what I imagine to be) Italian profanity. Eventually, if you want the item bad enough, he'll sense that or you'll sense his bargaining limit and you can reach a mutually agreeable price.

Personally, it wasn't for me. I understood the process, and I even understand the cultural background for it. It's an ancient thing, going all the way back to a time even long before the time when this verse was written. A wife of noble character would have known what to bargain for and what to let slide by. That woman is better than me. She would have had an informed sense of what is and isn't a good deal. Maybe things aren't so different after all. In my house, the women seem to have a better (again, informed) sense of what is and isn't a good deal. After all, part of every Friday's routine is viewing the next week's Target ad. I enjoy shopping, but not that much. Given the choice between shopping and fingernail torture, I'd have to think about the options. The ladies of my home are better at it than me and God bless 'em for that. It's something for which I can be thankful.

What's more, the woman of noble character would be shrewd enough to know what her goods and services were worth. If she raised a crop for sale, she would inform herself of the going price for her commodity. If she made a product, she would know what the market price for it would be. When the wife of noble character wanted to trade, she would know when she was getting snowed and what her goods should sell for. I've often thought women would make better stock traders than men. It's part intuition, part information, and part how we process both.

Maybe it's circumstantial, but I doubt it. God seems to be talking about informed intuition in this verse. He gives us talents, yes unique talents that sometimes vary by gender, and the knowledge in how to best use them. When we use them for His glorification (and that means using them in love for our families), we are doing a Godly thing. I'll do well to remember this today when that Target ad is published.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 19 March 2012

A wife of noble character: in her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers. Proverbs 31, verse 19.

A few days ago, we talked about how a wife of noble character would select good wool and flax. She would wisely select the best fibers from which to make the best fabrics. Doing this would be an act of service and an act of love. Today we get to talk about how she uses that. If you remember, I mentioned how I had seen recreations of how 1830s pioneers spun cloth. Watching made me glad to live when and where I do. Before you could make cloth, you had to back up a few steps; before you could weave thread into cloth you had to weave cotton, flax, silk or some other fiber into thread. That's where the distaff and spindle come into play.

On a spinning wheel, you would pump or turn the wheel while threading fiber over the spindle onto the wheel. The wheel would help separate and wind the thin fibers into thread or yarn. The distaff would come into play because it held the fibers. It wasn't easy work keeping the un-spun fibers untangled from the spun thread (which was wound onto a spool, just as it is today in modern factories). It would take nimble fingers, dexterity and many hours of practice. To think that, in some parts of the US, activities such as this really only ceased to be commonplace about 100 years ago is amazing. To think that, in some parts of the world today, it is still occurring is shocking and proof that the more things change the more they stay the same. It's proof that we should be thankful...

...Because one of the things that stays the same is how women multi-task. I think the verse is obviously talking about how a woman spinning thread was talented and industrious. As said above, she had to develop nimble fingers to keep the un-spun fibers free from the spun thread; she had to work to keep the 'crude' free from the 'refined.' The wife of noble character would have had to work to keep refining and spinning thread, feeding the spindle and wheel, keeping the unrefined fibers free and untangled, pumping the wheel with her foot (or perhaps turning it occasionally by hand), and winding the spun thread onto a fresh spool. It sounds exhausting because it was.

In a larger sense, the verse is talking about how the wife of noble character would have to multi-task. Men, in the 32 centuries since this proverb was written, what has changed? I mean, do I venture onto risky ground if I say that men and women perform tasks differently because we're wired differently? In my opinion, women are better at multi-tasking than men are. If you want to know more about why I say this, please do two things. One, read "For Men Only" by Shaunti Feldhahn and, two, email my wife. Ask her if she thinks I think she multi-tasks better than me. Men, the answer is obvious.

My wife is much better at simultaneously performing multiple tasks than I am. I have long thought this is one of the talents God gave women and not men. It isn't that men can't multi-task: it's just that women are better at it. Part of the proof is in the Proverb, but part of the proof is also just in common sense. Historically, women managed dozens of tasks just to manage a home. With women now making up half of the 'external' workforce, it's surprising that most homes are still managed and kept mostly by women. Does this mean men need to lend a bigger hand? Yes, I say it does. But it also means that even if men do, it still shouldn't surprise most folks that women might just do a better job at getting those many tasks done.

Why? Because women can multi-task better. This isn't sexist and it isn't an endorsement of the ideas of Gloria Steinham. It's actually a compliment and, I think, a fact of life. Many women are industrious, multi-talented, multi-faceted, and able to multi-task more effectively than their male counterparts. It's a God-given ability. Such a lady is the kind of lady a man of aspiring character would want for a wife. Sure, I know there are men in this modern nation who still want an industrious woman to only tend their houses; if that works for them in a marriage, God bless them both. I wanted more. I wanted someone who was kind, smart, fun, pretty, intelligent, curious, independent and able. And I wanted someone who could multi-task. I wanted a wife of noble character. Thanks be to God that He led me to one.

I've never seen my wife spin thread; to be honest, I'm not sure she would even know how to operate a spinning wheel. And I don't know that she would even want to try; I know I wouldn't, at least not because I had to. I'm glad to be able to go to a store to purchase the clothing I need. It's worth it to me to 'sub out' that function. In a way, that's sad. How would our society function if there were ever a grave crisis where we needed to know how to perform those ancient skills like raising good, self-defense, building your own shelter and, yes, spinning thread for cloth? If you live in the suburbs like me, your lifestyle – maybe your life – would be at risk. It works for many people in the world to not know how to perform tasks like spinning, but thank God He gave our forebears the ability to learn and master these kinds of work. And

thank God He gives us the ability to do the same if or when we will need to. Most of all, thank God for the women he put in the world who can perform multiple tasks at once with talent, grace and love.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 20 March 2012

A wife of noble character: she opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy. Proverbs 31, verse 20.

Last Friday, we opened our home for a party. It wasn't a party we threw: it was a party our daughter threw for her fiancé, our soon-to-be son-in-law. This was a stretch for us, you see, because we opened the doors and a group of (mostly) strangers flocked in. After all, it was a birthday party, there was free alcohol, and the 'strangers' were only strangers to my wife and I; they knew each other. We did get a chance to hang out with our future in-laws (who we knew) and got to meet some of the people our daughter and fiancé talk about. Were they needy? Aren't most young twenty-something's needy? True to form, they split when the beer ran out.

It's difficult for me to be a host, or really to be outgoing in any way. Time has made me better at it, but I'm still a shy host. If I go to a public place, I try to blend in. If I go to an airline club (and I frequently do) I usually find a corner to write (things like this) or hide. And if I'm in a party, I usually flock either to the back of the room, or to the bar...even in my own home! Not so my wife. She's fairly unafraid to jump into a crowd, even if it is a crowd of needy post-teenagers. She's very good at making people feel comfortable and wanted. It's a gift, and I admire her for it.

