

Sep/Oct 2015

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



ALSO: ONE BODY, MANY DIFFERENCES

Friends:

I once worshiped in a congregation that included a developmentally disabled man who sat in the front row every week. He didn't want to miss anything. He brought more enthusiasm and interaction to worship than some of us were used to, but we needed to learn. He taught us how to greet people with joy every week, and how to say "Amen!" out loud when something powerful happened in worship. He taught us to ask for prayer because we needed it. He taught us all to worship more genuinely.



In September, Pastor Mark Stephenson explores with us not only how Christ's body includes a full range of people but also how we are blessed by and truly need everyone there.

Then in October, Pastor George Vink leads us through Proverbs. The book of Proverbs helps us to see what wise living looks like in God's world, with Christ himself the key to all wisdom!

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven Koster". The signature is written in a cursive style.

—Steven Koster

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**“One Body,
Many Differences”
Mark Stephenson**



**“Living Wisely in
a Foolish World”
George Vink**

Managing Editor: Eleanor Lamsma
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re FRAME MEDIA

september

One Body, Many Differences

Mark Stephenson

In 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 the apostle Paul describes the church as a body with many members. This month, after a few days of introduction, we will look into these Bible passages to gain some insight into true Christian community. We'll see that by radically loving others and including especially persons whom society pushes to the edges, the body of Christ reflects and participates in the perfect love of God.

Mark Stephenson was ordained in 1989. He served as a pastor of two churches before becoming director of Disability Concerns for the Christian Reformed Church in North America in 2006. He and his wife, Bev, have six children, including their oldest, Nicole, who was born extremely prematurely and lives with severe, multiple disabilities as a result of complications from her early birth.

PERFECT COMMUNITY

"I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity."

—John 17:22-23

What is perfect community? I believe it to be a situation in which the unique perspectives of each member are embraced with compassion, not just tolerated. Each person is known by and knows the others. Each person's gifts contribute to the community's life. Differences among members do not cause fear or prejudice but add life, beauty, color, and fun to the community. Each cares for the others so much, each values the others so much, each wants to serve the others so much that in a sense they are not many but one. Individual identity and community identity balance so that the will of the group never overwhelms the individuals and the will of an individual never dominates the group.

Amazingly, such a community exists. We call that community "God"—mysteriously one God

in three persons. The biblical analogy for God's tri-unity is the church, called to be the earthly reflection of this perfect community. Jesus prayed that we, his people, may be one as he and the Father are one.

In *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry*, Paul Hanson wrote, "The true community of faith, by experiencing in its own life the creative redemptive presence of God, holds before the world . . . the vision of the whole human family reconciled and living together in peace." Do you long for this vision too?

One God in Three Persons, make each of your people unique and yet also one in unity, purpose, mission, and love, just like you. In Jesus, Amen.

PRISTINE COMMUNITY OF CREATION

God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. —Genesis 1:27

Pristine is a good way to describe creation before we polluted and spoiled it. Earth, water, air, birds, fish, reptiles, mammals, microbes, even light from the sun, moon, and stars were all pristine and good.

At first, however, Adam was alone, and God said that was “not good” (Genesis 2:18). Adam needed a companion, someone with whom to share the path of life. Without a companion, he could not image God fully.

So God created woman and thus made a community of human beings who would reflect the triune God.

To image God is to be in relationship with God *and* with fellow human beings. Author Hans Reinders calls the image of God the “gift of friendship.” God created humankind in God’s image: male and female,

people in relationship with one another.

The interdependence of one human with another and their dependence on God are part of the pristine creation God made. God’s intent was that humans so love one another, so devote themselves to one another, so serve and be served by one another that they are unique individuals as well as a loving community. Sadly, Adam and Eve’s unspoiled community didn’t last, but God wasn’t finished with us yet!

Triune God, thank you for not leaving Adam by himself. Thank you for creating humans as a community. Thank you for your gift of friendship, which we enjoy with you and with each other. In Jesus, Amen.

BETRAYAL IN RELATIONSHIPS

The LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

—Genesis 3:9

When Adam and Eve chose to eat the forbidden fruit, they disobeyed God. Justice demanded that they be punished for violating God's command. Christianity uses this framework to explain the need for Jesus' death. He took the punishment that humans deserved.

Besides breaking a law, Adam and Eve betrayed someone who loved them. When a husband and wife say their marriage vows, they promise to be faithful to one another. If one of them has an affair, that person has betrayed the other.

When Adam and Eve broke relationship with God, they betrayed him by turning to follow the advice of another. Betrayal spread like fire into their own relationship as well.

Our relationships include betrayal too. One day, for exam-

ple, after working out with their team, Joe privately told his teammate Ted about a fear he had. Ted told Joe's secret to other team members, and Joe soon became the butt of jokes. The harassment grew so severe that Joe eventually quit. Not only did Ted betray Joe, but his betrayal spread like fire through many other relationships.

Our betrayal of God spreads like fire into our other relationships too, and we need a reconciler.

Lord, our divine companion, we grieve the way our betrayals stain our relationships. We hurt because others hurt us. We confess that we have hurt others too. Make our relationships new through your Son. Amen.

HEALER OF BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS

God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them.
—2 Corinthians 5:19

Sin involves not only violating a command but also betraying a relationship. Not only do we need Jesus Christ to receive the punishment we deserve, but we also need someone to heal our broken relationships.

If a husband has an affair, the wife feels hurt and distrusts him, and even if she wants to restore their relationship, trust too must be restored.

In our sins we betray God. Genesis 6:5-6 says, "The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled."

Can couples who have endured the pain of betrayal be

reconciled? Sometimes. Those who survive betrayal to have a loving, trust-filled relationship almost always need someone to help them reconcile.

Similarly, because we have betrayed God, we need someone to reconcile us to God. The broken relationship between each of us and God can be restored and healed through the work of Jesus. He came to make all things new, including our relationship with God. Jesus, our reconciler, draws us back to God even when we want to run the other way.

Jesus our reconciler, thank you for the ultimate sacrifice you paid not only to cover the penalty for our sin but also to reconcile us to God. Without you, we would be alone forever. Amen.

SPIRITUAL GIFTS FOR EVERYONE

To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.
—1 Corinthians 12:7

God has made us diverse in a variety of ways. The 7.3 billion humans alive today differ in age, intelligence, ability, ethnicity, culture, personality, gender, vocation, interests, and much more.

1 Corinthians 12 says that God gave his people a variety of spiritual gifts including wisdom, faith, healing, and speaking in tongues. Other Scripture passages mention other gifts, and each person receives gifts. The Spirit “distributes them to each one, just as he determines.”

Though we can affirm this truth with our heads, we have trouble living it out. We must learn to see that all people have gifts from the Spirit, including people like these:

- The woman who constantly talks about her aches and pains whenever you see her.

- The homeless man who rarely showers and sits in the back at church.
- The refugee family who always keep to themselves at church.
- The child with autism who can't sit still.

We hold the gifts of some people in high esteem, and we question whether some other people have gifts at all. But God esteems each of us and the gifts he gives. To see each other as God sees us, we must know that God gives spiritual gifts to every believer.

Whose spiritual gifts are you not seeing? Will you make it a matter of prayer to accept others as God sees them?

Infinitely gifted God, thank you for distributing your gifts among all believers. Open my eyes to see the gifts you give to each one. Amen.

PREJUDICE ABOUT DIFFERENCES

His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

—Ephesians 2:15-16

Prejudice can be pictured as a circle that separates “us” from “them.” The people inside the circle are “normal” people, who are most like ourselves—similar skin color, ethnicity, values, abilities, language, gender identity, and so on. Because “we” inside the circle are “normal,” everyone outside the circle is “abnormal”—people different from “us” in ethnicity, abilities, and so on.

The ancient Israelites thought of themselves as normal people and everyone else as abnormal. In fact, they thought that they alone were selected to receive God’s favor.

But through the prophet Isaiah God told them that the promised Savior was coming for *all* people. “I will . . . make you a light for the Gentiles, that my

salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6).

The actor Whoopi Goldberg once quipped, “Normal is nothing more than a cycle on a washing machine.” Praise God that Jesus came to destroy the sinful distinction we make between “normal” and “abnormal” humans. He is creating a new humanity. Jesus came to put to death the hostility of prejudice and to create a new community of mutual love—no normal or abnormal people, no “us” and “them.” Just *us* in all our diversity. Hallelujah!

Father, Son, Spirit, so united in love, teach us to revel in the wonderful diversity you have created among us. Make our love reflect yours. In Jesus, Amen.

LOVING THE ALIEN

God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.
—1 Corinthians 12:18

At my church, Pastor Art asked this question in a sermon about Jonah: “Whom is God calling you to love that you don’t want to love?” Jonah’s answer would have been “the people of Nineveh.” They were residents of Assyria, which had ruthlessly conquered Israel. They were the enemy. No wonder Jonah didn’t want to call them to repentance! He did not want God to show them mercy. He wanted God to roast them alive. But obediently Jonah preached to them, and they repented. God forgave. And Jonah moped!

