

“Four Proverbs for Graduates (and the Rest of Us!)”
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Have you ever been on a trip? On your trip, have you ever forgotten something? If you have, then you know you have to be sure the next time you go out of town to be sure you bring the right things with you. E.g., I recall when I started out as a minister whenever I left town I would look at a list of all the things I would take with me on a trip, and keep that list in my sock drawer. That list helped me be sure I did not arrive at my destination unprepared like forgetting my toothbrush or brush. The same is true when you are getting ready for a big event in which you have to perform. E.g., in Super Bowl XXVI the Buffalo Bills were playing the Washington Redskins, and Buffalo was about to take the field for the first time and Hall of Fame running back Thurman Thomas could not find something— his helmet! Another running back went into the game in his place, and Thomas found his helmet by the third play of the offense. We don't want to go into life unprepared, whether it is going on a trip or an athletic event, or into anything in life. And if you are a graduate today, I know you don't want to go to your next destination, whether it is post-high school or post-college. There are four Proverbs which I think are especially helpful in making one prepared.

READ Proverbs 27:1,17; 28:6; 29:25 (pp. 609-611)

READ Proverbs 27:1. “Our attitude about tomorrow must not be boasting, but must have humility about the future. Cf. Psalm 37:5; Matthew 6:34; James 4:13-17.” I recall when I was in high school I ran track—the 800 and the 400 (in the mile relay). In one particular 800 race I recall we began the race and went through the first curve on the track and one of my opponents shook his fist above his head and let out a loud “yahoo!” and he seemed very confident in himself. I thought, “Wow, that guy is wasting a lot of energy doing that. He is either really fast and can afford to do that or really foolish and doesn’t know what he’s doing. By the end of race I had my answer—he was really foolish! That reminds me of how a lot of people go through life—they are really brash and cocky, and sometimes it is because they do know what they are doing, but probably more times than not they just have empty bravado. This type of thing can happen in the ministry. E.g., I recall a minister who was going through ordination around the time I was, and one of the things we have to do is give a mini-sermon, kind of a devotional, before the Board of Ordained Ministry, and there was one minister who seemed really confident and exuded a very “rah rah” spirit, and he went on in the ministry and seemed to be building up churches, but then a friend of mine had to take over a church for him mid-year because this confident minister had done very questionable things, unethical things financially in the church and left the church in a dangerous state, and he left the ministry and I have not heard anything more about him. People can also be like this in the business world where they exude confidence and tell of all the things they are going to do and how they are going to be a millionaire by the time they are 30, or they are going to have a plush retirement and travel the world. And all in heaven look down on such people and shake their heads and wonder whether we know we are just flesh and blood, and will not live forever. E.g., I may have share with you in the past, but I have been thinking about it while preparing this message, about a conversation I had with a gentleman who told me of his wife who had worked as a school teacher for about

35 years, saved up for retirement, and about a year into retirement developed breast cancer and died shortly afterward. We can plan all we want, but we never know what is around the corner, and how truly vulnerable we are. Every breath we take is a gift from the Lord, and not our own achievement. We should make our plans and prepare for the future, to be sure, but we need to be humble enough to trust the Lord with whatever happens next and know we rely on Him and not our own limited abilities. READ James 4:13-17.

READ 27:17. “A person does not enter the world with all the answers; he or she must learn from others and be teachable.” E.g., when I was in seminary, there was a bulletin board with the title, “Iron Sharpens Iron” where people could write comments to challenge others. It is important now that you have graduated to know that graduation is called “commencement” because you are seen as being at the beginning of your life’s endeavors in your chosen field. I.e., you are not at the end of your education. In your jobs you will often find that you have to spend a certain number of hours a year in continuing education, and that is important to do. Have you ever met someone who was not teachable? It is not easy to be around such people, because they cannot take correction. E.g., it reminds me of the phrase, “You can always tell a New Yorker, you just can’t tell him much!” I’m not picking on New Yorkers— because I have seen such attitudes in many people from all around the world! And I know I have struggled with this as well — and the Lord and others have a lot to teach me! This can happen in the church. E.g., I recall I was having lunch with someone years ago who was a teacher in the church, and I had to confront him about his teaching about reincarnation being true, but this idea was foreign to the Bible and Christianity, but he wanted no correction and was rather angry, and he had me wondering whether I would be walking home from the restaurant, because he drove me! But, have you ever met someone who was teachable? It is a pleasure to work with such people. Such people know that the job is not about them, but about getting the job done