So I hope she isn't upset with me for so publicly giving away a secret: secretly, my wife isn't very empathetic. Ask her: she'll tell you. To get to where she is today, she has had to learn as she goes. She is a success because of her hard work and using the talents God gives her. But her overall attitude is that, when you're sick, you should suck it up & push through. If you have troubles, that's an awful thing (and she'll both pray for and help you through them) but you need to knuckle down and do what's necessary to overcome. Yet even while this is so, she has always been kinder and more loving to strangers than me. Gee, we sound like a real winning pair, don't we? I'm the insecure husband and she's the cold wife.

Not really. In fact, she's really quite kind. She insists that people be their best, do their best, and work their best to overcome adversities. She has overcome, more than anyone who knows her really knows. My wife is someone to admire, and if she has the attitude that, well, you just need to suck it up and get better, then it's because she's had to do that herself so many times. When I think of someone who inspires me to be both a better man and a better person in general, I think of her. I think of her because, despite her gruff exterior attitude, she's actually someone who extends her arms out to those in need. When kids leave the school for the night, they stop by her office to get a hug. She learned to be loving in this way when she let God move into her heart. He was there all along; she simply lets Him shine.

Me, I've had this kind of attitude only a few times. Some of the best advice I was ever given was "lose yourself in something bigger than yourself." They didn't know it but that's the essence of faith. It's easy to do on mission trips, when you're out of your normal routine and out of your normal place. If you visit a nation in Africa, you'll see hundreds of people in every tiny village who just want to be loved. Yes, they look at you as 'the Candy Man' and that you represent affluence and 'stuff,' no doubt. Far more important is that they look at you with eyes hungry for love, hungry to just matter. It's unavoidable that you would want to love them back, to just give those hugs. I'm not a touchy-feely guy, but one of the most moving moments of my life was simply holding this little girl in a village in Uganda, a little girl who clung onto my neck and wanted someone to simply hold and love her. It had me in tears then; it has me again as I write this. To love as Christ loves us, just because: that's an attitude to live for.

And it's an attitude that ANYONE of noble character, but especially a wife of noble character, can grow. The place where you live is full of people in need and they aren't just people out of work. The suburbs are people full of need and unhappiness, discontented at the life of false affluence. The cities are full of people in need, disillusioned at having to live a life of cloistered shelter in the middle of the crowd if only just to survive. The small towns are full of people in need, struggling at making ends meet emotionally when everyone else knows all your business. The workplaces are full of people in need because we all are forced to wear a false face, hiding our true feelings behind "I'm ok" and "just fine." The churches are full of people in need, practicing unloving traditions, spiritual control games, and the false gospel of "Jesus loves you if..." No matter where we are, we're people in need because we need Christ.

At the party last week was a friend of a friend. I'd met him before and discovered that he's a good guy, a solid young man living through a very tough time now. Ex-military, he is going through PTSD and disillusionment in his relationship, in his work, and in finding his way in a world he doesn't understand. Please pray for this man, that he would know some peace. And pray that God might use me to reach out to him and be a listener, a mentor, or a friend. I'm no wife of noble character, but I am man of that character when it is Christ living through me and not Dave living just for myself. My friend

of a friend is a man in need. I bet you know someone like him. Maybe it's time for both of us to open our arms and extend our hands in Godly outreach to just share as He shares. We all need a hug.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 21 March 2012

A wife of noble character: when it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet.
Proverbs 31, verse 21.

This winter, I've written quite a few of these proverbials from the northern US. Specifically, since last fall, I've written them from either Michigan or Minnesota. If you've never been to either place, all you need to know about winter here is that it's usually cold, bracing and snowy. In this part of the country, snow is usually measured in feet, and it's a badge of honor to say you enjoy the winter here. I lived in Minnesota for nearly 10 years and moved away in 1975. After weathering winter in Minnesota, Michigan, Montana, Massachusetts and even Maryland, I'll just say I'm thankful now to live in Texas.

Now that we're safely into spring, it's ok to say that this winter was the warmest in many years. It's odd; it's not what anyone expected. During normal years, people here don't let the cold or snow slow them down. In fact, some aspects of life revolve around the winter. Outdoor sports like hockey, snowmobiling, and cross country skiing are the norm. That scene in "Grumpy Old Men" where they're ice fishing? Yep: that happens on most every one of Minnesota's 10,000 lakes. But it didn't happen much this year. The St. Paul Winter Carnival wasn't as much of a success, and it was something of a let-down to not have so many days below zero. Talk to some of the locals and more than a few will tell you they're disappointed that things were so warm; yesterday, on the first day of spring, it was nearly 70 degrees, and it's supposed to be nearly 80 by the weekend. That's unheard of here. It's difficult to ice fish if the lakes aren't frozen. Mosquitoes, already plentiful any year, will be thick this summer. And there's a disappointment in the air at simply not having all the snow around.

Perhaps there are more than a few wives of noble character disappointed because their preparations didn't go to full use. If you've been reading these messages, I think you're seeing that one of the hallmarks of a wife of noble character is preparation. She uses her many talents to prepare for hard times. In ancient Israel (for that matter, in present day as well) a cold winter could be especially harsh. In that region, snow is rare but possible. The terrain and climate aren't conducive to people thriving in the winter. If it snowed, it could be a real hardship, especially in a part of the world that isn't far from where people really do still live as they did 3200 years ago. The wife of noble character wouldn't be afraid of that or afraid for the ones she loved. They would be ready for the storms because she prepared. She clothed them and provided safe, clean shelter. Her pantry would be full; she would have money set aside if a need arose; she would have stocked up on fuel; warm, safe beds would be at the ready.

What's more, the proof of all this would be in scarlet. The blood-red color of their clothing would be a sign of both color and affluent security. She could afford to dress her loved ones well in fashionable things instead of just the drab colors of mere sustenance. Wearing the bright color would be that badge of honor (something familiar to Minnesotans), like defying the cold weather and making a statement to it. It wouldn't be cheap to provide such clothing to her family, but the woman who had prepared ahead of time would have been able to do so. It was a labor of love.

Are things any different today? No, not really. Most home-makers do their best to store up, stock up and ready up. I have yet to meet a woman of noble character who didn't do her level best to provide better clothes for her family than she did for herself; when I've met women who didn't, generally, they weren't always of noble character. Whether it's socking away money for a needy moment, or making sure your kids always have hats and gloves the wife, mom, and woman of noble character is prepared for the time when the snow flies. Or, if you live in Phoenix, change "when it snows" to "when the sun is blistering" and your clothes of scarlet may become flip flops and a swimsuit. Either way, it takes work, forethought and above all Godly love to prepare for the people you cherish most.

Up here in the (usually) frozen tundra, my birth-stater's are complaining that there has been too much of that blistering sun and not enough of that flying snow. I've been thanking my co-workers for doing their best to provide us with a Texas-style winter instead of the usual Minnesota variant. Up here, I don't have a wife of noble character; mine lives north of Dallas. If the snow flies, I'm stuck with the clothes I brought along. But that's ok. I'm sure my wife would gladly pray for me...all while turning down the air conditioner in the car lest it get too chilly inside on a warm Texas spring day. She's prepared me so I'm prepared myself. That works no matter what the thermometer says because the wise use of one's time, talents and treasures is a gift from God.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 22 March 2012

A woman of noble character: she makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple. Proverbs 31, verse 22.