In *Some of My Best Friends Are Black*, Tanner Colby describes the day Wallace Belson, a black man, decided to attend a white church in Louisiana. Several men from that church beat him when he entered. Years later, that church merged with a black church attended by

Wallace Belson, Jr. He hated those people who had beaten his father. He wanted no part of the merger.

One day, Belson, Jr., fell from a ladder and nearly died. When his life was spared, he changed, and he began worshiping with the merged church: “Well, God didn’t take me, so I made a promise to try and get along with everybody and just leave everything behind. So I did. I changed, completely, away from that old hatred!”

Whom is God calling you to love that you don’t want to love?

Reconciling God, I don’t like some people. In fact, there are whole groups of people I do not wish well. Forgive me. Teach me to love as your Son loves me. In his name, Amen.

ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.

—1 Corinthians 12:15

Many years ago I attended a worship service at a Coptic Orthodox monastery in Wadi El Natrun, Egypt. We worshiped the same triune God who unites us to himself through the finished work of Jesus Christ. However, the people there used a different language from mine, and they stood up for the entire service. The priest conducted part of the service in front of a wall; then he passed through a door and served the elements of communion through two tiny doors in the wall. I felt out of place in that worship service.

Who are some people in your neighborhood who might feel out of place at your church? What would make them say, "I'm not like them, so I don't belong"? Some people may feel left out because they can't afford the kinds of cars they see in the parking lot or the clothing

they see on worshipers. Some may feel left out because they are single and the church is full of young couples with children. Some may feel left out because they have made a lot of poor choices in life and everyone in the church seems to have it all together.

People who do not feel at home at a church "would not for that reason stop being part of the body." God placed the parts in the body just as he wanted them to be.

Inclusive God, thank you for welcoming me into fellowship with you. Sensitize my heart to people who are feeling like outsiders, and help me and my church to welcome them. In Jesus, Amen.

HOUSE FOR ALL SINNERS AND SAINTS

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!"—1 Corinthians 12:21

The poet Carl Sandburg was asked what he thought was the ugliest word. He said, "The ugliest word is *exclusive*."

Most people don't think that *exclusive* is ugly. In fact, many of us like exclusive neighborhoods, exclusive cars, and exclusive clothing. We like being with our "own kind," separated from people who are different and "undesirable." The Pharisees hated Jesus' inclusiveness.

Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber planted a church, House for All Sinners and Saints, in a "grungy, hipster neighborhood" in Denver, Colorado. This church attracted people whom much of society rejects: people with low incomes, homosexuals, and people addicted to various substances. Outgrowing their facilities, the church moved to a new building in a "stately, historic" neighborhood.

At the very next Sunday service, the usual crowd showed up—and people who were embraced by society, wearing their nice clothing. After the worship service, Bolz-Weber was upset and complained to her friends, "We're attracting entirely the wrong element."

She confesses in her book *Pastrix* that she had an exclusive attitude, rejecting people whom society tends to embrace. She had to learn to welcome "bankers wearing Dockers" in her congregation! The people of God is a house for all sinners and saints.

God, forgive me. Surprise me with how wonderfully different you have made your people. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WHO IS NOT HERE?

The body is not made up of one part but of many.

—1 Corinthians 12:14

Some people don't attend church because they sense they are different from everyone else there. Others don't come because people in the church do not welcome them. If a church really wants to reflect the body of Christ, which is made up of many parts, they need to ask themselves regularly, "Who is not here?"

Do people from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds attend? About 20 percent of the population has disabilities; do 20 percent of the people at your church have visible or "invisible" disabilities? Do people who have been in prison feel welcome? People from a variety of social classes? Single adults? Poor people? Rich people?

In Jesus' parable, the servants are sent out to "compel" people to come. God calls us to do the same in our churches. We must

work to welcome people who feel that they don't fit. We need to consider how we might need to change our relationships, our ways of interacting, our worship, so that people who are typically excluded will find they are welcome and needed by our churches.

Every church excludes people. Whom is your church excluding, and what changes do you need to make so that they will feel welcome? How can your church actively invite people who are not attending?

Welcoming Savior, you welcomed people who were looked down upon by society. In the same way, teach me to welcome people much different from my "own kind" into my life and my church. In your name, Amen.

EVERY PART COUNTS

God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.
—1 Corinthians 12:18

This is a true story; only the names have been changed:

Sam, a man with intellectual disability, began attending First Church. He was very friendly—in fact, too friendly. He had a habit of hugging women in church and kissing them on the lips.

More than once, the council at First Church discussed what to do with Sam. At one such discussion, some council members wanted Sam to leave. But another said passionately, pounding his fist on the table, “No. God brought Sam here. We need Sam here. We must find a way for Sam to stay.”

Whether or not he was thinking of 1 Corinthians 12:18, that council member’s statement reflected the essence of this passage. God put Sam at First Church, just as God wanted to.

First Church did not tolerate Sam’s behavior. Not only did the leaders remind Sam that he was not to kiss women at church, but they also ensured that Sam had a chaperone with him at all church activities.

One Sunday I led worship at First Church. Sam was one of the first people there that day. He called out to the elder helping me, “Where’s my friend today?” Amazing! The men who started out as chaperones for Sam had become his friends. God had placed this part of the body just as he wanted it to be, and the whole church grew in love as a result.

God, sometimes I wish certain people were not at my church. Forgive me. Teach me to welcome and love others as you have done. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

EAR ROCKS

Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.

—1 Corinthians 12:22

After taking a blow to my head, I began experiencing vertigo when I lay down and when I sat up. For over five weeks, every evening and morning I felt as if my head were spinning. Eventually I went to my doctor, who told me that my ear rocks were out of place. I didn't even know I had ear rocks, which are also called *otoconia*.

To put them back in place, a physical therapist turned my head this way and that. For 24 hours after therapy, I had to keep my head upright, even while I slept, so that my ear rocks would stay in place. My vertigo went away, and I praise God for that!

I have a new appreciation for my ear rocks; they are tiny, indispensable wonders.

Who are the "ear rocks" in your church? The boy with severe

disabilities? The old woman confined to her home? The very shy man? The woman with tattoos on her arms, neck, and legs? They may seem weaker, but they are indispensable. Maybe *you* feel worthless, thinking you contribute nothing worthwhile to the church's life. You too are indispensable.

Even when we don't know what contribution someone makes to the life of the church, God knows. "God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be." Each of us is indispensable.

God, thank you for my ear rocks and for every person in my church, including me. Help me to appreciate each one, for we all are indispensable. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

BARB'S CLOSE FRIEND JONATHAN

Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.

—1 Corinthians 12:22

The apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians in Greek. The Greek word translated as “indispensable” has two meanings: “necessary,” as in sorely needed; and “close,” as in close friend.

In her book *Accessible Gospel, Inclusive Worship*, Barbara Newman describes arriving at church one Sunday morning feeling tired and care-worn with responsibilities for the worship service. But she kept a smile on her face.

No one noticed her weariness except Jonathan, who has Down syndrome. Before worship started, Jonathan sat down next to Barb and said, “Mrs. B, you look sad today. I will pray for you.”

Reflecting on what he did for her that morning, Barb wrote, “He did [pray for me]. . . . God used his words and presence in

my life to heal my hectic and broken insides on that day. . . . Jonathan dug through the outer covering I had placed over myself in order to set me in front of God. He was my friend.”

Like the biblical Jonathan with David, so this Jonathan was a close friend to Barb. Sometimes people think gestures of concern like those Jonathan gave to Barb are not so important as preaching, teaching, or administration. But Jesus told us that the second greatest commandment is to love others. Nothing is more important to healthy church life than love.

Surprising God, open my eyes to see the wonderful gifts you bring into the church through all the people involved, because I have trouble seeing them on my own. Amen.

THE POOR ARE THE MOST TREASURED PART

God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it.
—1 Corinthians 12:24

Anxiety blocks love. Anxiety breeds prejudice. Anxiety leads to hatred, or at least causes people to ignore those who are different from one's "own kind." "Perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18) and sees people as God sees them.

People tend to feel afraid of those whom society considers "weak"—those who are poor, disabled, or dealing with mental illness. I've heard people say, "We can't have too many of those people attend our church, or we'll get overwhelmed." Yet Jesus sought out just this kind of person. They are parts of the body that receive special honor from God.

The most important parts of our bodies are not our hands and feet. The most honored parts are hidden away where they receive the most protection: the brain, the liver, the intestines,

the lungs. Our bodies give them special honor, though we rarely think of them.

A church fellowship that includes people whom society considers weak will be the healthiest, but without them the church is like a body without a lung. The theologian Henri Nouwen once wrote, "The church as the people of God can truly embody the living Christ among us only when the poor remain its most treasured part. Care for the *poor*, therefore, is much more than Christian charity. It is the essence of being the body of Christ."

Loving God, drive out anxiety from me with your love. So fill me with love that I see the poor, the outcast, the people at the margins as you see them: essential for a healthy church. Amen.

A HOT TUB AND A BROKEN TOE

If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.
—1 Corinthians 12:26

When I ease into a hot tub, the water touches only my skin, but my whole body luxuriates in the pleasure. When I broke one of my toes, only the toe had an injury, but my whole body was troubled by the pain. Our bodies share pleasure and suffering automatically.

