

Substantially Honouring the Lord

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 21st of November 2004.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Substantially Honouring the Lord and is based on Proverbs 3 verses 1 to 18.

Please be seated. May I like to turn again to the Bibles in the pews to page 510 to Proverbs chapter 3, which is the passage I'm preaching on this morning.

And as I mentioned at the beginning, this is what we call Commitment Sunday, the final of three weeks of sermons on the issue of our commitment and response to God.

Let me pray. Heavenly Father, you are the source of all wisdom and you've caused the Holy Scriptures to be written that we may be wise for salvation in Christ.

[1 : 0 5] So we pray that your spirit will work your word in us so that indeed we may be wise in your eyes. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise. So they say. Is that really the secret of health, wealth and wisdom?

An early night and an early morning. Well, in order to find out the secret of health, often associated with long life, people ask those who get to the age of 105 or thereabouts, what's the secret of long life?

You know, you read it in those interviews in the paper from time to time. A few years ago, the Queen Mum might have said a few gins each day. That'll keep you going to 101. Some might say that exercise or hard work, a diet, you know, meat and three veg or five veg or seven if you go to Coles.

My grandfather's 97 in a few months' time. He's got no answer to long life. His father lived to 99 and nine months. I'm hoping it doesn't run in the family that long anyway.

[2 : 1 3] But there doesn't seem to be really a secret. There's no real obvious secret, no consistent answer to long life and health. What about becoming rich and wealthy?

Well, again, there's no real secret or consistent answer, it seems. If you look at BRW's list of wealthy people, some have inherited their wealth and done very little. Some have worked very hard.

Some have been lucky. Some play sport. Some have won a quiz show lottery or something like that. And there are any number of books you can buy. Bookshops are laden with books telling us how to be wealthy and they've all got different answers.

There doesn't seem to be a secret or consistent answer. What about wisdom? What's the secret of wisdom? Private school education? Not sure about that.

A long beard? Well, I shaved mine off a while ago. Age and experience? Not necessarily. There are some very foolish old people. Not looking at anyone.

[3 : 1 4] There doesn't really seem to be a secret. No consistent answer to wisdom, like with health or wealth, for that matter. Healthy, wealthy and wise.

How can I be all those three things? Well, let me give you the answer. My child, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments.

The wise teacher of Proverbs, the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament, Solomon, presumably still at this stage, is appealing not to his own commandments, but to God's.

Don't forget my teaching. Let your heart keep my commandments. God's teaching. God's commandments. What we find in verses 1 to 12 of chapter 3 is a sequence, a pattern.

The odd verses are a command. The even numbered verses respond with the outcome or the result or the consequence that is likely in following the command of the odd verse.

[4 : 18] Often the commands are both negative and positive. Here, that's the case. Verse 1, don't do this, but do this. Don't forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments.

And the outcome, verse 2, length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you. That is, in effect, health. Long life, health, welfare, that's the sort of outcome or consequence that this wise teacher is saying you should expect or could expect from following God's commands.

Basically, the command of the odd verse, verse 1, is a fundamental commitment to God. That's, in essence, what is being commanded in verse 1. Keep my commandments.

And if you know the commandments of God in the early part of the scriptures, you know that they are vast and extensive, covering every aspect of life. Your gathering for worship, your Monday morning work, your leisure time, your family relationships, your attitude to wealth, your attitude to sexual activity, your attitude to your neighbour, to property, to possessions.

What's in your heart? The whole gamut is there. So when verse 1 says, keep my commandments, it is saying in the end, a fundamental commitment to God in every aspect of your life is what is required.

[5 : 35] Well, the pattern continues in verses 3 and 4. Verse 3 negatively says, don't let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you. And then positively, bind them around your neck and write them on the tablet of your heart.

Loyalty and faithfulness here is to God. That's what's in mind. And it's saying, in effect, be loyal and faithful to God. Make sure that you are. In a sense, it's saying, again, a fundamental commitment to God is what is required.

And the outcome or result that you might expect, you'll find favour and good repute in the sight of God and of people. Now, not every time is that the case. We know that.

There are people who don't find favour in the eyes of people when they're fundamentally faithful and loyal to God. They may well be persecuted. That's the opposite, in a sense, of finding favour in the sight of people.

But by and large, that's what's being promised or being described as an outcome. See, in the book of Proverbs, we're getting here observations on life.

[6 : 39] There are exceptions. Proverbs knows that. If you read the whole book and put together the various themes, we find that one statement or proverb is balanced by another. And so it's very well the case that sometimes God's people are, in fact, persecuted.

They don't find favour in the eyes of people, although they always do in the eyes of God. So we have to be careful how we read these, not as blanket promises that in every case this is what will happen.

That's the second of the pairs. Then the third pair comes in verses 5 and 6. Verse 5 is a very famous verse, actually, well worth remembering. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and don't rely on your own insight.