If you have teenagers, I'm thinking you'll agree with me: one of the hardest things to get a kid to do is to have them make their bed. See, I'm a bit obsessive about it. When I'm at home, even if it's 10 PM and I'm about to get in it to sleep, if the bed isn't made I'll straighten it out and make it. It's just the way I was raised, a small (and rather insignificant) life lesson about taking care of your space and getting it ready for the next time you need it. For me, a made-bed is a statement of self-respect, showing that you want your living space to look presentable, serviceable and prepared.

Not so my kids. It's almost like a point of pride for them to not make their beds. When I look at the jumble of sheets, blankets and pillows, I wonder how they don't get lost in the mess.

In a way, that's reflective of today's verse; mom's and dad's, if you're trying to teach your kids, use it at will. Chances are, their response to all this may be a rousing "so what?"

Good question. So what? What does this verse really mean? So what if some woman makes a bedspread? So what if mom wears nice clothes? I don't care for purple anyway and you can't buy good linen at Target. So what? 'So what' about what the verse says about wealth because it says plenty.

If you were in BC Israel, unless you were wealthy, your bed wasn't much. It wasn't a \$3000 Tempur Pedic, and it didn't have springs. In fact, it might have been a mat on the floor, or maybe a sack stuffed with straw or something like that. Chances are it wasn't very comfortable, especially if you worked doing very physical labor every day. Bed coverings like sheets, blankets or a spread would have been considered a luxury. Not many people had them, certainly not most common people. It's hard for us in America to realize that 7/8 of the world's population still doesn't have things like this that we take for granted (especially if you're a teenager). For a bed to actually have a blanket or a covering says a few things about she who owns it. She is industrious, and has proven that because she made money to buy fiber or fabric so as to fashion such coverings. She lives in relative comfort, and she is blessed. More than anything else, she lives a life of blessings.

In addition, if the woman of noble character is clothed in fine linen and purple, she is both affluent and well thought of. In ancient times, purple cloth was valuable because the dye to color it was rare and therefore expensive. Most ancient purple dye was made from shellfish, and it took thousands of mollusks to collect just a small amount of dye. You couldn't just run to Kroger and buy a jar of Rit to dye a bolt of cotton. It took many hours to collect and, thus, much work and effort. It wasn't cheap and commoners could not afford it.

Just like linen. Even today, fine linen is expensive. Then as now, fine linen is spun from high quality flax. Like the purple dye, it took a lot of work to spin, thread, weave, and sew fabric into linen. It was prized for its durability and cool texture even in hot weather. Ordinary people wouldn't own much fine linen; they wouldn't have been able to afford it. Kind of makes you see Wal Mart and Target in a different light, eh?

For the verse to say that a woman of noble character is clothed in linen or fine purple is to say that the woman is highly esteemed. She is to be admired and revered because her status, her character, and Godly nobility have brought her these wonderful rewards. Such a woman is wearing expensive items; those meant status and, usually, hard work. In the past, only kings and queens wore linen and purple. The woman of noble character should be treated like a queen. That she would have good bed clothing was also a mark of her position. She would be a woman of status.

In the verse, God is saying we should admire her, aspire to be like her in character, and respect her. She's Lady Thatcher, not Lady GaGa; she's the madonna of Nazareth and not the Madonna of the pop charts.

But that doesn't mean I'm going to treat my kids like royalty (even though I think they expect it). In fact, their beds usually don't get made without coercion. My youngest daughter is staying with us for a short while, and when I walk by her room I am dismayed. It's hard to believe this room is occupied by the same girl who used to be so tidy. Making her bed for her is like casting pearls before swine because as soon as she gets up in the morning, the tornado damage will return. She's a sweet girl; I just wish she'd tidy up more often. Ditto for her brother (except he isn't a sweet girl). Perhaps my expectations of how they'll treat their property (and our home) are misplaced, or perhaps they really do live like swine.

They're young adults, growing in the Spirit. As long as they develop the character worthy of noble royalty, I'm cool with it. Don't tell them that just yet, though. I don't want them to get mud on their crowns.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 23 March 2012

A wife of noble character: her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land. Proverbs 31, verse 23.

This is going to be tough for me to write because it's time to say some things again that I don't want to say about myself, and it's time to bring out some ugly truths so that the glory of God may be increased.

You've read it here before: I've cheated. I sought my comfort outside my marriage, and I stepped over the line more than once. If you think of the selfish, immature SOB who puts his family through hell so he can get what he wants, that was me. I want to talk about what happened a couple of years ago in particular. When you're down, disappointed and depressed, you don't see how other people in similar situations can seek you out. That's what happened when I got involved with another woman in my church. She was hurting, in a disastrous marriage, looking for someone to help her. We became friends and it didn't take long for that friendship to degenerate into a full-blown affair. And we were both devout Christians, members in good standing in our church! I wasn't a member of the formal leadership team – I had been asked to become one (I turned it down) – but I was an informal leader with a following. My life affected others but I refused to see it. She wasn't a leader either, but she was charismatic, pretty, bright and visible. Without divulging the details, her personal life was also a wreck, with abuse of many kinds being the norm and all kinds of ungodly things brought wrongly to her hearth. She had reached out to numerous people for help and they couldn't or wouldn't help her. But I did. And then I stepped over the line, we stepped over the line.

At the time, I didn't see that I had been a husband, respected at the city gate, sitting in my place among the elders of the land. That was possible because of my wife of noble character with whom I'd been struggling for awhile. Because of who she was, she made it possible for me to be 'somebody.' I was a visible, prominent member of my congregation and I threw that all away because I chose to be involved with another married woman who wasn't my own married woman. If you didn't know this about me and now you're disgusted, ashamed that I would do such a thing, you're in the right. I won't blame you if you stop reading and never come back; a decent person has that right. I hope you'll stick it out, though, because God's glory shone brighter after than even it did before.

I was a respected husband because, in large part, God had been at work in my life through my wife. We didn't have a perfect marriage; when a relationship suffers, it's rarely just one person's fault even when just one person (like me) does something so egregious. I was unhappy and desperate; she was unhappy and frustrated. Our life in the suburbs was anything but mundane, but I could honestly say then that she had worked her hardest to put all of herself into our relationship and still I did what I did. Something wasn't right and it wasn't her doing. I was able to live the life I did, to earn the respect I earned and sit with other people of good reputation in large part because my wife of noble character had submitted her all to our life.

And I crapped on it.

Have you ever lost your character and your standing because of something you did? I have. And here's the kicker: it wasn't the first time. It wasn't even the first time for a sin like this. If I had to list out all the ways I have defiled my character in this life, not even counting the ways I've defiled my wife's or God's, I wouldn't have time enough to write it. Such a list would take years to write. In the middle of realizing what hurt I had caused and the consequences of it, I sank into the worst depression of my life. It brought me to suicide, finding me sitting at my kitchen table while counting out pills to kill myself. Thinking I deserved the agony I was in because, in some way, I did. Thank God for a friend who interceded and talked me through it. And thank God for a wife who soon sought me out again to say "I forgive you. God isn't done with you yet." Most of all, thank God for His answering a prayer. That night, I was lower than I've ever been and I simply prayed to get through the night, that with His help I would face whatever happened in the morning but I needed help to get through the night. I put the pills away and slept hard that night, without those sleep aids I had intended to use as weapons.