Such sharing is not so natural with the body of Christ. Jealousy reduces our rejoicing when one part is honored. Selfishness or fear shrinks our empathy for someone else dealing with a hardship. If a church wants to be a healthy community, it needs to learn a behavior that comes naturally for our physical bodies. We need to understand why our bodies behave this way, so that our church body can desire to mimic this attribute.

Our bodies share pleasure because the whole body benefits. Though only my skin feels the

bubbling hot-tub water, my blood vessels, heart, lungs, and brain benefit from the relaxing heat. Our bodies share pain to protect the injured part. While my broken toe was healing, my whole body moved differently to protect the injured part.

In the body of Christ, if we could set our jealousy aside, the whole body would take pleasure in the honor of one member. If we took care to protect and assist one person who is struggling, the whole body would benefit from that person's healing.

Empathic God, forgive me for being so focused on my own life that I won't hurt or rejoice with others. Teach me a love that empathizes with others in their struggles and joys. In Jesus, Amen.

SINGLE ADULTS HAVE MUCH TO CONTRIBUTE

All these [spiritual gifts] are the work of one and the same Spirit, [who] distributes them to each one. —1 Corinthians 12:11

Noting that many churches tend to favor married adults over singles, Leanne Doornbos Nagel wrote (in our church magazine), “Church culture has made being an active young adult member difficult.” For example, her church grouped her with teenagers, even though she was a 24-year-old single adult who taught at a local high school. But her church included her 20-year-old married brother with adults.

She argues that a church culture that embraces both married and single adults mirrors God’s hospitality, making “room for marginalized members.” In addition, “a welcoming culture that respects its members retains its members.” She reminds readers that single adults have much to contribute to congregational life. They are equally as gifted as married members, and they may have greater free-

doms such as opportunities to “travel, study, and work in colorful landscapes, cultures, and jobs.” In addition, many single adults have fewer obligations tied to dependents.

Nagel encourages church leaders to use singles’ “experiences and knowledge by adding them to groups and committees” and by listening “when they share ideas or ask questions.” This is good advice not only for engaging young adults but also for engaging people with disabilities and anyone else who tends to be pushed to the margins. The healthiest churches engage *all* their members.

Jesus, you remained single throughout your ministry on earth. Help us to value, appreciate, and engage single adults and all others in our fellowship. Amen.

SINCERE LOVE HATES HATRED

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.

—Romans 12:9

What does a healthy body of Christ look like in motion?

Not only may believers hate, but we are *commanded* to hate anything that interferes with loving other people. One group of people who often find themselves at the edges of society and the object of jokes and hatred is homosexuals. My denomination affirms that sexual expression is biblical only when practiced by a man and woman who are married to each other, and we also affirm the importance of loving *all* people.

People with same-gender attraction often struggle with shame, identity confusion, and stigma. In a statement on pastoral care for homosexual members, my denomination calls the church to “compassionate ministry [that] seeks to incorporate those with same-sex attractions fully into the body and life of

the church, satisfying their need for community, for intimacy, for oneness with others, and their need to serve their Lord. Much of their sexual struggle lies here. What they need and what sometimes gives desperate urgency to their need is . . . to love and to be loved, to know and to be known, to feel worthwhile about themselves.”

Often we see hatred toward homosexuals, even among Christians. Instead, we need to hate this hatred toward any fellow imagebearer of God, and love sincerely.

Loving God, too often acts of hatred are committed in your name toward people with same gender attraction. Teach me to hate such evil and to love people as you do. Amen.

WORSHIP DISRUPTION OR PARTICIPATION?

Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.
—Romans 12:10

As a pastor, I have the privilege of leading worship on a regular basis. When I do, I find that worshipers assume that the things going on “up front” are the most important. So people tend to sit quietly, unless they are asked to speak in unison or sing together. With that assumption, if anyone speaks out or makes noise when people are “supposed” to be quiet, that person is considered a “disruption”—whether the person is a young child or, say, someone with an intellectual disability.

Each year around Christmas and Easter, I often lead worship in the neighborhood of group homes where our daughter lives. The 36 residents who have severe multiple disabilities are invited to attend, as well as family members. Many of the residents vocalize regularly, especially when they are excited about a group event

like this. As the worship leader, should I be upset that worship is constantly “disrupted” by the vocalizing of residents? No, instead I need a different understanding of worship.

Worship is not just what is happening “up front”; worship is the sacred time a group of people set aside and dedicate to God. Conceived that way, the vocalizing of residents during worship is not “disruption” but *participation!*

Love includes honoring another’s participation in worship. Whose participation is God calling you to honor?

Teach me, Lord, out of love, to examine my assumptions about life and worship, and to hear the joyful praise others give you. In Jesus, Amen.

SERVING GOD THROUGH LOVING OTHERS

Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.
—Romans 12:11

In the book *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis takes readers on an imaginary tour of heaven and hell. At one point in heaven, “Sarah Smith” passes by, receiving great honor from many heavenly beings. She received no earthly accolades but was a simple woman who lived in a simple home and showed deep love to every person and every creature she met. Sarah Smith had great spiritual fervor.

A few months after my friend’s wife committed suicide, he spoke about the support system that has held him up. These are some of the behaviors I believe the apostle Paul was talking about when he called us to keep our spiritual fervor:

- People listened nonjudgmentally as my friend told his story repeatedly.
- They prayed faithfully for him.

- They understood that grief is not a sign of weakness or lack of faith, but the price of love.
- They encouraged him to eat, exercise, and sleep well.
- They remained aware of his vulnerability and the uniqueness of each person’s trials.

Loving someone whose life and experiences are very different from our own takes energy, time, and effort. Our spiritual fervor can wane when it costs more of our time or money or energy than we expect. But, in God’s strength, fervent love listens, encourages, and seeks to understand.

Loving God, sometimes I tire of loving others. Make my love be a reflection of your unending love for me. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

LIVING WITH JOYFUL HOPE

Be joyful in hope.

—Romans 12:12

One Sunday I preached about hope. Before the worship service began, I quietly told four people I would give them a candy bar during the service. During my sermon, I asked if anyone would like a candy bar. Many hands went up, but I gave the bars to the four people I had told in advance. Then I asked one of them, “Did you hope to receive a candy bar?”

“Yes.”

“Were you confident that you would receive a candy bar?”

“Yes.”

“Why were you so confident of receiving a candy bar?”

“Because you told me before the service that you would give me one!”

People laughed, and I explained that I had offered the candy bars in advance to all four people

who got them. Those four had the joyful hope that they would soon receive a candy bar. That’s a metaphor for Christian hope.

Christian hope is not a vague wish. Christian hope is a sure confidence that we will receive what God has promised us. A community that lives with this sure, confident hope can take risks, offering hospitality to people whom society rejects. They can stand strong and confident with people who are struggling. They can foster hope in people who are feeling hopeless.

Because God keeps his promises, we can live with joyful hope.

Covenant God, give me grace and strength to live in joyful hope, knowing you will keep your promises. In Jesus, Amen.

“I KNOW THAT I HAVE YOU”

Be . . . patient in affliction.

—Romans 12:12

Whether affliction results from our own actions, other’s actions, or natural causes, pain and anguish accompany it. Who can be “patient in affliction”? Most of us would rather rail against it, feel sorry for ourselves, complain, lash out, and demand that God tell us why we are suffering so much.

The behaviors that come naturally for us when we are dealing with trouble in life will drive others away from us and destroy community. Patience in affliction deepens community by drawing people together and enhancing care for one another. A healthy body of Christ remains patient in affliction.

In a poem called “Broken Wings,” Cesar R., who is in prison in Texas, describes how he remains patient in the affliction of incarceration:

Today I have a thousand sadnesses, which do not let me sleep.

Today I have a handful of dreams, which I cannot fulfill.

Today I feel I do not have anybody; I feel that I do not have anybody.

But I know that I have You.

My Lord, today I ask You for strength;

Give me the strength to be able to continue.

(Crossroad Journal of the Arts, Winter 2015)

The apostle Paul was a prisoner too. What affliction must you endure? Ask God to strengthen you and give you patient endurance, and pray he does the same for all suffering people.

Lord, your compassions never fail. Great is your faithfulness. Give us all your patient strength, we pray. In Jesus, Amen.

PRAYER BUILDS RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Be . . . faithful in prayer.

—Romans 12:12

Joyful hope and patience in affliction go against the grain of our own natures. Despair and self-pity come much more easily. In times like that, it's important to turn to God in prayer. We pray for many reasons: to thank God for blessings, to praise God, to confess sins, to seek God's guidance.

In addition, we pray to ask God for help. Asking God for help may be the most natural prayer of all. When a Christian brother was torn from his wife and two small children and put into a detention center over immigration issues, many of us asked God to help them. The man was released and restored to his family. When my wife and I had triplets born extremely prematurely, we asked God to protect their lives and sustain them. Two of them spent four and a half months in the hospital and

are doing well today. The other child died.

