HELPING YOUR HEART

Back in the 70s there was a young teenage boy had just gotten his driver's license. When he got home, he asked his father, who was a pastor, if they could discuss the use of the family car. His father took him into his study and said to the boy, "I'll make a deal with you. If you bring up your grades, study your Bible and get a haircut, then you can drive the car." After about a month, the boy came back and again asked his father if they could discuss the use of the car. They again went to the father's study where his father said, "Son, I am very proud of you. You have brought up your grades, you have studied your Bible diligently, but you didn't get your haircut." The young man waited a moment and replied, "Dad, I've been thinking about that. In my heart I feel that Samson had long hair, Moses had long hair, Noah had long hair, even Jesus had long hair..." His father said, "Yes son, you are right, and they all walked everywhere they went!" Have you ever felt like that son? Arguing a point but just not seeming to be able to make your case?

We are continuing in or series today called The Path looking at the book of Proverbs. Wisdom is important. We need to be careful about the direction we choose in life. So how do we choose wisely?

Proverbs 3:5-10 Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; 6 in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. 7 Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil. 8 This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones. 9 Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops; 10 then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.

Often in life we come to a fork in the road and weigh our options. Then, we choose the road that feels the best to us at the moment. That path may not be the best path for us, so as soon as we figure out what we *want* to do, we put our minds to work figuring out reasons that *justify* our decision. Say the battery on our cellphone is losing it's charge. So, we decide to pick up a new iPhone, even though it costs $1000 and a new battery would have cost $100. "It just made sense," we say.

More and more these days, I hear from people who ask, "How did I end up on this path? How did I get here? Why did God let me get into this situation in the first place?"

One author wrote, "Our problem rarely stems from a lack of information or insight. It's something else. Something we don't outgrow. Something that another academic degree won't resolve. Our problem stems from the fact that we are not on a truth quest. That is, we don't wake up every morning with a burning desire to know what's true, what's right, what's honorable. We are on a happiness quest. We want to be – as in feel – happy. And our quest for happiness often trumps our appreciation for and pursuit of what's true."

What he is saying here is that our heart is on a happiness quest, not a truth quest. Our heart chooses the happy-now rather than the happy-later path. Almost every time. Isn't that true? So how do we help our heart to make the right choices? Three things;

1. Heart (5-6) - Trust in the LORD with all your heart

The starting place for a straight path is not trusting what your heart says, but trusting what God says. It is living a life trusting God and not self.

On American money you find the phrase, “In God we trust.” This is somewhat ironic, because, in my experience, money is often the last thing that most of us trust God with.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart. In every arena of life, in every possible path, in every category of path, trust God. The answer to choosing the right path is to choose God, to trust God, to go where he asks you to go, do what he asks you to do, and to do it every day. This is not a one-time thing. It’s a path. Place all your confidence, all your faith, all your hope, all your plans in God.

The challenge is to not lean on what your heart says is right, not on what your heart wants to do but on what God wants you to do. How many times have you heard someone say something like, “Just go with what your heart is telling you”? Or “Follow your heart.” That is terrible advice.

Jeremiah 17:9 The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

What Jeremiah is saying is that sometimes our hearts lie to us. Almost every time we want to do something that feels good short term that we intuitively know is not good for us long term, our hearts come up with reasons to do the thing we want to do rather than the thing that’s best for us over the longer term. Our hearts lies to us!

The heart is deceitful above all things. So, Solomon says that when you find yourself at a fork in the road – and every decision we make is a fork in the road – when you find yourself at a fork in the road, don’t trust what your heart is telling you to do. Trust what God is telling you to do. If you do this, he will make your paths straight. Jesus said something very similar in His sermon on the mount;

Matthew 6:33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

When we seek God’s path over the our own, an amazing thing happens. As we trust in God with all our hearts, God grants us the desires of them.

Psalms 37:4 Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.

In other words, God gets us to where we need to be, just by a different route that we may have been expecting. Trust in the LORD with all your heart.