And in the morning, God propped me up and helped me to face those challenges. He did it by reminding me to cling to Him in His words. To paraphrase the apostle John, I asked and He gave. He gave through the selfless love of a wife who had every right to disown and destroy me but sought to spread mercy instead. She made all the difference in the world.

The two years since then have seen more up's and down's; not the same sins but different challenges. We were still separated and it took time to reconcile. There were other times when I wanted to leave, to run out on my own and seek

my comfort elsewhere. Even as we were trying to reconcile, I poured my time into other relationships, trying to pull away, and in the process people, friends, family, got hurt. I wish I could take it all back, but I can't. One time last summer, I even moved out, briefly, only to find that God still wasn't done with me. It took prayer, devotion, talking, therapy, counseling, work, time and most of all love to get to the bottom of why we had had problems, and why I strayed. I lost friends, and some friendships changed; some haven't ever really recovered and may never. My position in life and my informal position in the church changed, and ways in which I had served before were now closed off to me by others. Those were some of the consequences. I don't feel at all like the man I used to be and I've taken active measures to change from being him. Even though he was me and I was him, my heart and head have changed. I want to be better, so I follow a better example. My wife of noble character was on point for me, spearheading the effort for God to be in my life and remake me into who He really intended for me to be.

Two years ago, I forfeited my seat at the gate only to find that God had another place in mind for me, another way to serve His purposes. The words you read here resulted from all this and they have been a blessing to many. That blessing isn't originally mine; it came from above, but because it was shared with me I now want to share it with you. We don't always see how our sins affect others, but they do. We also don't always see how our redemption can affect others in the same manner. I don't sit at the gate in the place where I used to, but I've been given a different seat and another opportunity to serve in a new way. The difference is that now I see plainly how my wife of noble character supports me in doing this. God, working through her, makes it all possible. It isn't always easy, it isn't always fun, and I don't always understand it. But it's always rewarding and always now I can see the hand of Him at work, shaping and remaking and turning my wrongs into good for others. For this, and for her and her patient mercy, I am now always thankful. Thanks for reading all the way through.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 26 March 2012

A wife of noble character: she makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes. Proverbs 31, verse 24.

Today, let's return to some of the things a wife of noble character does. Paraphrasing Mr. Jefferson, the truth of her works is self-evident. What she does is because of what you don't see, yet the truth you don't see is still self-evident in those works. What the wife of noble character does is, in the case of this verse, make salable goods. In the time it was written, she would make fine garments and sell them, and she would sell fine sashes to merchants who would then re-sell them for handsome profits.

In other words, she produces. She takes good things and makes them better. She supplies and purchases; she is able to produce a profit from her hard work. Everybody is better because of that.

Where do you stop giving praises for someone of such character?

I think that any society lauds hard work. I'm thankful for many things, but one of the things for which I'm most thankful is that my kids have good work ethics. All three were at work outside our home when they were 16; all three worked hard at their jobs. The older two are each in jobs many times subsequent to that original position (which, for both of them, was at a local ice cream shop). Youngest child works as a bus boy at a Mexican restaurant. I was up VERY early this morning because he came home after work very excited. In two days, he tipped out \$120. That's a phenomenal amount considering that he isn't even the server. What it is means he is a hard worker.

Both his mom and I work hard, but I'm giving her the biggest credit for instilling in our kids the work ethic that now serves them well.

Notice that the verse doesn't say that she LIKES working so hard. Perhaps it's still a virtuous thing for a person of noble character to do their work but not be fond of it. We were born to work, but any of us wishes for a time when we wouldn't HAVE TO work so hard. I find that the times when I enjoy work the most are the times when I'm doing something I enjoy for which I'm well-prepared. Perhaps it is the same for the wife of noble character. It's a pleasing thing to make something or do something that is held in high regard. That kind of feedback or reward makes it more worthwhile. Yet even in those times, don't we all long for some rest? Don't we all long to have a job that we want to do but don't have to do? I'm not going on vacation for another 3 months and I'm already eagerly anticipating it. I think our American society today is very consumed with leisure, viewing work as a negative thing that we have to tolerate. The wife of noble character may not see much that is pleasing in work, but I believe she would (like any of us) be pleased when it has a successful or rewarding outcome.

That's how God designed it. He designed Adam and Eve to work the garden, and that work was to be fulfilling. Before the fall, that work was rewarding, even an act of worship. After the fall, that relationship of God to man to work was corrupted. After, we would be compelled to work for our survival, only getting glimpses of the true reward that work can be. The verse seems to say that the wife of noble character works hard to make fine things that will net a profit and a just reward. I believe she has her eye on what it was in Eden. Her wares will earn her praise; her sales will earn her profits and those profits will secure her family.

Work, thus, is an act of love.

It's also a thing of craftsmanship. The things the verse talks about – linen garments and sashes – weren't things of ordinary commonplace. They were of best quality, fine products made with careful talent from the best materials. Earlier verses talk about her spinning flax into fine linen. That was done to make the garments described here, or those fine linen sheets for bed use. Making these things takes skill, refined talent, and many hours of dedication and patience.

Nothing has changed. The wife of noble character today still plies her trade with careful craftsmanship and abiding patience. She works in the discount store at a job she didn't dream of but that she is thankful to have in tough times. She works at home, making sticks and bricks into safe, encouraging refuge. She works in my office, testing applications and leading a team of experts in doing that. She leads a company, volunteers in school, flies an airplane, anchors a TV show, treats patients, empties the trash at the airport, or drives all day. And a wife of noble character works like mine, as

a director at a pre-school, shepherding children, helping other employees, and quietly witnessing God's love simply by smiling and being a friendly face. She pours her talents into doing her best and her witness is self-evident.

Simply said, a woman of noble character is Godly in what she does. Boil it all down, and that's the best way to describe her and the way she works.

Two of my three kids are still teenagers, but all three are young adults. I wish we could afford to provide them with new cars, the most fashionable clothes, trendy vacations and the best of everything for free. That's impossible: we aren't in Congress. They won't be getting those things from me, but if they work hard and use the ethic best demonstrated by their noble character mom, then nothing in life is impossible. If they do that and cling to the faith of their fathers, then no matter where life takes them they will know real success as peace.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 27 March 2012

A wife of noble character: she is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come. Proverbs 31, verse 25.

Whether you know it or not, today is a milestone. If you read this blog on Wordpress, you're reading the 500th Practical Proverbs posting. I started writing these to post them on Facebook. It was a coping mechanism when my marriage was falling apart. A friend said he read the Proverbs every day and then contemplated that reading all day long. That sounded good and I started writing. It didn't take long to then build a blog and, voila, here we are at number 500. God is good. Where we go next with them I'm still prayerfully contemplating.

At this milestone, while we're here, let's contemplate a strong, dignified, courageous woman. Three women immediately come to mind (not in this order): Margaret Thatcher, Christina Hendricks, and my wife. Baroness Thatcher is obvious. Even if you aren't a conservative, you have to admit that she is a woman clothed with strength, dignity, and that she has backbone; she isn't called "The Iron Lady" for nothing. First among equals, she had the political strength and the character to overcome her nation's fiscal and social bankruptcy and build from those into something better. She was a leader at a time when Europe was leaderless and adrift.