Sometimes God answers our requests for help exactly as we ask, but sometimes not. Either way, the Bible calls us to be faithful in prayer. Prayer—thanksgiving, praising, confessing, asking for help—connects us with God. Prayer builds relationship. Prayer strengthens the bond between God and us. When you have a good relationship with someone, hopefulness and patience become a little easier, especially when that Someone is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe.

God, help people in trouble. Help church leaders, community leaders, and national leaders. Help my friends and my enemies. God, help me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

EASY AND DIFFICULT SHARING

Share with the Lord's people who are in need.

—Romans 12:13

No one wants to be a “charity case” or someone else’s “project.” Nonetheless, all of us have needs. No one can live independently. We are utterly dependent on other people to build things like roads and cars and houses. We need others to raise our food and provide resources like electricity and gas. We need to be in relationship with other people. We need friendships and love.

Because we all have needs, the apostle Paul calls us to share with each other freely.

Some people are easy to share with—a friend who breaks her leg, a coworker who has surgery. But some needs are more intense. A severe heart attack, a major depression, a death, or a divorce can create significant, additional needs for many months. Sometimes church communities respond well to

help someone with significant additional needs.

Sometimes churches struggle, however, with helping to meet long-term needs. Some people don’t “get better.” People who have long-term needs tend to be forgotten after a while: shut-ins, people who develop serious physical or mental health disabilities, people with chronic pain or autism or dementia.

Paul calls us to share not only with God’s people who are easy to share with, but also with God’s people whose needs and hurts are deep and long.

God, you sent your Son to suffer and die for us. Help me to share with others what you have already given me. Make me, and your church, generous. In Jesus, Amen.

REAL HOSPITALITY DOESN'T GRUMBLE

Practice hospitality.

—Romans 12:13

Barb and her son, Ryan, left their previous church because they were not welcome. Ryan is in his 30s, has intellectual disabilities, and sometimes acts out. Sometime later, Ryan became involved with a Friendship group, and he and Barb began attending Sunday morning worship at the church that hosted the group. One Sunday morning, several times during the sermon, Ryan made shriek-like screams. He was frightening people in church. Pastor Steve wondered what to do. After several times, Steve paused from preaching and asked Ryan gently, "Are you okay?" Then he prayed for Ryan and Barb. After that, Ryan felt peace, and he and Barb stayed till the end of the service.

But what would happen after the service? Would they be asked to leave this church too? No. People gathered around

Ryan and Barb, saying, "Please don't let this keep you from coming here. We want you to stay." A few months later, Barb professed her faith in Jesus Christ at that church, and Ryan was baptized.

If Pastor Steve had been kind to Ryan and Barb but others in the church did not affirm them, they would not have stayed. Ryan and Barb were held in a web of loving relationships that kept them from turning away in humiliation. They stayed and joined that community of faith because they knew it was where they belonged.

Welcoming God, we praise you that Ryan and Barb found a warm, embracing church family. May we all do for others as their church did for them. In Jesus, Amen.

FAITHFULNESS THROUGH PERSECUTION

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.

—Romans 12:14

When Paul called the Christians in Rome to bless those who persecuted them, he wasn't speaking figuratively. Christians were accused by the Romans of being atheists and cannibals. Only a few years after Paul completed this letter to the Romans, the emperor Nero was feeding Christians to wild animals and burning them alive.

Few of us will ever face such severe persecution, but fellow Christians in countries around the world today face many kinds of trials for the sake of Christ. Some must worship in secret. Others are told to renounce Christ or die. Still others have their homes vandalized. Some lose their jobs; others even lose their lives.

The body of Christ is as intimate as two people united in prayer and as vast as all Christians around the globe.

When we embrace the whole body of Christ—all Christians as one body—then those who do not face open persecution can stand with those who are persecuted. Some of our own loved ones face horrible trials. Some people come to faith in Christ knowing that if they are found out, they will be killed.

If you are facing open persecution for your faith, thank you for your faithfulness. If not, pray for those who do. Pray that God will sustain them, keep them faithful, and even grow his church in these severe circumstances.

Sustaining God, thank you that I am part of a body that spans the globe. Hold tightly my brothers and sisters in the faith who suffer for Jesus' sake. Amen.

LOVE TAKES TIME TO LISTEN

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

—Romans 12:15

My life is busy. I work more than full time, and my wife works too. We are helping our kids through college. Our family is expanding again as our children get married. I have volunteer commitments. I . . . well, you get the picture.

Most of us feel like we need more hours in a day, more days in a week, and we have too little time for sleep and relaxation. With all of that activity, we feel as if we can give only brief attention to any one thing. Who has time to stop and really listen to another person? If we ask someone how she is doing, and she begins to give a real answer, our first thought is "I don't have time for this!" Paul calls us to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, but we can't do that if we are too focused on our own to-do lists.

Jesus was very busy too. In just over three years, he healed the sick, trained followers, taught a whole new understanding of the Old Testament, saved humankind from sin, and set in motion events that will one day make all things new. And yet, he took time to listen to a sick woman tell the whole story of her illness. And that's just one example of Jesus' taking time to really *be* with people.

If you want to follow Paul's command, follow Christ's example and take time to listen.

Everlasting God, I feel so busy, so limited, so impatient. Teach me to slow down, listen, and love others. May I rejoice and mourn with people in their sorrows and joys. In Jesus, Amen.

GOD'S HEART BEATS WITH RECONCILIATION

Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud . . . Do not be conceited.
—Romans 12:16

If anyone had good reason to hold a grudge, it would be Jacob's brother, Esau. Jacob cheated Esau out of his birthright *and* his blessing; then he fled because Esau planned to kill him as soon as their father, Isaac, died.

Years later, after they both had wives and children, they met again, but Jacob was terrified that Esau still wanted to kill him. He sent messengers and lavish gifts ahead of him, hoping to appease his brother. But he need not have worried. As Jacob bowed before his brother, "Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him." Jacob responded, "To see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably."

If we have also read the previous chapter, Jacob's response may remind us that Jacob had

just had an experience of seeing God face to face. Now Jacob saw a reflection of God in Esau through their reconciliation.

Paul calls us to live in harmony with other people, but we won't always succeed. We will hurt others, even if we do so unintentionally. And others will hurt us. We will have misunderstandings. We will anger others and be angry at others. When we reconcile with another person after being at odds, we see God's face, because God's heart beats with reconciliation.

Reconciling God, thank you for reconciling the world to yourself in Christ. Thank you for making us Christ's ambassadors of reconciliation. Help me to reconcile today with anyone who has hurt me. In Jesus, Amen.

SECURE ENOUGH TO LOVE

Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. —Romans 12:16

About Romans 12:9-21, *Harper's Bible Commentary* says, "Human relations are nourished by security, not anxiety; the issue for Paul throughout Romans has been to identify authentic security and confidence."

The body of Christ finds security in knowing we are not our own but belong to our faithful Savior, Jesus (see Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 1). People who are focused on themselves lash out, insist on getting their way, or ignore people different from themselves. People who are secure in Christ show a relaxed, secure love.

Who are the kinds of people you find especially difficult to love? Who are the people that cause you to feel disgust, anger, frustration, pity, or fear? These are the people that, for you, are "people of low position."

God can help you with such feelings that hamper your love. He will help you remember that you are loved to your very core through Jesus Christ. You belong to him. Your sins are forgiven. He loves you as you are. The wide, long, high, deep love of Christ surpasses knowledge, drives out fear, turns from selfishness, and associates with people of low position. Christ's love fills his followers through the power of his Holy Spirit.

You can love without pride or fear because your security is in Christ.

God, thank you that I am not my own but belong to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. Thank you that I need not insist on my own way because I am secure in Christ. In his name, Amen.

LOVE SETS BOUNDARIES

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.
—Romans 12:18

I've consulted with a number of churches that have members who challenged the limits of their love: an older man with dementia who propositioned young women in church; a man with intellectual disability who literally pushed people when he got excited; a woman who phoned different members of the church several times a day.

How does a church love people who test the limits of love? Love includes setting boundaries for persons whose behavior is inappropriate.

Occasionally churches must ask the person to leave and not come back, but such a rejection must be the last resort. Instead, churches need to get creative with love. They may need to help the person learn appropriate behaviors. They may need to ask for volunteers to accompany a person when he

is at church gatherings so that he can be reminded to avoid offensive behaviors. Always church members must remember that they do not deserve God's love themselves but that God has loved them through Jesus Christ. They are called to do the same with others, even those who are difficult to love.

Sometimes God brings difficult people into the church fellowship so that the congregation can learn new ways to love. When our understanding of love is stretched in unwanted directions, we begin to taste the love of God for humans in new ways, and we get better at loving everyone.

God, we love because you first loved us, even though we can be unlovable. Show us how to love creatively. In Jesus, Amen.

STOLEN EGGS AND A SECOND CHANCE

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

—Romans 12:21

Helen Johnson and five family members lived together in Tarrant, Alabama. At a grocery store, Johnson realized she did not have enough cash even to buy a dozen eggs, and the family hadn't eaten for two days. She stuffed five eggs into her pocket, and they broke. (See www.al.com/news/birmingham.)