I heard the story of a pastor who was going through a very difficult season of ministry. He felt like God had abandoned him. On top of everything else, his cat developed a skin condition that required weekly baths. The vet said to put the special cat shampoo on and let it soak in for a few minutes. The cat of course hated the baths and fought them every time. One day he was again bathing the cat and it was yelling and very upset when he felt like God spoke to him. God said, "Tell the cat what your doing." He replied, "I can’t God. I don’t speak cat. I’m doing this for it’s own good." God said again, "Go ahead, tell the cat why your doing that." He said, "I can’t Lord, I can’t explain why. It’s for it’s own good though." Suddenly it hit him that just because he did not understand what God was doing did not mean that it was not for his good. The "why" may be beyond our understanding, but we need to trust that God knows what He is doing.

2. Head (7-8) - lean not on your own understanding

The second way that we can help our heart to make the right decisions is to use our God given brains when making decisions. Again, the heart is on a happiness quest, not a truth quest. To combat this, we need to make sure we make the conscious effort to engage our minds when making decisions. Look again at the passage we read this morning;

Proverbs 3:7 Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil. 8 This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.

There are two principles at work here. The first is the *Principle of Focus*.

Your attention determines your direction. Why was it that not long ago, almost everywhere nations passed laws prohibiting people from talking on cellphones without some sort of hands-free device? Because they knew that if a person is staring at their phone, giving more attention to it than to the road, there's a good chance they'll steer themselves OFF the road, or maybe steer themselves into somebody else on the road. What you give your attention to will determine your direction. And your direction will determine your destination.

We see this all the time. If you are riding a bike and you look off to one side of the road, you are going to naturally begin to steer in that direction. Have you ever been on a high cliff and you look over the edge and your brain says 'jump.' That does not mean you are suicidal. It just means that your brain is telling you move in the direction you are focusing. Solomon understood this;

Proverbs 4:25-27 Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you. 26 Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are firm. 27 Do not swerve to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil.

Our destination is determined by our direction, but our direction is dictated by whatever holds our attention. Therefore, make sure your attention is on what it should be on. Make sure you are looking in the right direction. Solomon says keep looking straight ahead. Concentrate on where you are going. If you do that it says that God will make a level path before you.

E.g. how do you pick a spouse? When I was in seminary I had many choices as to what I would do with the rest of my life. I felt that God was calling me into missions, so I set that as my direction. I had no idea of where that would lead me. I knew there were huge obstacles ahead of me, but I set my direction. Then one day I walked into the cafeteria at Ontario Bible College and someone caught my attention. Cute little blond girl named Naomi. She was going in the same direction, so we decided to go there together and my life has never been the same.

That is a positive example, but all of us know that there are times in life when our focus gets diverted in ways that we wish it had not been. Decisions we wish we had never made. Things we wish we had never bought. Relationships we wish we had never initiated. Maybe life was better before these things grabbed your attention. In some cases, the path you were on before they came along was the path you should have adhered to but you didn't. What grabbed your attention altered your direction.

Perhaps you had a mental conversation that went something like this; Wow…would you look at that. I probably shouldn't go there. Perhaps I should double-check to make sure I shouldn't go there. Yep, I shouldn't go there. C'mon now, focus. Don't go there. Well, I guess it probably wouldn't hurt to go there for just a moment…

There is an old story of travelling salesman that went around selling a magic potion that would turn water into gold. There was just one catch. While you followed the detailed instructions you could not think about red monkeys or the potion would not work. Do you think anyone ever was able to do that? The more you say to yourself "don't think about red monkeys" the more you think about red monkeys. If you are on a diet and you are thinking to yourself "don't eat the chocolate cake" they what are you focusing on? The chocolate cake!

If you cannot shift your attention you will eventually change your direction. Has there ever been a time in your life when your common sense seemed to get railroaded by the emotion of whatever or whoever it was that grabbed your attention? Before you knew it, you were moving in an entirely different direction. Usually there is a strong emotional appeal to the things that grab our attention. We get sucked in to those detours because something emotionally engaging is on those paths. My observation is that the things that tend to grab my attention are often things I should avoid.

Advertisers understand this. They make a living trying to grab my attention. Great advertisements appeal to our emotions. They plant seeds of discontent within us, they shift our focus by grabbing our attention, and once they have our attention they know it is only a matter of time before they have us.