Then there is the indomitable Ms. Hendricks. I'm a "Mad Men" fan and have long thought the sultry red-haired actress was quite pretty. It's really her current character that intrigues me though; it's the character that has those qualities from the verse. She plays someone as sleek as the 60s couture in which she's clothed. Underneath that façade, she's also got real grit and can stand toe to toe with the chauvinist male characters that populate most of the cast. I haven't seen Ms. Hendricks in many other roles, but I imagine it's no small chore to be a curvy, confident dignified lady in an industry where rail thin is considered obese. Props to her for being who she is; maybe it's not all acting.

But above those two (or anyone else) I submit my wife. I've known her for 29 years, and have been her significant other for 25. During that time, I've put her through quite a bit of hell, and I've dragged the woman around the world (literally) while pursuing my various careers. I first met her when she was a country girl in a small southern Indiana town. There was something about her that told me, almost from the time I first got to know her well, that she had a deep vein of golden strength in her. Through our time together, she's found faith, shared and grown it, learned to stand up and be proud, and become the kind of person I want to be.

When I think of a woman of noble character, one clothed with Godly strength and dignity who can laugh at the harsh trials of life because she knows she can overcome them, I think of my wife. I've always been attracted to strong, attractive, but witty and fun ladies, yet nobody else I've ever known really measures up to her. I'm not going to over-idealize the lady; she'd be embarrassed if I read these words out loud. Her favorite Bible verses, though, are from Romans 5 where Paul talks about how God works for our best in all things, how suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, and character produces hope because of what God did in His Son.

It takes a person of substance, strength, and dignity to make those words her theme in life. She chose them many years ago, years before we ever started growing together in God. He knew her 'when' and He knew He would make her into a Godly woman of substantive dignity. The people she grew up with underestimated her. If you knew her all those years ago in southern Indiana, you might not have seen her in that light...but God did.

And I did. I'll always be thankful for the day when I realized that I saw her in that light just as I will always be thankful she's given me far more chances than I ever deserved. She did it because of love and mercy, her love and her mercy which are God's love and God's mercy. The tough times we've had, and there have been many, many of them over our quarter century, have toughened her but they haven't defeated her. She learned to persevere and let that perseverance deepen into character that produced the solid promise of hope.

What's more, we laugh a lot. After a couple has loved and hated each other, married, separated, fought, reconciled, fought again, reconciled again, controlled, rejoiced, parented, worshipped, struggled, bankrupted, recovered, worked, played, and lived together, we still laugh. Indeed, after so much time and so many trials, I see her in a wholly different light now. She makes me smile. I much prefer to 'cut up' than to be serious all the time, but I find now that the humor comes more from the heart rather than just as a way to cope. We have endured many tough times, those left over from growing up, those with us as a couple, those of her design and those of my making; sins all and challenges every one. Through them, though, we laugh more. We laugh because we know, she knows, that it's a tough old world out there. In that tough world, God has her back and has prepared us for those challenges. A woman who can laugh at the world is a

woman who knows she can overcome the world's worries and petty fears. It's not a laugh of arrogance or over-confidence. It's laughing knowing that we're covered.

On a 500th post anniversary, that's something worth celebrating. Sometime next week, God-willing, we'll finish out the book of Proverbs and I'll probably take a short break. Gonna rest the noodle for a week or two while listening to where God takes me. These days, I'm thankful that He's guiding me along my journey at the side of a strong, dignified, and confident woman of noble character. For too long I searched for someone like that, not realizing she was by my side all along. No matter how many blog posts there are, and no matter how many years we have together, I'd stand my lady up against Lady Thatcher, the red-haired Ms. Hendricks, or anyone.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 28 March 2012

A wife of noble character: She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue. Proverbs 31, verse 26.

In marriage, your roles reverse. Maybe that's true in any relationship, but it seems especially true in marriage. What I mean is that, over time, you take on the attributes and attitudes of your partner. Perhaps it's a function of living together, or learning to adapt your behavior to accommodate others'; I really don't know. No matter, over time, I've found that I act more like my wife and she acts more like me.

In our relationship, she is the wise one and the better teacher.

Now, I'm the dude who writes about these verses every day, and I'm the guy with years of formal & vocational teaching under my belt and the degree to back those up; rah rah sis boom bah, chucka chucka chucka. Over time, though, I've come to see that my wife is naturally much wiser and better at these things than my years of formal training have made me. Tonight, she'll pause to celebrate another milestone, this one our daughter's 19th birthday. Me, the formally trained consultant (aka "educated idiot") am 900 miles away, sending my love long-distance when I can't be there in person. It's a job thing and today is going to be a big day at work. Still, it's not where I want to be. Over time, I hope to be there more often, especially for days like today. Over time, I hope to be more with my wife and my family because I want to act more like my wife and hope she doesn't act like me.

On her birthday, it's my prayer that our youngest daughter will grow into a woman of noble character like her mother: a woman who speaks with wisdom, where faithful instruction is on her tongue. Mom has been around the block and is no stranger to the ways of the world. Before I even brought my own brand of hurt, she knew hurt on her own. When she speaks, she speaks with quiet, unassuming authority purchased with experience. Her wisdom understands how the world works, how deception of the heart is aimed at the soul, how our actions compile on one another, how tough it can be. These days, that wisdom is coupled with another, making her shrewd as a snake but innocent as a dove when she is sent out into the world. These days, her wisdom is guided from above, from the God who takes away the sins of the past and replaces them with the sure promise of a future in hope. On her birthday, I pray our daughter listens to this woman because she knows about life and how it should be lived.

That woman is also unafraid to teach. She can't help it: because of her position and her disposition she lives every moment as a teachable one. Faithful instruction is on her tongue because true instruction was impressed on her heart. It happened in Bible camp over the summers, in church and in Bible study, in women's groups in the towns of several states. More than any of those places, God's faithful instruction was stamped onto her soul when she went to Him, asking Him to guard and love her heart, to keep her and the people she loved safe when we were all under attack. Her prayer is answered anew every day that we go to sleep at night safe, resting up to begin again with the morning. Ask her some time. Email her. She might be a little embarrassed at first, but if you get her talking (and you will), you'll find she's friendly and will faithfully, honestly tell you that what she believes is the truth and why that matters. On this birthday, I want our girl to remember this as well.

Mom is a great example of the kind of woman I hope my daughter grows into. The real heroes in this life aren't the celebrities, the fashionable or the famous. Real heroes are much wiser and instructive, and they're everywhere even if they don't get much credit for it.

It's hard to grow up in this so-called modern world. I've said it before that I don't think kids today have it any tougher, but I do think they have a set of challenges and technologies at their disposal that make growing up today different. Youngest daughter is going through a tough time these days, but I want her to know that the tough times will pass and that the hard work she's doing to get through them bring great credit on her. I want her to know that all the parties in the world can't replace the feeling of someone who really loves you. That even if 'that guy' hasn't found her yet, he's out there and she's worth the wait. I want her to remember that her mom and dad are testament that no sin is unforgivable and that God can heal anything even when we've given it up for dead. Most of all, I want her to know that she's loved and held special by us, but mostly by God whose love knows no end and whose love meets her first and foremost every day in the example she sees from her mother.

