

“The Path - Your Heart Matters”

Scripture: Proverbs 3:1-12

Graphics: path, road, direction, obstacles, mules, heart

Big Truth: The people of the Panama UMC are called to stay on the path that leads our lives to a holy God who loves us and gives us grace and mercy. The Path is a metaphor for life, a process of progress from birth to death and everlasting life. Along the way, we must allow God to give us direction, correct our course, inform our hearts, give us help, keep our eyes on the road, and make us content when the destination is unreachable. The Path is God’s best plan for us and He will call us back to it every time.

Focus Phrase: Set your full heart fully on God and your path will be straight with Him.

1. Introduction

A. [OPENING VIDEO - no introduction of video]

- B. I’ve been to the Grand Canyon twice now. Both times, I was able to do some hiking down into the Canyon, on foot. I’ve often considered what it would be like to rent a mule for a few hours and take a tour down into the Canyon on a mule’s back. I haven’t done that, and my choice was confirmed the last time I went hiking down the Bright Angel Trail.
- C. You see, we were hiking back up from a fairly treacherous hike part way into the Canyon on spring ice-covered trails last year. As we were ascending out of the Canyon, we noticed ahead a group of mules heading for us - a tour that was descending into the Canyon on the same trail as us.
- D. We weren’t quite sure how this would work, but we definitely knew that we needed to be on the UPHILL side of the trail so that one of those beasts didn’t accidentally push us into the Canyon.
- E. We were able to find a wider part of the trail, and the mules began to walk by, single file, each with a rider precariously perched on their backs, and most with a look of fear in their eyes.
- F. Just then, one of the mules who looked particularly unruly, stopped at the edge of the drop-off, and began to eat of grass...which was about a foot down the slope, over the edge of the drop-off. The very panicked rider tried as hard as possible to pull that mule back up to the flatter part of the trail to no avail. Eventually, we watched the mule and rider continue down the trail, only to watch the mule stop again to do the same thing again - leaning out over the sheer drop to eat some fresh spring grass that was just starting to appear.
- G. Mules really are one of the most stubborn creatures on earth. They have a mind of their own. Given their own way, they would almost never choose the right path, because mules don’t like to think about future consequences, they just want to do what they want to do when they want to do it, regardless of the eventual outcome.

- H. In that way, we are not unlike them, at times. We two-legged mules are just more subtle about our rebellion.
- I. Here's what we do sometimes: 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 from God's perspective, 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.
- J. We can justify anything from buying the new car we can't really afford, to the newest technology that we say will make our lives better, to the latest hunting gear, or gadget to make our projects easier.
- K. 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?"
- L. Author Andy Stanley says, "*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.*" (The Path, p. 57)
- M. So the question for today is: **why do we find ourselves on the wrong path?**
- N. There are two reason why this is true:
- i. 1. Our hearts are on a **happiness quest**, not a truth quest; and,
 - ii. 2. Our hearts choose the **happy-now** rather than the happy-later path. Almost every time.
- O. Let's pray and then see what wisdom we can find today from the Book of Proverbs...wisdom to live God's best life for us today and forever.
- P. PRAY!**
- Q. Two weeks ago when we started this series, we said there is an unbreakable principle in the universe that if you try to break it, it will break you: **Your direction determines your destination.**
- R. Last week we said that **prudent people switch paths** when they see trouble coming. They make **course corrections**, even though that requires more energy and determination than almost anything else on earth. "The prudent see danger and take refuge, while the simple keep going and pay the penalty."

- S. Solomon diagnosed this problem 3,000 years ago, right along with the problem we're looking at today. Apparently, people back then weren't too different from people today.
- T. The title of this message is: **Your Heart Matters**. What we'll find out is that God has a keen focus on capturing your heart in such a complete way that you will choose HIM and HIS path over simply being happy, every time.