What captures our attention influences our direction. This is the Principle of Focus. But there is another principle at work within us. That is the *Principle of Choice*:

You get to choose what you give your attention to. In life you can choose to either GIVE your attention, or you can PAY attention. They are different. Giving your attention is passive. Something grabs your attention or captures your attention and it makes you look. However, paying attention is intentional. It is choosing to not lean on your own understanding but to lean on God's understanding.

Emotions tend to fuel the things that grab or capture your attention. Intentionality tends to fuel what you pay and give attention to. On every path that leads to disaster or destruction, there is something powerful and emotionally engaging that summoned us, that grabbed or captured our attention.

It means you have to make a choice. You need to choose which direction you will go, and then fix your gaze directly on it. It means understanding God's calling and direction for your life and then doing everything in your power to fix your mind and heart upon it. What you give your attention to determines your direction. And the direction you head in determines your destination.

Let me ask you a question, in your life is there a person or position or pastime that is leading you in a direction that you do not really want to go? What captures or grabs your attention, or what you choose to pay or give attention to will determine your direction, and your direction will determine your destination. Paul said;

Philippians 3:13-14 Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Forget the distracting stuff and stay focused on what really matters. Choose your direction and fix your gaze upon it.

Hebrews 12:2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Fix your eyes on Jesus. To fix your eyes means to focus your attention. It is making the choice to follow Jesus over everything else. You do not swerve to the right or left. You do not allow your eyes wander. Don't let your heart or your attention be captured by lesser things, focus your attention on Jesus, on following Him, getting to know Him better, serving Him fully, becoming like Him more and more every day. Focus your heart and mind on Him.

When the Alaskan Pipeline was being built, there were many Texans who went to Alaska for work they found it difficult to work in the frigid weather. The native Alaskans could work indefinitely in the cold. A study was done to find out why the Alaskans could physically withstand the weather better. The study found there were no physiological differences, it was all about attitude. The Alaskans just said, "I know it's cold right now but there is a job to be done so let's do it." In other words, they were focused on the job, not the weather. Fix your eyes on Jesus, and He will lead you in the right path.

3. Hands (9-10) - in all your ways acknowledge him

The Christian life is not just about focusing your heart and mind on Jesus but about practically being changed in your behaviour. In all our ways (actions) we need to show who it is we are following.

How do you acknowledge God in all your ways? The first is by inviting Him into your life. It is receiving the gift of salvation that Jesus offers us. That is a practical thing you DO. You may want to do it, you may think you should do it, but you have not done it until you have made the choice and practically asked Jesus in. It is an action.

How do you acknowledge God in all your ways? Another way is baptism. If you have invited Jesus into your life, you need to show that by doing what Jesus asked you in obedience to do. Again, you may want to do it, you may think you should do it, but until you overcome the fear and make the decision to take the class and go through with it you have not done it.

How do you acknowledge God in all your ways? In the passage we read this morning it gives one very practical way, with our giving. We show whether or not Jesus is Lord by how we handle our finances.

Pro 3:9 Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops; 10 then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.

Are you tithing? Do you honor God with your generosity? I am very thankful that we have many in this church who understand this principle. Even though we are not taking up an offering because we are online, still they are being faithful in their giving. I talk to so many pastors and have heard of churches that are having to lay off staff

How do you acknowledge God in all your ways? It means inviting Jesus into every area of your life. Into every relationship you have. Into your work or school. Into your pastimes and thought life.

When we first moved to Chatham, we did not really know our way around. The good thing is that nowadays we have GPS built in to our vehicles. The GPS tells you where you are going. It says "In 100 meters, turn left." There are many times when we would be driving and I would think that I should turn left at the next stoplight but the GPS would say turn right. I did what it told me to do.

Wouldn't it be nice if getting on and staying on the right path in life was just as simple as using a GPS?

It is! The trick to overriding the happiness bias in your heart is to override it with the perfect wisdom that God gives from his word and his spirit. You do what God tells you to do, not what you think is the right thing to do.

I saw this sign posted on Facebook. You can read it 2 different ways. The first is "You don't matter, give up." The second is "You matter, don't give up!" Totally different message depending on how you see it. It is all a matter of perspective.

3:5-6 Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; 6 in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.