In marriage, roles reverse. The more you think of it, it's the mark of a good marriage. I get the good blessing of being able to write these things and share them with you, becoming more willing to talk in quiet about matters on my heart. In the past, these quiet moments are ones you'd more likely find from my wife. Today, she also gets to work one on one with people, professing what she believes more by what she does and the way she acts than necessarily by the words

she says. Her job prevents her from any real active witnessing, and that's something she'd probably feel reluctant to do anyway. In other words, she's become like me. My hope on our daughter's birthday is that she'll be more like her mother when it comes to accepting and then living out the simple truth of faith, then maybe more like both of us in confidently expressing it. God can reverse any role in our lives, and He always uses them for the greater good to make us wise, teaching witnesses for Him. Happy birthday Samantha Morgan. Mom and Dad love you very much.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 29 March 2012

A wife of noble character: She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. Proverbs 31, verse 27.

She is industrious and not lazy. Right?

We're planning a really nice vacation this year. I don't yet know if it will happen, but for the first time in a few years, we're planning to get away for a week to a resort where we will all relax. My wife, myself, and our four kids are planning to get away to Arizona in July and we're all already looking forward to this. Five days at a hot, sunny pool with frothy drinks in our hands, sleeping late with no schedule, maybe a massage and some other unplanned activities; palm trees, sand, take out food, no emails. Right about now, that sounds pretty good to me.

It sounds good to my wife as well. I work long hours away from home, but she works even longer ones. Her day starts at 0315 when she sets the first alarm. She finally gets out of bed some time after four, spends an hour getting ready, checking email, reading, piddling around and making coffee. At 5 we have a morning devotion together and coffee, then I sometimes make breakfast so she can get out the door by 6. She works a full day until sometime between 4 and 6, depending on the availability of teachers, how many kids are in the school, etc. She's usually home by 6, when we have dinner, relax, talk, do some bills or activity (she sometimes brings home things to tally or code), and she's usually in bed by nine. On the weekends she may even work a day because she needs to catch up on office work she couldn't get to during the week; the school where she works is chronically short-staffed.

Have I mentioned that she's industrious and not lazy? I bet you get the picture. She needs that vacation more than anyone else in our family.

To me, she is a Proverbs 31 woman, specifically one that watches over the affairs of her household AND doesn't eat the bread of idleness. She has always liked to keep busy; even when she worked from the home (or in the home) she always kept occupied. My wife has always been active in keeping our home, especially as regards our finances. I'll admit: sometimes this has driven me bonkers. It's not an area in which I'm strong, and at times I felt used. But I see now that I'm thankful for the gifts she has because some of them are ones I don't have and our household needs. She's a planner by nature, and it takes someone with that talent to run a household when you don't make much money and you're always on the go. Come to our house at any time in the last 23 years and you'd never find the bread of idleness served with any meal.

Oh, and let's get this out there: watching over the affairs of her household doesn't mean standing by while her husband philandered. She didn't. In those affairs, she confronted me and took action. During those critical days, her first action was always to go to God first, so that she could walk in His will wherever that took her. It wasn't a done-deal that we would stay together. Other women have (and should) leave a man like me, but she saw something different. Whether we stayed or left, she reached out to me to re-introduce God to me. It wasn't that God had abandoned me: it was that I had turned away from Him. She still wanted to have a life with me because she believed that's the life God was leading her to live. Even when we were separated, even during the times when she disliked and even hated me, she loved me. She watched over our house, over the goings on and the make-up of our household, even when she lived apart from it in emotion and in fact. That's been the difference in turning things around and changing. After so long, things are better in a way that can last.

There are many housewives in the world who are desperate (and they aren't on TV). Most housewives aren't. I don't envy the work that housewives do because it's tough work. There's even more work to do when you choose to work outside the home and also keep one going. I'm thankful that my job allows me to work from home part time because I'm able to help out with things that she doesn't always have the time to do. Truthfully, I used to resent that, and she did as well. But working through our problems I think we both found that, for our relationship, having the perfect house wasn't one of the things that mattered so much. We get the laundry & dishes done, we make the bed, we keep it tidy and mostly picked up (or as much as you can when you still have kids living at home). We do all that while both working full time and keeping busy schedules. Me, I've learned quite a lot from her about how to manage life while managing work. I've said it before that I believe women multi-task better than men. I believe it's because that industriousness is part of a lady's nature, not just a learned behavior. I've learned that by living with someone who does it well.

So, in a few months we'll (hopefully) be sitting at that resort in Phoenix, resting on our laurels. Everyone wants a nice vacation but, to tell the plain truth, nobody deserves one. I met hundreds of people during mission trips in Africa and Asia

who, I assume, never got a day off let alone a vacation at some posh resort. All I can do is pray for them, and pray that taking this trip is the right thing to do. God doesn't want us to feel guilt when He provides us with opportunities. The trick is making sure we do the Godly thing about them. I don't know if sitting by a pool for a week is a Godly thing, but I do know that it's something I'd like to do for my lady. She works harder than anyone I know and I'd like to give her some time away to recharge before we jump feet first into the rest of a very busy year.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 30 March 2012

A wife of noble character: her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her. Proverbs 31, verse 28.

This verse has been a long time in coming. God has given me this forum to share some things about my wife these last few days. Before that, most of what I've written here has been about other things, other people, happenings in my life and what they mean in light of the Proverbs. These last few verses have been about the wife of noble character, however, and I'm thankful that this is the way it is. Praise for the woman at my side is long overdue, not so much from others but definitely for me.

I'll share something: as I was writing those columns these past years she sometimes told me of her frustration that I didn't write more about her and what we were doing to work through problems and reconcile. My response was usually "that's coming" because I had read ahead and knew this time, God willing, was just up the road. Now that it's here it is the time to give her some of the praise that I think she was wondering about.

I wish our children would arise every morning and call her blessed. Nothing would make me happier than to hear that they called Mom and said "hail Kimberly full of grace." Ok, maybe that's a bit over the top, but you get my drift. I would love for them to more regularly, publicly, earnestly give their mom some well-deserved praise. Kids are kids, and most kids I know shy away from that gushy stuff, at least when people are looking. Me, I wish they would overcome their fear of being un-cool to more publicly pour some praise on mom. She has long earned it.

It's not that the wife of noble character is vain. It's simply the way things are that her children would consciously want to arise and call her blessed. She proves her worth day in and day out by living the life she does. Loyal mother, caring partner, capable worker, loving friend, invaluable teacher, shrewd businesswoman, woman of faith: that she should be called blessed is never in question. Why her children wouldn't use all their waking hours to call her that may be.

Ditto for her husband. A man married to such a woman can't keep quiet about it. In his own way, he praises her and praises God for her in his life. He sees how the things she does affect others. He understands that she is someone special, not just to him, but special just because. He feels her presence in the good things that happen to him. Her husband knows that he is blessed by having her in his life because she is blessed by God. I know these things because they're true in my life.