2. Scripture

- A. Let's open our Bibles to Proverbs 3. Solomon gave a solution to the happiness quest in what may be the most famous section of the book of Proverbs.
- B. Some of you who've been in church a long time may have a portion of this memorized. What you may not have seen before is its relationship to The Path.
- C. (on screen) This will be on the screen. Let's read this out loud together (Proverbs 3:5-12):

**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.
Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD and shun evil.
This will bring health to your body
and nourishment to your bones.
Honor the LORD with your wealth,
with the firstfruits of all your crops;
then your barns will be filled to overflowing,
and your vats will brim over with new wine.
My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline
and do not resent his rebuke,
because the LORD disciplines those he loves,
as a father the son he delights in.**

- D. So, according to Solomon, God makes your path straight if you do three things:
 - i. **1. Trust in the Lord with all your heart.**
 - ii. **2. Lean not on your own understanding.**
 - iii. **3. Acknowledge him in all your ways.**
- E. Some of you have never heard this proverb before, so let me walk you through it. And some of you are almost too familiar with this verse, so I want to help you to see it as if for the first time.
- F. TRUST in the Lord...

- i. The starting place for a straight path is just what it says on all American money, “In God we trust.” This is somewhat ironic because money is often the last thing that Americans trust God with.
 - ii. “Trust in the Lord with all your **heart**.” In the Old Testament, when we see the word HEART, it’s lev (leb) or levav (lebab) which means: *the interior of the body, conceived of as the seat of the inner life, of feeling and thought*.
 - iii. For the Jewish people, the heart is not just the organ that pumps blood, but is the whole seat of emotion and desire and thought and feeling. It is, in essence, your consciousness engine.
 - iv. Given that, the beginning of wisdom to be on the right path is to have your heart set on God’s path. 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.
 - v. 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. Trust God with your WHOLE HEART.
- G. AND, LEAN NOT on your own understanding...
- i. The challenge is to not lean on what your heart says is right, not on what your heart wants to do, not on your understanding of how luscious the weeds are growing two feet under your path.
 - ii. How many times have you said to someone, “Just go with what your heart is telling you”? Or “Follow your heart.” We’ve all said that, haven’t we?
 - iii. That might be bad advice, friends, because the prophet Jeremiah said, “The heart is deceitful above all things...” (Jeremiah 17:9).
 - iv. What he meant was 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 God’s best 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.
 - v. Say this to the person next to you: “**Your heart lies to you!**”
 - vi. Now say this to yourself, “**My heart lies to me!**”
 - vii. The heart is deceitful above all things. So Solomon says, “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 your heart** – trust God.

viii. Don't lean on your own understanding, lean on God. Don't acknowledge your motivations, your intentions, your ambitions, acknowledge God's. If you do this, he will make your paths straight.

ix. Jesus said something similar thing in his Sermon on the Mount when he said, **“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”** (Matthew 6:33).

H. ACKNOWLEDGE GOD in ALL your ways...

- i. Acknowledge God and his ways, and he will make your paths straight. He'll direct you in the way you should go. He'll protect you when evil and junk try to crowd in on you.
- ii. Has there ever been a time when you acknowledged God in all your ways? Many of you have trusted him for salvation – which is kind of like inviting God into your living room. “Here, Lord, come into my life.” But then that's as far as you let him go. Have you invited him into your bedroom, where all your private thoughts are? Have you invited him onto your computer, where all your access to the world is? Or kitchen? Or closet?
- iii. Seek first the kingdom of God and he'll take care of the rest. Trust in the Lord with all your heart, acknowledge him in all your ways, and he'll steer your ship in the right direction, your car onto the right path, your life into the right places and plans and priorities. This is The Path, friends...and it all comes from your heart. Your Heart Matters!

3. Application

- A. Given that, let's get some practical application on HOW to orient our HEARTS to God's Path this morning...in the ways that GOD is calling you to follow on The Path.
- B. In verses 7-8, Solomon writes: **“Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.”** (Proverbs 3:7-8)
- C. After telling us the key to a straight path, the path you want to take, the path that will always get you from where you are to EXACTLY where you want to be, Solomon suggests three action steps to take in order to trust God fully with your whole heart and acknowledge him in everything.
- D. **#1 - Don't be wise in your own eyes.**
 - i. Don't think, “I don't need to consult God on this one, after all, I'm an expert at it. I've taken classes in it. I've taught others about it. I've done this type of thing a thousand times before.”
 - ii. Every decision, every fork in the road is a new fork. Wherever you are today, you've never been there before. So resist the temptation to think you

know it all. That's when you get into trouble. Consult God in ALL your ways, with EVERY forks in the road.