In all your ways, acknowledge Him. There's the command. It spills over into the even verse this time. Again, it's positive and negative put together. Trust positively in the Lord with all your heart. Negatively, that means don't rely on your own insight.

Again, it's about basic fundamental commitment to God. Something that stems from the heart, not just an external begrudging obedience to God's commands, but rather from the heart.

[7 : 48] And the promise or the outcome, God will make straight your paths. There's a sense of ease predicted about that, but there's a sense of direction.

And there's a sense of direction towards the promised destiny that God has in mind for His people. The Christian life is not always easy and straightforward, but the goal is reached by God's grace.

The fourth pair comes in verses 7 and 8. Again, negatively and then positively. Don't be wise in your own eyes, but on the positive side, fear the Lord and turn away from evil.

Now, the writer has already made it clear in chapter 1 and 2 that the beginning and source of wisdom is fearing the Lord. And that human wisdom and godly wisdom are often different things.

Don't be wise in your own eyes. Don't have human wisdom, but have godly wisdom. That is why he says in the second line of verse 7, fear the Lord. For that's where godly wisdom begins and is found.

[8 : 52] Fearing the Lord is not a terror against God. Like someone might be fearful of spiders and snakes and things. Fearing the Lord is a reverential awe of God, knowing that God is God and before God we submit to Him.

It's a positive relationship. It's not a negative one. It's not when we're remote from God. But it's actually a relationship of trust, knowing that God is God and we fear Him because He is sovereign in power and we submit to Him.

Here the outcome in the even verse, verse 8, is healing for your flesh and refreshment for your body. Now literally the word flesh there is actually the word for navel and most probably the idiom is to do with your inside and the body in the last line is to do with your outside.

That is, it's a wholeness of healing that is being described in verse 8. But it is a suggestion of health. So if we're looking for finding a clue to health, then wisdom is its prerequisite, as verses 7 and 8 going together suggest to us.

Interestingly, this healing for flesh and refreshment for your body has no exercise regime and no strict diet. I think it's fantastic. The fifth pair in verses 9 and 10.

[10 : 17] Honour the Lord with your substance and with the firstfruits of all your produce. Here it's just a positive command, no negative to balance it. In a sense it's saying similar things.

Honouring the Lord with your substance means with your possessions, the things that you have, what you own or what you are entrusted with. Honour the Lord with all of that.

And, in particular, the firstfruits of all your produce. For in the Old Testament, one of the laws was that the firstfruits of crops and flocks and herds belonged to God and were to be given to God.

It was sort of like giving a tithe, but it was the first. And the first belonged to God whether you got a second, a third, or a fourth, or none. So you might only get in a bad season, let's say, one lamb.

It belonged to God. Not you. Any other lambs that might come might be yours. But if you only got one, it was God's, not yours. So the firstfruits was placing a priority on giving back to God what in a sense belonged to Him.

[11 : 23] And the observation that flows in verse 10, then your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats will be bursting with wine. Now we might want to jump in and claim that as a promise and get angry at God when our barns or our pantries or our equivalent bank accounts or whatever are not overflowing and say, God, I've honoured you, I've given my tithe, and why aren't I rich now?

But even within the book of Proverbs, as I've said, Proverbs are in balance with each other. And sometimes the people of God who are faithful and loyal aren't still poor.

It's better to be poor and honest, the Proverbs say, than to be rich and crooked. Not in every case, in every time, are our barns overflowing.

But generally speaking, this is trusting that God will honour and bless those who honour Him with their substance. That's an exercise of faith that the book of Proverbs is calling us to.

And the last of these pairs, verses 11 and 12, again the command comes first, this time really just a negative command. Do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of His reproof.

[12 : 38] God is a disciplining Father, disciplines His children. To despise His discipline is probably to take it too lightly and dismiss it. To be weary of it is maybe to take it too heavily and be overburdened by it, to think that God's turned against us or something like that.

The outcome, verse 12, is that the Lord reproves the one He loves as a father, the son in whom He delights. So to have a right view of the discipline of God is not to cower away from God thinking that somehow He's coming down with strong punishment against us for something we might have done wrong.

Nor is it to be dismissive of it as though God would not discipline us, that we are righteous in our behaviour, but rather to recognise the Lord's discipline as an act of love and therefore cherish it and respond rightly to it.

I think Christians actually are too weak on the whole these days about the discipline of the Lord. I think I see that in our prayers sometimes where we pray so readily for an end to the problem that we're facing.

We pray so readily for healing, for a job, for an end to some form of distress without necessarily probing whether God might be disciplining us in such a way, teaching us something from the struggle that we are facing.

[13 : 56] Sometimes that exposes our lack of wisdom, I suspect, in our relationship with God. Well there we have six pairs, six commands with six outcomes.