Mind you, I don't want you to get a picture that isn't true; I don't want you (or me) to idealize this woman. It would be easy to do that, and if I did it would be falling for a subtle attack designed to draw us away from the truth. There are blemishes in her past, things she doesn't like to talk about; don't we all have those? There are behaviors I see that others don't, and some of them aren't attractive. She'd tell you I'm no walk in the park, too. Even the 'perfect' couples struggle during the early years of marriage. It's natural to do so when two people are forming a single union.

We did, and it took years for both of us to find our identity as a couple instead of just as two people. I gave up several times, insisting that I was so done and that I simply couldn't live in the relationship any more. Yet one thing I held onto, even in those dark times, was that I could always give her praise. Her character, her faith, her devotion to our kids, her caring heart: even when we were pulling apart, those things were always evidence of God in her life and always worthy of praise. During the times when I thought we were going to divorce, I still could admire my friend. When you really love someone, you don't give up on them. It's a 'Fireproof' idea: you never leave your partner behind. She didn't leave me behind and I didn't leave her behind. After all the up's and down's, we're still standing and can talk about these things in the hope that others will draw God's strength from them, maybe learn from our mistakes.

That's why I wake up each day now and spend the first minutes of it with her. And that's also why I would love to see our kids more effusively give her praise. It would probably embarrass them and I'm sure it would embarrass her. When I get home, I think I'll encourage them to do it anyway. She's a mom of noble character, and those aren't just a dime a dozen.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 2 April 2012

A wife of noble character: "Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all." Proverbs 31, verse 29.

Notice that this is a quote. That makes it different from the other verses in this chapter. All of those are observations, praiseful observations to be sure but made in the third person. Not so here. Here, it's first person, as if the writer wanted to say something to his own wife. Remembering that chapter 31 of the Proverbs is 'the sayings of King Lemuel,' the writer may indeed have been a man. Or it could have been a mother, reflecting on the qualities she wanted in a wife for her son. Or, it could be Solomon himself, writing under a pseudonym so as to give a different kind of glory to God.

No matter who it was, this is a personal quote; a snippet of conversation preserved for all time. From the sound of it, this could be the start of a public love letter. Is that surprising if you think of all of Scripture as a love letter from God to us, full of drama, musings, lessons, reflections, hopes, dreams and, above all, that love? The Bible is the story of humanity, of human history and how a God of perfect love made His people for that love. He wrote through dozens of people to tell us how to always come back to him. It's a love letter. Permit me then, to share a few paragraphs of my own love letter that could be long overdue.

To my patient and noble wife Kimberly, I know many women who do noble things but you surpass them all. We've known each other almost 30 years, and in that time we've grown, fought, liked, hated, challenged, admonished, cherished, abandoned, hurt, comforted, supported, defended, but loved each other. Before I met you, I worked in a position of honor, doing things I was proud of and some that I wasn't. But the work mattered to me because it was good and I was part of something that served a greater good. I was good at what I did and enjoyed the life I led. It could be lonely, but it was honorable and something to be proud of.

I didn't know about nobility until I met you.

You taught me about being noble just by being yourself. Someone who is noble has high moral qualities. In a fallen world, where all of us are tainted with degrees of tragedy and disgust, one who works to rise beyond that and lives to do better is a person of good character. One who grasps faith and shares it while doing so becomes noble. That's you. In living your life, you live out your beliefs and you are the kind of person I want our daughters to be. You've become strong but not stony, and your strength is not just your own or your experience. It's your faith in God.

I have learned more about God at your side than I ever learned before. More than any college degree or anything else on earth, those are lessons that will last forever. Through His eyes you saw me when I was good, when I slipped and fell, when I became a destroyer; through His eyes you saw things in me that others had given up looking for. You constantly teach me to seek first the wisdom of Christ in how I move in the world, and you constantly remind me that it's good to look in the mirror of faith so as to see things we need to see. It is a pleasure and an honor to grow in faith with you, and I know our journey is both continuing and just begun anew.

You found me where I was and made me better. You shared dreams of being more, and helped make them into reality. It's true that the things, the prosperity, and all we've wanted from this world together haven't always come to pass. What we've been blessed with – faith, family, friends, hope – is far better. I can't conceive of living life, of having any of the success I have known, of having anything at all, without you and all you've given to me.

I never really knew what nobility was until I learned about it from you. Through all the up's and down's, you have always strived to do better, become more, live more faithfully than before. God not only guarded your heart: He taught all of us around you through you. I was a fool to ever doubt that God knew what He was doing when He put the two of us together. God not only knew what He was doing but He blessed my life just by being around you. I can't conceive anymore of being at someone else's side because I don't want to conceive of life without being at yours.

You can quote me on that.

I don't know that my paltry words will be read a thousand years from now; I sincerely doubt it. What I do know is that the love of God lives in your heart, my wife of noble character, and that will live forever. It lives in your heart, shines in your smile, and glows luminous from your soul. Your noble character is God's gift that you share with all of us, and you're the kind of person I have always wanted to become. I'm blessed, fortunate, and humbled to have the privilege of being called 'your husband,' and I'm thankful for every minute to do so.

Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 3 April 2012

A woman of noble character: Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. Proverbs 31, verse 30.

My wife and I have been married for 23 years. When we got married, George (HW) Bush was president and gas was under \$1.15. Back then, I was 50 pounds lighter; back then, she didn't have gray hair where her part meets her scalp. The big movie that year was "Batman" with Jack Nicholson, and the New Kids on the Block were actually new while Donny Osmond was trying to make a comeback. At the time we were married, I was stationed at Fort Meade, Maryland, and the night of our rehearsal dinner we received orders to report to a base in Southern Italy that following October. We didn't have kids, we didn't have a mortgage (let alone our fourth), we didn't drive a minivan, and we didn't go to church.

And even then, God was at work in us. Even then, He was drawing us together. For both of us, in the years ahead we would learn about charm and we would learn about beauty. We would even learn how to fear and praise the Lord. It wasn't a process that started overnight and it sure hasn't finished overnight. In fact, it hasn't finished at all.

Through it, I find that it is my wife who is to be praised. Today is the Tuesday of Holy Week. Yesterday was the day when Christ expelled the moneychangers from God's house, cleansing it of impurities. We should do the same of our sins, ridding ourselves of bad habits and things that drag us down into sin. Knowing that, traditionally, Tuesday is when Christ sat in the temple and taught, then went out to Bethany to be anointed by his friend. It was the day when He taught the parables of the two sons, the tenants who killed the master's servant, and the story of the man who tried to enter the wedding banquet. It was the day when He said that the greatest commandment of all is to love God then love our neighbors as ourselves. Finally, it was the day when He started speaking woes to people, grieving in public for the Divine love that would be taken from them because they rejected it. In the background, the conspiracy to kill Him had already begun.