An employee called the police, but the store decided not to press charges. Instead of arresting Johnson, Officer William Stacy bought a dozen eggs and gave them to her.

Officer Stacy remembered going hungry himself as a child because his mother didn't always have the money to feed him and his sister. When Johnson asked Stacy how to repay him, he told her not to shoplift again. "Sometimes the best route is to not arrest," Stacy explained.

Stacy discerned that Johnson's hunger, not her theft, was the evil that needed to be overcome with good, and God multiplied the good he did. A bystander recorded the incident and posted it on Facebook. Offers to help Johnson's family came pouring in to the Tarrant police, who were able to provide enough food for them to stock their pantry.

As we have examined the church in action this month, I pray that we too have gained wisdom and the desire to overcome evil with good in our love for others through Jesus Christ.

God, fill us all with your wisdom, and motivate us with your deep love to overcome evil with good. In the precious name of Jesus, our Savior and Lord, Amen.

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Living Wisely in a Foolish World

George Vink

Living in God's presence requires an awareness of our relationship with our Creator, Redeemer, and Provider as well as an appreciation for our relationships with each other. The Bible makes clear that our relationship with God is complete only in Christ Jesus and that our relationships with others are best when they're in tune with Wisdom-incarnate—that is, Jesus Christ.

Proverbs is a book of basic advice for wise living as God's children in his world—all to his glory and for the growth of his kingdom. We constantly learn from the experiences of others how to live wisely. We learn from sages like Solomon, Agur, and Lemuel as well as from those who live by faith today.

Wise living is godly living. A stroll through Proverbs with personal reflections along the way can encourage both experienced saints and new believers.

George Vink is a retired pastor who enjoys writing, consulting, and traveling as well as serving as an interim pastor with his wife, Shirley. They've been married for 48 years and have been blessed with four sons and their wives and ten grandchildren, who live in California, Alberta, and Michigan. Six months of Rev. Vink's previous Today writings along with six additional months of devotions have been compiled into a volume titled Walking in the Word: Day-to-Day Reflections on the Christian Journey (available through local and online booksellers.)

WISDOM, LIFE'S ESSENTIAL ELEMENT

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.
—Proverbs 1:7

During my seminary training over forty years ago, my Old Testament professor wisely cautioned us not to preach from the book of Proverbs too early in our ministry. He said we needed to have considerable life experience in order to bring its spiritual insights to our congregations. His advice still seems right to me as we aim this month to learn about living as followers of Jesus from a book of the Bible that never mentions his name. In addition, we'll need to turn to Jesus regularly as the one who lived the perfect life, the life of wisdom-in-the-flesh.

When I was a young pastor, eager to do the right thing, "the fear of the LORD" meant submitting my life to Christ's lordship and applying his Word to every situation. But I didn't always know how to do that wisely. For example, after a long

discussion by the church elders one evening about dealing with someone in a certain way, one elder asked, "Pastor, it may be right . . . but is it wise?" I was frustrated by that, but this wise question still comes to mind regularly.

Living in a world with information at our fingertips, we must learn that the knowledge we need is really wisdom applied with the compassion of Christ. It includes an awareness of God's laws and a concern for life calling for obedience and discipline even when doing so may be difficult. Jesus showed the way by submitting to his Father's will. He is our example.

Lord, help us to be wise in this world. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

LEAD ME NOT INTO TEMPTATION

Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching.
—Proverbs 1:8

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Matthew 6:13), he was not suggesting that it was all about someone else drawing us into temptation. We are responsible too. Dealing with life’s temptations calls for an awareness of the tempting power of sin. It includes recognizing that others, like the proverb writer and our parents, know the powerful temptation of sin.

The words of the tempter can seem so enticing or desirable, and they may wear us down. Temptation is everywhere in our lives. A wise person knows this. A wise person hears the proverb writer say, in effect, “It takes away the lives of those who give in to it.”

Sin is self-destructive. It’s terribly sad when we succumb to

temptation and end up hurting others and ourselves.

Following wise instruction, however, leads to life as God intended it.

Jesus put it this way: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). If you’ve been blessed with parents who taught you these words, thank God. If not, give thanks that you know them now. And if you don’t know what they mean, seek out someone who can help you learn and understand.

Father, thank you for parents who teach their children the way of life to its fullest in Christ. Empower us today to follow Christ as our example. In his name, Amen.

ARE YOU SIMPLE, OR WHAT?

“How long will you who are simple love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge?”

—Proverbs 1:22

Imagine getting an email, text, or tweet saying, “How long are you going to stay a simpleton? Signed: Your friend Wisdom.” No doubt, you’d wonder which of your friends would send such a message.

Here the proverb writer uses a literary device called *personification*, which ascribes personal qualities to a thing or concept. Personified, Lady Wisdom shouts, “How long are you going to act foolishly as someone without understanding, refusing to learn what you need to know?” Any one of us may have heard similar words from a friend or parent: “When are you going to wise up?”

All who want to follow Christ must never suggest that believing in God’s love shown in Jesus calls for being simple. The Creator of this amazingly complex world is the God we must

fear, leading to the knowledge of how to live in his world. Recall that Proverbs begins with this truth: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7).

Each one of us must answer Lady Wisdom’s question for ourselves. It’s our responsibility to answer with the kind of lifestyle and choices that show we seek the wisdom to walk obediently in God’s ways. The choices are ours to make—wisely.

Creator, God of wisdom, help us to see that our world needs us to know you as the source of life and of the knowledge about how to live in your world—all to your glory. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

STORING UP TRUTHS

My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you . . . then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.
—Proverbs 2:1-5

A subtle, amusing cartoon shows a group of church elders, tired from a lengthy discussion. One of them suggests, “I don’t care who broke the wall of Jericho. I move we have it repaired and take the funds from the facilities budget.”

Most Sunday school students know who “broke the wall of Jericho” and what God said about it (see Joshua 6). Yet, considering its subtle point, the cartoon reminds us that biblical knowledge is declining today even where church attendance may be booming.

Storing up God’s commands and turning our ears to his wisdom doesn’t come naturally. It takes regular Bible reading and reflection. Living as disciples of Jesus Christ, we must make the effort to learn God’s Word—his words and commands.

Wise living calls for serious reading of Scripture. It requires learning details about the life of Jesus as told in the gospels. Learning what Jesus said and did will make us appreciate his ultimate sacrifice. It will encourage us to imitate his life, devoted to obeying his Father’s will.

A wise heart and a knowledgeable walk are pleasant to the soul and yield eternal blessings. Can a true disciple desire anything less? Do you?

Life-giving God, grant us the desire to learn the truths and teachings in your Word so that our lives will have a compass to steer us in the right direction as your children. In Christ, Amen.

KNOWING WHAT TO DO

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

—Proverbs 3:5-6

Each of us has probably already made many decisions today. And for the rest of the day, we'll continue to make conscious and not-so-conscious decisions. The choices we make say something about who we are and whom we serve. Is life "all about me," or am I aware that what I do is really my response to my Creator and Provider?

We read, "In *all* your ways submit to him." That calls for trusting that God's ways are good, and that following them leads to living life to the full, as God intends for us.

When Joshua challenged Israel, "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15), he knew that his decision to serve the Lord shaped all his other decisions. When we trust in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, all our other decisions are based on obeying

his teachings, not relying on our own understanding. Guided by the Holy Spirit and God's Word, we know what to do. We know that God's Spirit will not tell us to do what God's Word says we may not. And obedience leads to being on the right path, whatever the cost.

Knowing what to do comes more readily with a wholehearted commitment to serving Jesus. Then, like Jesus, we'll be focused on our calling to be disciples who make decisions based on knowing God's will.

Lord Jesus, thank you for being the example of living obediently. Empower us with your Spirit to make decisions based on your Word. In your name, Amen.

THE LORD'S GOOD DISCIPLINE

My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline . . . because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.

—Proverbs 3:11-12

Though I have five siblings, I claimed that my father loved me most because he disciplined me the most. Could it be that I needed more teaching or training than the average child?

As Christ's disciples, we recognize the need to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). This kind of growth requires discipline.

I recall the pain expressed by a son's blurting out, "Pastor, my dad doesn't care enough to discipline me. He won't take the time!" I'd heard about such situations, but I had never heard it from someone in such pain.

I reflected on the disciplining I did with our sons. Did they understand I was disciplining because I loved them? Did they know that being grounded for a week also restricted their par-

ents? Did my imperfect efforts express love and awareness of each one's uniqueness?

Jesus' mother, Mary, expressed frustration with her 12-year-old son: "Why have you treated us like this?" Jesus answered, "Why were you searching for me?" Joseph and Mary didn't understand. Nevertheless, Jesus went home and "was obedient to them." And "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:49-52). Growing wiser includes discipline from imperfect parents. Once again, Jesus shows the way.

Father, thank you for Jesus' example. Help us to understand that the goal of discipline is to grow in grace and knowledge. In his name, Amen.

