

St. Paul's Dorking Small Groups 5th October 2008

HARVEST FESTIVAL

PROVERBS 3:1-10



Word: Key points from Sunday's sermon

The Book of Proverbs was probably written (at least in part) by King Solomon who, when asked by God what gift he would like, asked for wisdom (see 1 Kings 3). So Proverbs has been around for quite a long time! It is practical stuff rather than deep theology, filling in the gaps about daily behaviour and attitude that are not really dealt with by the Jewish law. Yet Proverbs is more than just an ancient book of manners. It describes a way of life that is firmly centred around a deep, but practical faith in God, affecting the whole of life.

1. Giving (v. 9). Honouring is all about paying homage, showing gratitude and trust. And giving to others, for God's work, is how we can show that we honour God. But notice it doesn't say we are to honour God with **some** of our wealth, not even with a tithe, but simply with *our wealth*, i.e. **all** of our wealth. However we spend and use whatever we have, it should be honouring to God. This is a whole life-style thing, not just about a part of life, not just giving a portion of what ever we have. Clearly, though, we can and should give money and gifts at a time like Harvest, when we remember those who have not got as much as us in a material sense. Those of us who have given when under financial pressure ourselves, especially in today's precarious climate - when some of us will have seen the value of our savings dwindling or may even have lost our job - well, that shows faith and courage which God will himself honour and reward.

In Kenya they do Harvest a bit differently: they bring whatever they produce to church with them, whether it be bananas or live chickens and they are auctioned in the church - or maybe outside if it's a goat - to raise money. But if we're not into raising chickens, might it mean something else to give of our wealth, our *first fruits*? We explored this in some detail last year for our First Fruits Sunday in December, and I guess it means giving our very best of whatever God has given us. E.g. things other than money or food that we can give to others, like our time and our talents.

2. Running through all these verses is a relationship of love. The passage is written as though God, as a parent, is talking to his child, and the words *God* or *the Lord* appear everywhere, because it's all about our relationship with Him. Notice how often the word *heart* appears v.1, 3, 5. The heart is the very essence of a person. In v. 8 where the writer refers to health in our body and our bones, this also means the whole person and describes how our relationship with God affects everything about us. Being a Christian is not something we simply add on to all the other things we do: we are fundamentally changed, new creations, as St Paul says (2 Cor 5:17). This relationship with God, being this new creation, is characterised by an indwelling love rather than following the letter of the law. The instruction in v 3 echoes that in Deuteronomy, which comes after the great Jewish declaration of faith and the commandment to love God (see Deut 6:4-9). But in v. 3 it is not the Law we are to bind around us but love and faithfulness. That's what God's teaching and commands are built on.

3. The **key verses** in this passage are v. 5-6. The words *trust* and *lean* have a similar meaning, *lean* being used in the sense of getting support or relying on something. And we are urged to do this with our whole self, our heart. The word *acknowledge* in v. 6 implies knowing and being aware of God, being in fellowship with Him through His Holy Spirit at all times. This is a present tense, continuous activity, not an afterthought. And if we do this, God will direct us. The bit I have found most difficult is almost hidden in the 2nd half of v.5: it's *lean not on your own understanding*. Too often I approach a situation thinking I know what God wants. But it aint necessarily so! Quiet time set aside for listening to God is an essential ingredient in our continuous fellowship with Him.

Witness: questions to discuss

1. Think back to last Autumn's First Fruits study/Sunday. What difference did it make to you? Is it still making a difference? Why/why not?
2. In what ways do we entrust out money and possessions to God? And what is the barrier to giving Him even more?
3. Look at Proverbs ch 1 for the reason why it was written. How easy is it nowadays to give people advice on how to behave? In the recent TV programme *Make me a Christian*, several un-churched individuals were challenged to live by Christian principles *before* they had come to faith. Was this a good way of introducing them to the Gospel?
4. Our walk with God is not a "bolt on", we are "new creations" and Jesus said in John 3 that we need to be "born again", a term often thought unhelpful by those outside the church. How else would you describe what this means?
5. What spiritual disciplines/practices do you think are needed in order to maximise our ability to bind love and faithfulness around us?
6. Share in 2s and 3s times when you have heard God helping you to make a decision you would not have done if you were not a Christian.
7. Look at 2 Peter 1:2-8. Which of these faith characteristics do you think is most/least evident at St Paul's?