E. #2 (to trust God with your heart) - Honor God's provisions for you.

- i. Verses 9-10 tell us this: **“Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.”** (Proverbs 3:9-10)
- ii. After all, it all came from him. If you want him to direct your paths, first, let him direct your wallet. For most of us, our wallets are closely connected to our hearts, aren't they?
- iii. God says, “Hey, if you want my input, trust me with your output - I gave it all to you anyway. If you trust me, give.”
- iv. You know this is true: **You can give without loving, but you can't love without giving.** This is true with our children or our families...when we LOVE deeply, we give generously.
- v. And something mysterious happens when you give because of love. Jesus says, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:21), which kind of seems backward. If you love, you'll give. But God knows that if you give, you'll love. So he says, “If you want my direction for your life, if you want me to guide you, honor me with the firstfruits of all your crops—the first of everything you earn for whatever kind of work you do.” Then I'll be able to fill your barns to overflowing.”
- vi. Solomon says, “If you're going to acknowledge God in all your ways, one of them is your financial ways.”
- vii. That leads us to our third heart matter...

F. #3 - Allow God to change you in the fire.

- i. Verses 11-12 tell us this, from the perspective of a loving parent: **“My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.”** (Proverbs 3:11-12)
- ii. Sometimes you caused what is happening to you. And sometimes God knows you need some correction, which he provides like every loving father does. Either way, he'll use the pain to change your heart for Him, if you let Him.
- iii. I've heard many people say, “Why did God let this happen to me?” Usually, they're in too much pain to hear the truth at that moment. But the truth is, God didn't want that to happen to them. God tried to prevent it from happening to them. He tried to stop it, but he doesn't stop them because God gives us free will to choose the wrong path.

- iv. On the other hand, people lose their jobs or lose loved ones or suffer from other people's mistakes. You might hear people say, "You know, we were doing so well. And then THIS happened. But what we found was that we were ignoring some of the most important priorities in life. Now I'm so much more focused on my wife and children. I'm working hard to get a job, but this time of unemployment has been so good for redirecting my values to where they should have been."
 - v. We saw this A LOT during COVID...it gave us time to breathe and get some priorities straight!
 - vi. "The Lord disciplines those he loves, like a father does with a son he delights in."
- G. In order to allow your heart to move from being on a happiness quest to being on a truth quest: Don't be wise in your own eyes, honor God's provisions for you, and receive God's correction when you're in trouble.
 - H. In order to allow your heart to move from self-focused on happiness-now to being other-focused on happiness-later: Don't be wise in your own eyes, honor God's provisions for you, and receive God's correction when you're in trouble.

4. Conclusion

- A. Ultimately, be focused on what comes when you set your heart on God's ways, God's will, and God's promises: everlasting life in the presence of God, through faith and trust in Jesus Christ.
- B. God's WAY is Jesus - the WAY, the TRUTH, and the LIFE. The PATH.
- C. We each have a choice to make: we can be mules or we can be disciples. We can try to let our hearts lead us to just being happy in life, which we all know is a frustrating and disappointing pursuit. OR, we can choose to let God take hold of our hearts and lead us along HIS path.
- D. The amazing thing is that His Path leads to happiness and joy, for sure, but that's not the destination He has in mind. God's destination, which requires His direction and willingness to correct course, leads to being with Him forever. Our VBS kids learned that this week...and I pray that it will be something that guides them throughout their lives.
- E. Today, don't be a mule...be a disciples whose heart is trusting in God.
- F. Keep reading from Proverbs this month. Keep checking your direction, your destination, and your course corrections.
- G. As you walk with Jesus, lean not on your own understandings, but in ALL your ways acknowledge Him.
- H. Let's pray...