BEING GOOD NEIGHBORS

Do not say to your neighbor, "Come back tomorrow and I'll give it to you"—when you already have it with you. —Proverbs 3:28

When we moved into our new home a week before Christmas, we didn't take time to hang out lights or a wreath on the door, but we did make sure that our carved-wood "*SHALOM*" sign was prominently displayed. Coming home one day, we found a plate of home-made cookies with a card saying, "Happy Hannukah or Merry Christmas!" Our neighbors wanted to welcome us but were not sure if we were Christian or Jewish. Upon thanking them, we shared a good laugh followed by a good conversation, including their statement "Our tools are your tools."

Responding to his disciples' request "Lord, teach us to pray," Jesus used the example of a friend's need for boldness as well as a father's desire to give good gifts to his children (Luke 11:1-12). Helping others is a

powerful way to demonstrate our love for God—and our neighbors!

"What good is it . . . if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds?" (James 2:14). James then goes on to illustrate the need to match faith with actions, as Abraham did (James 2:15-24).

As Jesus' followers, we hear the admonition "Do not withhold good . . . when it is in your power to act." Christians should be good neighbors.

Gracious Giver of gifts, thank you for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, whom we needed so desperately. Help us to be more like him by being good neighbors. In his name we pray. Amen.

GUARDING YOUR HEART

Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my words or turn away from them. . . . Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.
—Proverbs 4:5, 23

Proverbs 4 refers again to wisdom as a person. She's someone to be sought. To follow her ways is to be fully in line with God's ways. To honor God in all we do requires healthy familiarity with Lady Wisdom. It calls for knowledge as well as how best to apply it. Living effectively as followers of Christ requires wisdom in our everyday decision making.

Wisdom is not a computer chip installed in one's conscience. It comes by way of obedience to God's Word even when it may not make sense to friends who are not committed to honoring God. It comes by asking God for wisdom in whatever you may do (James 1:5). It comes by way of asking, "What would Jesus do?" as well as, "What would Jesus have *me* do?" and praying for the guidance of God's Spirit.

It all begins with your heart and its alignment with God.

Today's proverbs aren't talking about the heart that pumps blood through our bodies, or the heart we might associate with romance. It has in mind what parents or other teachers say when they urge us, "Give Jesus your heart." The heart we must guard is our commitment to love and serve the Lord, no matter what. Does your heart have the divine power and direction it needs?

Father God, help me to guard my heart by reading your Word and seeking the friendship of those whose hearts are tuned to your direction for their lives. In Christ's name, Amen.

HEART PURITY NEEDED

[Jesus] began to teach them. . . . "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."
—Matthew 5:2, 8

Some of the imagery in Proverbs 5 is graphic and explicit. In a world where the exploitation of human sexuality prospers, we need warnings about what to avoid as well as encouragement to enjoy what God has intended for good.

On the day I began working on this reflection about Proverbs 5, I received an email offering help for pastors and churches dealing with issues of sexual immorality. It stated that more than two-thirds of all men in church view pornography as a prostitute substitute. The proverb's picture of the lips of an adulteress dripping honey is clearly one of smooth speech enticing someone to sin. At the same time, the warnings about evil deeds, complete ruin, and death should prompt us all to listen closely.

Our hearts set the direction for living. Jesus promises the joy of

seeing God if we are pure in heart. The pure heart knows that whatever we do, in the bedroom or the boardroom, it's all in full view of the Lord.

Proverbs 5's encouragement to enjoy our sexual nature (within God's guidelines) uses word pictures about pure water. Like water, sex is essential to life as a gracious gift of God, but it requires the commitment of marriage to be expressed fully and enjoyed without shame. The pure heart knows the captivating power of love—God's and ours. Wise hearts delight in God's prescriptions.

Jesus, empower us to understand our sexual nature and be grateful for the gift of life. Help us to remain pure in all our relationships so that we honor you. In your name, Amen.

JEALOUSY AND ANGER: GOOD EMOTIONS?

Jealousy arouses a husband's fury, and he will show no mercy when he takes revenge.

—Proverbs 6:34

When combined, anger and jealousy can be lethal. Yet both can also enhance life. The Bible says God is jealous, not willing to share what's due only to him, just as a husband or wife is jealous regarding the affection of their spouse. Anger is a feeling we experience, as Jesus did, when there's injustice (see Mark 3:5; 11:15-17). Regretfully, it is more often motivated in us by selfishness or a desire for revenge.

Called to live in obedience to God's will, we need the guidance of his Word. Proverbs points us in the right direction as it deals with life from a perspective of godly wisdom.

How we deal with anger and jealousy reveals our determination to be more like Jesus, who experienced these emotions too. Healthy jealousy indicates a deep and committed relation-

ship. Righteous anger reveals that sins anger not only God but also those who observe or experience wrongdoing or injustice.

The practical teaching and observations found in Proverbs provide necessary safeguards or warnings. Emotions enhance the joy of living but require containment as well as restraint. So we need to ask ourselves the question God asked Cain, "Why are you angry?" (Genesis 4:6). A similar question could be asked about unhealthy jealousy: "Why are you feeling jealousy?" Answering honestly will help us to be more Christlike.

Father, help us to be aware of when and why we experience anger and jealousy so that we may not sin against you and others. In Christ, Amen.

LIVING LIFE TO THE FULLEST

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." —John 10:10

It's time to listen to Jesus. God is not a spoilsport, eager to make our lives dull or dismal. His Son came to restore what was destroyed, to give life instead of death. Christ's message is the message of wisdom personified. We are called to live in harmony with the Creator and his creation. The Lord promises his blessings to those who keep Wisdom's ways. It's a matter of listening to Wisdom's instruction, being wise, and obeying the life teachings presented.

Lady Wisdom promises life and favor from the Lord. She anticipates Jesus' promise of life "to the full." Life as God intended it for his children is the life of dreams fulfilled, promises kept, and relationships enjoyed. It's the life of doing what's right and being a blessing to others, showing God's love in all we do. Full life builds community

that reflects God's perfect unity, opening arms of love and care for everyone, promoting justice and right living so that all can flourish, living to their full potential in *shalom* with God and one another. This is life as God intends it to be, filled with joy, peace, goodness, fruitfulness, and much more.

Just as Jesus contrasts himself with the thief who destroys, Wisdom contrasts the life of God's favor with harming oneself and loving death. It remains a life and death matter. Do we want life in Christ, or death in sin? It's time to listen!

Lord, give us eyes of wisdom to see your design for the full life of loving, caring, and enjoying your favor. Empower us with your Spirit, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

THE BANQUET INVITATION

Wisdom has . . . set her table. She has sent out her servants, and she calls from the highest point of the city, "Let all who are simple come to my house!"
—Proverbs 9:1-4

Lady Wisdom has a large, solid house built with seven pillars, indicating its completeness and perfection. It's a place to host banquets to be enjoyed by all who accept her invitation. It's the place to learn how to live wisely, to "walk in the way of insight." It's the place where the "fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." It's a picture we can understand better after hearing Jesus talk about banquets.

The gospels tell us that Jesus came to preach the kingdom, and in doing so he often told stories to illustrate its nature. In Matthew 22:2 Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son." In Luke 14:16 he says, "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests." Then servants were sent out just as

Wisdom sends out her servants. Just as her house is large, so too God's kingdom has room for all who are invited.

Jesus' banquet stories include warnings about rejecting the invitations. Proverbs teaches as well that the wise person accepts the gracious invitation to "fear the LORD." Knowledge of the Holy One will lead to understanding. The reward of kingdom citizenship is now and eternal.

Remember, you're invited!

Gracious Host of the kingdom banquet, thank you for the invitation to include us in your plan of salvation. Empower us to live wisely. In Jesus' name, Amen.

REMEMBERING THE RIGHTEOUS

The name of the righteous is used in blessings, but the name of the wicked will rot. . . . The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life.
—Proverbs 10:7, 11

Practical wisdom for righteous living comes to us through the Bible, especially in Jesus' example, and also by way of the people around us—wise leaders and mentors of all kinds in our family and community. Our memories of good, helpful people and their ways of dealing with life can be a great blessing. Righteous people often share wisdom by word and example in ways that make an impact on us. Remembering how a friend dealt wisely with difficulties in his life can be instructive. Remembering how someone walked with and trusted God in her final days can be deeply encouraging.

We are truly blessed when we can remember righteous people who have imparted wisdom to us. Among those coming to my mind is a dear friend who in his last days held tightly to

the words of Scripture in Isaiah 55:8: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD.” He challenged me to share them with others upon his death.

People's words accompanied by righteous living make for blessed memories. Jesus' example of living by the way of wisdom—and the good examples of people who have followed him—make all the difference for us, in life and in death.

Lord God, thank you for blessing us by way of all who have been examples of living as your children. Lord Jesus, thank you especially for showing us—and sharing with us—your true righteousness. Shape us to be like you. Amen.

LOVE'S COVERING

Hatred stirs up conflict, but love covers over all wrongs.

—Proverbs 10:12

Having lived in many different homes during our married life, we've found it essential to know how to paint and wallpaper. Both can serve well to make a house into a home, providing personal touches. Moving into a house with "egg-plant purple" paint in the kitchen, we realized quickly that we'd want another color to cover its loudness—hopefully in one coat.