My wife knows these things better than me. I'm betting she would tell you that she doesn't know all the stories or the order in which they happened. Yet she's heard them all through her life and she understands their lessons much better than I do. It's the details she wouldn't recite verbatim. I think that's because she doesn't need to. She is a woman who sees the world as it is. Details matter but details aren't the whole story and sometimes not even the real story. My wife knows better than me how charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

She knows it better than I do because she has more freely trusted God in all things. It's not that I don't believe: I do. I simply acknowledge that she's better at putting that belief into practice than I am. My wife can do this because she respects, listens to, submits to, and is a friend of the Lord. Again, I am those things as well, but in a different way. I see that she's better at it than me. For a long time, I felt threatened by that. Isn't that a stupid thing to be threatened by? That the person closest to me would be a stronger believer than me? It's petty jealousy; got skin, got sin as our friend Patrick would say.

Yet it's still the truth. She's a stronger believer than me. I can tell you more of those book-smart things that happened in the Bible but she can better relate to you what they really mean. Part of our growing together has been the realization that we're a yin and yang combination, that our differences together make us able to grow more alike as one. What I don't understand she helps me understand; what she doesn't know I'm able to teach. Through it, I still say she's a stronger believer than me, and from this I'm no longer threatened. Instead, I'm proud to be one who can praise her for her faith. It's a very real thing, and a thing very much worthy of praise.

That's amazing considering that we have had our own struggles with prosperity. Any young couple wrestles with charm and beauty. We did. We're people, we're Americans and we're free: it's part of our culture that we'd become wrapped up in the pursuit of 'stuff.' The world beckons us, and to be fair, some of that beckoning isn't all bad. But whether it's property, wealth, position, clothes, possessions, friends or advantage, 'stuff' is (to me) whatever drags you down. Things can be charming at first, but the charm can hide an obligation. External beauty is a function of work and makeup; that which is of the world is bound to decay. When that happens, debt, distraction, and dissolution are things that can await you if you take your eye off the ball. I'd be lying to you if both of us still didn't occasionally feel the pull of stuff in our lives. It's easy to let bills, obligations, and desires for more things pull you away from what's better. That tug is constant; it's one of the enemy's effective tactics. The trick is realizing that he's tugging you with a rope around your neck.

Kudos, then, to my wife (anyone in fact) who's learned that faith in the Lord is the antidote to cure this common poison.

So on this Tuesday of Holy Week, 23 years (this month) since we got married, I'll raise a toast to my wife and acknowledge that I'm thankful to learn with her and from her about things that matter most. Namely faith, eternity, selflessness and love, then how to share those in ways that matter. God has been at work at us in each of the four decades in which we've been married. He's at work in us still.

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Daily Proverbial, from Proverbs, 6 April 2012

A woman of noble character: give her the reward she has earned, and let her words bring her praise at the city gate. Proverbs 31, verse 31.

Some books in the Bible just end. Take Acts (or 'the Acts of the Apostles.'). There isn't an ending or benediction to it. It simply ends, leading us to conclude that there really is no conclusion. The journey simply continues. So it is with the book of Proverbs. God's sayings are many and varied, but they don't end. They continue. They are His recorded advice and common sense, pertinent to every age in future history. Even when you reach the end of a chapter or book, the lessons still continue on.

For instance, all these last few verses about the woman of noble character. It's safe to say that what we've learned about her is that her character is evidence of her faith. She is who she is because she is a woman of God. She is a woman, a wife, a partner, a friend, a confidante, a teacher, a worker, and a child of God. She is the equal of any wise man even as her role, like herself, is different. As a woman of noble character, she earns her time in the sun. It isn't just given to her by others: she's earned it. That's worthy of praise and admiration. Giving her that praise is the Godly and right thing to do.

And then there is the lesson that heaven is not just later: heaven is here and now. Our reward is heaven, and the reward for the wife of noble character is heaven. So many pastors would have us end a discussion of heaven at "later." "That's for then, this is now." Really? I don't think so. For the Godly, for that woman of noble character, heaven is here and now. This isn't the eternity we're promised, but the good in this world is a glimpse of it. That perfect eternity really does come later, and at a moment's notice for which the wife of noble character is already prepared. Where we spend our lives now, in union and faith with God, though, may just be where we will spend our eternity. This very earth may itself be where our heaven will be restored. Give the woman of noble character her reward. She has earned it, both now and for later.

There's that city gate again. People come and go, in and out of the city through that gate. It's where you would find the learned, the wealthy, the prominent people. They would be on top of their game at the city gate. Make a place for the wife of noble character there at the gate. She is first among equals and has earned her time in the sun there. Men and women are different, to be sure, but the wife of noble character isn't some shrew to be trampled under foot, just some subservient helpmate to the man's headship. She is Queen Esther, leading and bringing many sons to Glory. Honor her place at the city gate where many may be inspired by her countenance.

Along the path of my life I have so far met many extraordinary women. My mom is extraordinary. She was independent and liberated before feminists ever learned to shave their hairy legs. Her mom was extraordinary too, and I didn't even really know her in her prime. My daughters are extraordinary, at least to me. Ditto my sister and sister in law, both of whom have made successful careers and prosperous lives. And my mother in law; I won't forget her because she too is extraordinary. My dad's three sisters are extraordinary. They are our family's matriarchs, inspiring the rest of us with dignity in the face of adversity, facing down dread times with courage and resolve, and loving kindness in all things. There were teachers (Missus Kennan, Winn, Pickens and Herbert specifically come to mind) who were, in my opinion, surely the best ever in their trade. There was an old friend in Florida who was a single mother of two girls, managed a retirement park, and is one of the most resilient people I've ever met. Not far from her is the born again friend, someone who has become a teacher of faith to me and an inspiration in dark times. Bonnie, my former manager in Colorado, taught me quite a lot about corporate America and loyalty to the people around you. And there is Ann, who confirmed me at the Presbyterian Church in McAlester. She was the first female minister I've ever known and a truer believer in the Lord you'd be hard to ever find.

After all these weeks of reading, I hope you get the sense now that I think my wife is the most extraordinary of all. All those other ladies – mentors, friends, coworkers, and family – are accomplished and noble in their own ways. None of them, or any of the many I've left unmentioned, can hold a candle to the lady at whose side I am fortunate to stand. She's earned a reward far better than me, one far better than anything I could ever provide. All of us who know her are blessed to do so. She's fiercely loyal, devastatingly competent and quite fun to be around. She also has cute toes and makes some really killer strawberry jam. When I think of a wife of noble character, one who embodies all the best qualities that the Lord wanted women and men alike to know from these Proverbs, to emulate, I think of her. Thank you, my honey, for being with me, and for standing with me. You could have walked away but you make life wonderful just by being you and staying. I admire and love you.

Today is a day of change. This is the last verse in the book of Proverbs and thus it will be a transition point in our journey together. I don't know how many thousands of words we've shared on this trek, but it has been quite a few. Lots of prayer

and thought has gone into where to go from here, and I know now where that will be. God willing, there will be more words up ahead after a short time away to collect them and rest up. Wherever the words have led, I hope you know even more now that the most proverbial thing any of us could say is "Jesus loves me this I know." Not many words to make that musical phrase, but they say much more than all of mine combined. Three thousand years ago, King Solomon didn't know Him by name, but he knew what those words would mean. After all, they were proverbial. Many years from now, those words will still be much more than simply true. Some books and journeys end. This one continues.

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