correctly, and working together as a team. E.g., I recall at a fast food restaurant my order was wrong in some way, and the person was very helpful in getting the order correct and apologized to me— which often does not happen— and it was a pleasure to interact with this person, even though there was trouble with my order.

READ 28:6. “A decision should be made *now*: would we rather be rich and compromised before the Lord, or poor and walk with Him in integrity. Cf. 28:18.” Before we leave the sanctuary this morning I hope and pray we all have this issue settled, because I guarantee you and I will be challenged in this area. Let me ask you and myself: have you ever been tempted to tell a white lie in order to save face? E.g., I recall after Ray Nagin won his first term to be mayor of the New Orleans there was a big disappointment. He had been an executive with Cox and ran on the idea of cleaning up New Orleans, and in his campaign it was proclaimed that he was a CPA; but then it later came out that he was not a CPA, and he explained that actually there was like one part of the CPA exam he had not passed, but he was pretty close to being a CPA. That half-truth, white lie, was a foreshadowing of things to come, unfortunately. There will be times for all of us where we will be tempted to tell half-truths, to use profane language, curse words, in order to ingratiate ourselves to others, and to laugh at inappropriate jokes. This is true in ministry as well. E.g., there are times I have known that taking certain stands in The UMC would not curry favor with the higher-ups in the church, and I have had to confront where I am on this issue. And we all do. We need to decide now whether we would rather be wealthy and compromised before the Lord, or poor and walk Him in integrity. It means trusting the Lord to take care of us, and He is fully capable. We just live in obedience to Him and let Him take care of the rest.

READ 29:25. “Another decision which should be made *now*: whom do we fear more, people or God? Only the latter will bring protection. Cf. 18:10.” The verb for “is secure” (ישגב) in the qal is the same verb in the niphal found in 18:10,

“The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run into it and are safe (ושגב)”. If we want to be secure and safe, it comes through not fearing people but the Lord, and to fear the Lord means not primarily to have terror of God— though for those who come under His judgment, there is that aspect— but much more to trust Him to care for them, to obey Him, respect Him, love Him. So how does this work? How is it that a snare, or trap is laid, if we fear people more than God? E.g., I recall at times when I am more focused on pleasing people there is the really good feeling of making them smile and like me, but when I feel like I may not be fitting in or accepted it can feel really bad and insecure. And of course there are those times when I have felt very accepted and fitting in and I started thinking that life is about me, which of course it isn’t. The snare is there whether one wins people’s affection or loses people’s affection. Satan is pleased either way. So then, how does the Lord offer protection? He makes us secure in His love. E.g., in C.S. Lewis’ chapter on “The Greatest Sin” in *Mere Christianity* he focuses on pride, and once we give that over to the Lord and focus on the Lord first, we are free to be ourselves, not trying to compare ourselves to others at, say, social gatherings— in fact, we are not even thinking of ourselves, but are looking to be a blessing to others, because we are protected and safe and secure in the Lord. Thus, we must decide before we leave here, are we going to be people pleasers and thus fall into the snare, or God pleasers and enjoy the safety of His love?

These four verses in Proverbs will prepare us for walking out the doors of this sanctuary into the world. I encourage you and me to meditate on them, memorize them, ask God the Holy Spirit to teach them to us as to how they apply to our lives as we go forward. These verses from Proverbs are for you graduates, and for the rest of us as well!