Psalm 32 provides an excellent description about covering sins. The psalmist recognizes that he cannot cover his sins, and his uncovering or acknowledging them to God leads to God's covering of forgiveness. Then the psalmist can sing and celebrate joyfully.

The apostle Peter, having learned about God's forgiveness and love, wrote emphatically, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love

covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).

Hatred and love are contrasted in today's proverb. As the opposite of love, hatred stirs up the dissension of broken and painful relationships. We don't need hatred! On the other hand, love covers, heals, and restores. With God's love as our source, we live as people who know that sins are forgiven and slights can be forgotten.

Love led Jesus to a cruel cross, resulting in our sins' being covered by Christ's blood. Love provides the forgiveness we need—daily and desperately! Have you claimed its covering?

Lord, thank you for the forgiveness of all our sins, paid for by Christ on the cross. Help us to confess to you. In Jesus, Amen.

GIVING AND BEING REFRESHED

A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.
—Proverbs 11:25

What we call “blessings” are not always blessings. Having or hoarding plentiful possessions doesn’t guarantee happiness. Saving funds for a lengthy retirement doesn’t mean you’ll live to reach the age projected to enjoy it. It’s what we do with what we have that determines a sense of prosperity. What matters is looking at stuff with eternity in mind.

As a grateful recipient of people’s generosity, I’ve learned that giving freely and generously has more to do with our way of thinking than with having an abundance to give. Whether we share our time or donate our funds, the reward is in the giving. The giver experiences a sense of community as she shares with someone, imitating her Creator in doing so. She helps to refresh others, and in doing so she is refreshed. Doing

what God uniquely designed us to do promises blessing for both giver and receiver.

Jesus provides the example of how to live our lives as generous givers. He gave his all, a living sacrifice (see Romans 12:1). The Father rewarded him with the accomplishment of a kingdom being established, a church growing in grace, and individuals living with a purpose. If Jesus had withheld himself, we would have no future, no refreshment. Our blessings are entrusted to us for blessing others. In refreshing others, we too will be refreshed!

Heavenly Father, Giver of all good gifts, we praise your name. Help us see that what you entrust to us is ours to share with others. In Christ’s name, Amen.

A HEALING TONGUE

The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. Truthful lips endure forever.

—Proverbs 12:18-19

As a pastor, I kept a copper container with two, meter-long swords in my study. Visitors often commented, wondering why I displayed them. I'd explain that they reminded me of my aversion to the rhyme "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Reckless words can pierce like swords, leaving life-long scars.

Few of us would say we've never been hurt by someone's words. Solomon states, "The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing." Words do hurt. And words do heal. James 3:10 tells us, "Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be."

Christ's followers must control their tongues. Christ's followers must desire helpful, honest, and

healing communication. Saying what is factual or apparent may not be an excuse to hurt someone. Our words must seek to encourage even when an admonition is needed.

Helpful words begin with listening to those in relationship with us. Good counsel includes knowing the person we're talking to. Honest and healing words come from those who have learned to look at others through the eyes of Jesus. His words were wise, and ours must be too. Words make a difference.

Lord, thank you for the gift of speech, the use of words. Help me to guard my tongue so that I speak wisely and encourage others to walk in your ways. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A WISE FRIEND—A GIFT FROM GOD

The righteous choose their friends carefully. . . . Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.

—Proverbs 12:26; 13:20

Like other parents, my mother cautioned me about hanging out with the wrong crowd. Literally, she said, “Remember, you get infected by such friends.” As a teenager, I thought she stated it too negatively. But was her advice any different from Solomon’s: “A companion of fools suffers harm”? The teaching about carefully choosing friends makes sense if we realize how quickly we can be led astray.

In Genesis 3 we learn that God walked in the garden with Adam and Eve. What a friendship that must have been! In John 15 Jesus refers to his disciples as his friends. When I read those words, I think of all the time Jesus must have spent walking with his disciples. Imagine walking with the Son of God, asking questions, hearing him explain about life, and

pondering the amazing things he said.

A wise friend is a gift from God. We must choose our friends carefully, avoiding unwise companions. A good friend will sacrifice for others. Jesus, the greatest of friends, tells us, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13).

How is your walk with Jesus? Do your friends walk with him? Have you invited them to do so?

Father, thank you for wise friends and for enriching my life through their friendship. Show me how I can be a better friend. In the name of Jesus, my Friend, Amen.

A HEART AT PEACE

A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.

—Proverbs 14:30

On principle and self-awareness, I consistently refuse to pay to see people's wealth displayed in their homes, yachts, or other showy possessions. Such displays of opulence serve only to enrich their owners or agents. It hardly leads to contentment even if we say, "I wouldn't really know what to do with it all." God wisely instructed his people not to covet their neighbors' possessions. But can we avoid feeling envious when we view or admire other people's riches?

A tranquil heart lowers blood pressure. The serene, content heart gives life. The "heart at peace" is the heart of those who see what they own or have accomplished and are gratefully content. They're not always looking at others and their "stuff." They understand the admonition of Psalm 37:7: "Do not fret when people suc-

ceed in their ways." One does not need to be the richest or the smartest to be content. It's a matter of being wise, and the wise person is not concerned about being the wisest.

Like a cancer, envy destroys what is healthy. Envy prevents us from enjoying what we have and the relationships we enjoy.

Hebrews 13:5 states, "Be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'" And Jesus promised, "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20). Do we need more?

God of peace, help us see the riches we have in Christ. Help us be content to share what we have so that we will live obediently as your children in your world. In Jesus, Amen.

AN UNUSUAL MEAL

Better a small serving of vegetables with love than a fattened calf with hatred.
—Proverbs 15:17

Some lines in the book of Proverbs may not seem to apply to us today, and we might struggle to connect them with the call to follow Jesus and to live wisely and obediently for the Lord. In such cases, we must read them as reflections on life sending us to search for wisdom as Christ's disciples.

Today's proverb about a meal, though, is one to which most of us can respond with a hearty "Amen." Having a meal together remains a time-honored expression of hospitality and friendship. The luxury of a fattened calf ordinarily was reserved for special occasions. Mealtimes can be wonderful times of building bonds of love. They're vital to healthy family life. Hatred should not be on the menu.

During his last supper with his disciples, Jesus said, "I have

eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15). And what follows is an account of Christ's amazing love amid those who would soon betray and deny him, contributing to his suffering. Though his followers shouldn't have treated him that way, Jesus endured all of his suffering willingly so that we could be healed of our deadly sin and reconciled with God. Now God welcomes us to the great feast of his kingdom, and we enjoy a foretaste of that when we celebrate holy communion for Jesus' sake! We "do this in remembrance" of him (Luke 22:19).

Lord Jesus, thank you for the gifts of life and love that we can celebrate at your table. May we reflect your love and faithfulness in we all do! Amen.

A CROWN OF SPLENDOR

Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained in the way of righteousness.
—Proverbs 16:31

A counterpart to today's proverb is Proverbs 20:29, which adds a contrast between young men and people with gray hair: "The glory of young men is their strength, gray hair the splendor of the old." As someone with a much older brother who still has waves of gray, I'm glad it's the color and not the quantity that matters.

Notice also that in today's proverb, gray hair denotes a righteous life. But don't we see less-than-righteous folks with gray hair too?

Our proverb for today reflects a general belief that long life was a sign of God's blessing. We still agree, as we often hear someone say, upon reaching old age, "I've been blessed." As an indication of age, gray hair is not a disgrace but a distinction. It's a crown of splendor, an achievement to be celebrated. It's a

way of identifying the elderly who deserve respect. And if those having the crown of splendor are ones who've lived a righteous life, we should treat them with even more respect. They're people to whom we should listen if we are to live wisely and obediently.

I can't picture Jesus with gray hair. Yet he lived the most righteous life ever. He wore a crown of thorns, coloring his hair blood-red for our sake. If we're wise, we'll give him the respect and worship that he deserves!

Father, thank you for displaying your love in the person of your Son, Jesus. Help us to see the wisdom demonstrated by a life crowned in glory, showing us how to live. In his name we pray. Amen.

HONORING PARENTS

Whoever robs their father and drives out their mother is a child who brings shame and disgrace. . . . A man who fathers a wise son rejoices in him.
—Proverbs 19:26; 23:24

The way a society or culture treats its aging members says a lot about its values and compassion. Throughout Proverbs we read admonitions as well as encouragements about honoring parents. Followers of Jesus want to be among the wise children obeying the command “Honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12).

Whether living in their own homes, or with their children, or in retirement centers, aging parents need their children’s loving care. The writers of Proverbs knew nothing about pension plans or retirement homes. Parents lived with their children, and the family income provided for them. Robbing one’s father or driving out one’s mother would be the equivalent of spending dad’s pension on fishing trips or abandon-

ing mom to fend for herself. Shameful!

Mark 7:9-13 records Jesus’ strong rebuke for adult children who hypocritically claimed doing honorable things while aging parents suffered neglect or abuse.