They are interrelated, they are not in a sense separated one from the other totally. At the heart of them, if we read just the odd verses all the way through, is a demand for a fundamental commitment to God.

That's what's required. Obedience to His laws, trusting in His ways, in every way acknowledging Him, honouring Him with our substance, not despising or getting weary of His discipline in our life.

That is the wise life. That is wisdom. And a fruit of wisdom is health and wealth amongst other things as described in the even-numbered verses, in the twelve verses that we've looked at in chapter three so far.

Interestingly, the one specific command in all of those is about our giving. All of the other commands in verses one, three, five, seven and eleven are all very general and broad about obeying all of God's commands.

[15 : 14] The one specific one is in verse nine, honouring the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce. So in particular, our giving must have a priority in our life.

In obedient and generous giving is Christian wisdom expressed amongst other things. and honouring God with our substance means not just with our lips, not just occasionally being nice, not just the occasional act of piety or generosity, but rather in all our ways, including and especially in our use of money, wealth and possessions.

What that then is telling us is that we must take our giving seriously as a deliberate act of obedience to God. You see, casual giving is not honouring God as we've already seen in the drama in a sense.

The person who comes to church ill-prepared rummages in their pockets, their wallet's not there, the wallet is empty, there's just a few loose coins or something like that. That's not honouring God with our substance.

Honouring God with our substance and the example of the first fruits in the Old Testament shows that our giving must be a priority. That is, our giving to God in our weekly giving and giving to Christian missions.

[16 : 38] That suggests that we must be in a sense planning and budgeting for our giving, not just whatever is left over at the end of a bad day. For as in the example of first fruits, even in a bad harvest or a bad lambing season, for example, the first belongs to God.

That might be a very costly gift indeed back to God. But the first is His, the priority belongs to what we give back to God. Not at the end of the month with whatever surplus, if any, there is left.

But rather, when we get paid at the beginning of the month or whatever it is, setting aside, having budgeted and planned to give generously, honouring God with our substance. It means that as our income increases, we plan and budget and give an increase rather than let our giving just stay stagnant for decade after decade.

I imagine that in some churches around the world, in Australia rather, there are people who are probably still trying to give two and six, haven't yet gone past the decimal. I'm being a bit flippant in saying that.

But sometimes our giving just stays stagnant for decades and decades. But rather, as I think this is suggesting, our planned, deliberate giving ought to be tied to our income as our income increases so our giving will increase and so on.

[17 : 53] We need to plan and budget for that sort of thing to happen. And indeed, elsewhere in the book of Proverbs, there are many Proverbs that commend generosity in addition to regular giving.

The godly care about the rights of the poor, chapter 29 says. Curses will come on those who close their eyes to poverty, chapter 28 says. Give freely and don't be stingy, verse, chapter 11, verse 24 says.

But honouring the Lord with our substance is not just talking about our tithe or 10% or whatever that we give into the church plate and to Christian mission. It is also about how we spend the remaining 90% or whatever.

Honouring God with our substance means honouring God with all of our possessions, income, wealth, not just the bit that we give away. That is part of it and giving generously is part of it.

But if we give a tithe, a tenth or even more and yet what remains to us, we spend recklessly, selfishly, indulgently on luxuries and trivia, then we could rightly be accused of not in fact honouring God with our substance, even if we give generously to the poor.

[19 : 08] You see, both parts of our wealth and possessions and income need to be addressed. The amount that we give away for the benefit of God's gospel and ministry here and in other places as well as our spending of what we don't give away for ourselves, for our families, for our comforts and so on.

Spending wisely, frugally, yet generously with what remains is just as significant in the eyes of God if we are to honour Him with our substance.

In fact, chapter 21 condemns those who spend and fritter away their money on much wine and indulgence and luxuries. Well, the same argument can be used for our use of time.

Though that's not the focus in these verses here, elsewhere in Proverbs, those who are lazy are condemned. Our use of time is a significant thing before God.

We are commended to work hard and to be generous in our use of time for the benefit of other people as well. So in the same way that we are to honour God with our substance by way of possessions, elsewhere in Proverbs and in the Scriptures, the same sort of argument applies with our use of time.

[20 : 23] It may be, for example, that we give generously in our time in the service of the church, in helping in church activities, in being part of church groups and so on, but with the rest of our time we are fundamentally lazy.

That's not honouring God with our time. So it's not just the time that we use for the benefit of others, but it's the rest of the time as well that determines whether we are honouring God in our life.

For example, we may set aside time as we ought every day to read the Bible, but we may in fact spend much more time reading, you know, silly magazines full of gossip.

That shows an imbalance in our use of time. It may be that as we ought every day we spend time in prayer, but we may in fact spend more time just idly gossiping with other people around about.

Again, that shows a lack of honouring of God. It's not just the amount of time we might devote to prayer and Bible reading and other good activities, but it's the use of the rest of our time in edifying, constructive, wise ways that is right before God.

[21 : 34] Well, the verses that follow go on to show that wisdom is really the source of true, final wealth and health amongst other things and that the wealth that wisdom leads to is more valuable than the wealth of the world.

So verse 13, happy are those who find wisdom and those who get understanding for her income is better than silver, her revenue better than gold, she's more precious than jewels and nothing you desire can compare with her.

That is, that the wealth that wisdom brings is better, more valuable than the wealth that the world might bring you. It may mean that in this life you might be wise and poor, but for eternity wise and in godly terms truly wealthy.

It may be that in this life you are wise and worldly wealthy too, but the real wealth is the wealth of God's wisdom. So in a sense these verses are giving us the big picture.

It's not just an immediate thing that you might honour God today and tomorrow morning you wake up and your bank account has mysteriously doubled. It doesn't mean that you might serve God by acknowledging him in all your ways today and tomorrow you wake up free of your aches and pains.

[22 : 50] But in the big picture true health and wealth comes from wisdom and it is worth much more than the wealth that our world seems to provide. yet how foolish we often are.

How much energy and effort we expend on achieving worldly wealth. How little by comparison sometimes on godly wisdom. Sometimes we're more eager to serve mammon than God but we can't serve both as Jesus made clear.

The greater longer lasting wealth and health comes from wisdom and that means submitting to God's laws in all of our life. A fundamental commitment to God.

Verses 16 to 18 go on along the same line. Long life is in her right hand in her left hand are riches and honour. If you want health if you want wealth then wisdom is the path the secret.

They may not be immediate and they're certainly not worldly but godly wisdom godly health godly wealth are there for those who submit to the commands of God. Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace.

[24 : 01] She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her those who hold her fast are called happy. And there is a hint of the bigger perspective. For the tree of life was found at the beginning of the scriptures in the garden of Eden in the place of God's dwelling where Adam and Eve for a time dwelt with God before their sin.

And the only other place in the scriptures where the tree of life reappears is at the end of the scriptures in the new Jerusalem in heaven where God personally dwells with his people forever. So the reference here to the tree of life in verse 18 is directing us ultimately to heaven.

That that is where perfectly kept will be the promise that the ways of those who serve God will be pleasantness and peace happiness health and wealth forever.

that's where these promises are finally and fully fulfilled. These verses are urging us to be wise in God's eyes not in ours.

They are urging us to submit to God's laws in each and every aspect of our life and not least in our giving and in our money. Wisdom God's wisdom is to be our goal.

[25 : 23] Not worldly wisdom nor worldly wealth nor worldly health. The spin-offs from God's wisdom are greater than our world will provide and through the early chapters of Proverbs it's as though we're standing at a crossroads as indeed for much of our life we are.

Almost every day there are basic choices that we make and at some times in our life very significant choices. This path or that. The foolish path promises much.

It may even deliver some in the short term. The godly path delivers much better. Maybe not more immediately. It's not necessarily an easy path but it is the path to take.

The path of a fundamental commitment to God in every aspect of our life. That's what Commitment Sunday is about really. And we express that in particular in our giving of time and in our giving of money.

Towards the end of the book of Proverbs another of the wise teachers of this book man called Agur in effect prays a prayer that may be helpful for us to think on.

[26 : 36] Two things I ask of you he's praying. Do not deny them to me before I die. Remove far from me falsehood and lying. Give me neither poverty nor riches.

Feed me with the food that I need or I shall be full and deny you and say who is the Lord or I shall be poor and steal and profane the name of the Lord.

There is godly wisdom being expressed in such a prayer. Neither to be too poor that might lead us down paths of sin nor to be too rich that leads us to a denial of God and the worship of mammon.

I'm going to lead us in prayer and then in the song that we'll sing after this we will take up just the collection of those commitment sheets. The darker blue one for our offering of time and gifts by way of involvement in service at Holy Trinity the lighter blue sheet that regular attenders received a few weeks ago for our giving of money and to the life of Holy Trinity.

Those sheets will be regarded confidentially that's why we're taking them up separately or one reason why we're taking them up separately. It may be that you've forgotten to bring those sheets and we encourage you to then return them in a collection or to the office in the next two or three weeks would be good.

[28 : 08] But let me pray as we make this expression of our commitment. Our Heavenly Father you make it clear to us how we are to be wise in fearing you in acknowledging you in all our ways in trusting you and not ourselves in giving of our substance to you in submitting to all your commandments.

God we want to be wise people in your eyes and we look forward to the promises of eternal health and wealth, peace and happiness.

As we take up this collection we are offering ourselves to you in all aspects of our life in particular here focusing on our ministry here at Holy Trinity.

Lord God help us to be more committed to you and we pray for Jesus' sake. Amen.