What a difference it makes when parents can delight in the caring love of their adult children, having their needs met and enjoying regular contact. With Christ’s wisdom to guide us, and in the strength of his Spirit living in us, we can honor our parents as God calls us to.

Father, thank you for parents whom we can honor by caring for them in many different ways. Give us insight on how we can do so, to your glory. In Christ, Amen.

A GOOD NAME

A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.
—Proverbs 22:1

When I asked friends to share a favorite proverb from Scripture, a rightly proud mother shared her son's business motto: the words of today's verse. How appropriate! In a business world where large profit margins seem to be the only objective, a commitment to having a good name is most commendable. I also know this is not just a slogan designed to gain clients. Our friend's son demonstrates this motto in every area of his life.

In a world with numerous temptations to cut corners or deliver less than promised, it's vitally important that followers of Christ conduct their business with integrity. The temptation to seek gold or silver—the profits—as our top priority is the same today as it was in Solomon's day. Greater profits may come by way of dishonest weights, selling a sick animal,

falsifying records, and more. But when you get caught, your business will also be ruined.

Too often our testimony is negated by the way we do business. Too often we put a Christian symbol on our business card and yet deal dishonestly. Our good intentions and promises must be followed up with actions of integrity—in all we do. Christ's name is at stake, not merely our reputation.

Jesus calls us to honesty. Honoring him, we can sing, "Lord, I lift your name on high," and mean it. Are you honoring God in all you do?

Lord Jesus, empower us richly with your Spirit so that we may live lives of integrity in all our relationships. We ask this in your name. Amen.

EXAMPLE, EXAMPLE, EXAMPLE!

Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it. —Proverbs 22:6

Both children and parents learn obedience to God best by being obedient in everyday, ordinary life. Then, if an extraordinary expectation comes their way, the pattern of obedience is in place. As God's Son, Jesus often taught and showed how to do his Father's will.

Most of the adults and children in churches I have served have learned the words of Proverbs 22:6 and have aimed to live by them. Parents take this proverb to heart, trying to teach godly living by "Example, Example, Example!" After all, what does it mean if parents can say, "I've provided food, clothing, recreation, education, and more," but they have not taught their children about the Lord?

Generally, the character and virtues of godly parents are picked up by their children, but we must remember that Proverbs 22:6

is a proverb, not a promise. To their parents' sorrow, some children turn away from the Lord, and this calls for much prayer.

Wise parents know they can't "do it all" on their own. They join a church where God's Word is the basis for all teaching. They make friends with other parents for whom God's Word is truth. If possible, they also find a school that supports them in raising their children to honor God. Working together and with God, shall we not all aim to show that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7)?

Father, thank you for our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Help us follow his example of obedient living so that we also can be good examples for others. In his name, Amen.

WISE TO BE HUMBLE

Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence, and do not claim a place among his great men; it is better for him to say . . . "Come up here," than for him to humiliate you. —Proverbs 25:6-7

Jesus not only knew people's hearts; he astutely observed their behavior. At a dinner hosted at a Pharisee's house, Jesus noticed how the guests were picking places of honor closest to their host. It sounds a little like going to a wedding reception and seating oneself at the head table with the bride and groom.

Jesus told the clamoring guests a parable about humility that echoes today's proverb. Applying the lesson, he stated, "All those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (see Luke 14:11). Proverbs 16:18 affirms this: "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall."

A wise person understands Jesus' words as he applied Solomon's wisdom. A wise person realizes that God's Word

has sufficient guidelines to help us walk in wise ways. This includes not thinking too highly of ourselves. Trumpeting one's accomplishments gives little honor to those to whom the credit is actually due.

Proverbs proclaims wisdom. It's all about grace. It's all about what God accomplishes in us, through us—and, often, despite us. So let's believe and live by God's grace!

Our Father, hallowed be your name, not ours; your kingdom come, not ours; and your will be done, not ours. Help us to see ourselves as you see us and to live accordingly. In Christ's name, Amen.

LETTING SPARKS FLY

Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses. . . . As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.

—Proverbs 27:6, 17

Today I'm celebrating my 71st birthday, and I'm thankful for the years God has given me. Earlier this month I mentioned that my seminary professor cautioned his students to wait awhile before preaching from Proverbs. That was wise advice, but I've also learned that you don't have to be elderly to appreciate friends who speak the truth. The earlier, the better!

When a friend rebukes you, the words may hurt, but they are truly a kindness. Wise friends will tell us what we need to hear. We need friends who'll say what needs saying.

Alternatively, kisses—or flowery false words—from an enemy are deceptive. Feel the pain in Jesus' words as he responds to Judas's kiss of betrayal: "Are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" (Luke 22:48).

We need people in our lives who'll say what we need to hear. We need friends who will challenge us, disagree with us, and yet stick with us. When iron sharpens iron, sparks fly. When friends disagree, sparks fly. They have a purpose. They help define our goals, check our priorities, and affirm our commitments.

It's wise to have friends who'll challenge us and question what we may be doing. It's also good to be a friend like that. Are you such a friend?

Lord, thank you for friends who challenge us as they walk with us. We confess our inclination to avoid hearing what we need to hear. Help us to listen to wisdom. In Jesus' name, Amen.

DRIP, DRIP, DRIP

A quarrelsome wife is like the dripping of a leaky roof in a rain-storm; restraining her is like restraining the wind or grasping oil with the hand.
—Proverbs 27:15-16

Some people are quarrelsome and contentious—and their actions are not gender-specific. Probably all of us know the challenge of dealing with people who are constantly quarreling or picking arguments. They can be difficult.

Think of the constant dripping from a leaky roof that allows rainwater to puddle somewhere overhead before it drops down into your room. The storm may be over and the sun already shining, but the water continues to drip, drip, drip. Similarly, with a contentious person, there's often a nagging "drip, drip, drip" that continues long after a quarrel has ended. There's just no letting up!

Jesus' followers recognize that quarrelsome people hinder healthy relationships. Church families become unfriendly and uncomfortable when conten-

tious people have influence or take up leadership positions. Certainly disagreements have their place, but intimacy can be restored only if there's honest communication followed by repentance and forgiveness. There's no place for constant dripping.

God's Word wisely prescribes, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21). Submission begins with listening and knowing when to reconcile because we love Jesus. He expects it.

Lord, we need help to communicate honestly with each other, especially when we disagree. Help us to listen and look for your way of seeing things. In your name, Amen.

YOUR “HEART CONDITION”

As water reflects the face, so one's life reflects the heart.

—Proverbs 27:19

While chasing prey, cheetahs can run about 60 miles per hour, but only in short spurts. This fast cat's speed is limited to sprints because of its small heart. Endurance at that speed would require a larger heart.

The Christian's life of obedience calls for endurance. It cannot afford the “heart condition” of a small heart, possibly engaging only in a spurt now and then. Proverbs talks about a person's life as a reflection of his or her heart.

Talking about someone's “heart condition” and how it shows in their life, one might ask, “How big-hearted is he?” or “Does she have the heart for it?”

A physical heart condition may prevent someone from strenuous activity, but a spiritual heart condition is more dangerous.

For example, if we have a heart condition that makes us miserly, we are not apt to share from the abundance we have been given. On the other hand, a heart condition that leads to sharing the joy of Jesus, who lives in our hearts, gives us the stamina for a life of faithful obedience.

Who or what has your heart? Remember, we should “have the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). Filled with his unconditional love, we'll have a large, well-conditioned heart!

Faithful Father, thank you for people in our lives who demonstrate hearts of compassion and obedience. Grant us the largeness of heart to be what you want us to be. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A FATHER'S JOY

A man who loves wisdom brings joy to his father, but a companion of prostitutes squanders his wealth. —Proverbs 29:3

As a father of four sons who have brought us great joy, I appreciate today's proverb about a young man who loves wisdom. The joy that parents feel as they observe their children making wise choices is a joy that God also knows. When Jesus was baptized, the voice of God the Father spoke from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). What joy and delight the Father had!

As someone who embodied wisdom, Jesus provides us the best example for living the obedient life. His love for wisdom shines through his parables as he teaches his listeners, including the twelve disciples.

His love for wisdom shines in the parable about two sons recorded in Luke 15. In that parable, Jesus speaks often of the sons' father, filled with compassion for the younger son, who

had squandered his wealth with prostitutes. When the lost son returned, the father threw a party to share his joy, but he also went out to plead with the angry older brother, who refused to celebrate.

Jesus left the story open-ended, so we don't know the older brother's response to the father's invitation. But we do see our heavenly Father's joy and full forgiveness in the father's embrace of the foolish son who was wise enough to come home repentant.

Are we wise enough to do the same?

Heavenly Father, thank you for welcoming us when we turn back from our foolish ways. We want to bring you joy, as Jesus did! In his name, Amen.

HEARING FROM MOTHER

Let beer be for those who are perishing, wine for those who are in anguish! Let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more.
—Proverbs 31:6-7

While considering today's verses from Proverbs 31, I saw an opportunity to share wisdom about substance abuse while also acknowledging the teaching of wise mothers, like King Lemuel's and many others.

In their training, preachers learn they must not take the Bible's teachings out of context or try to interpret them apart from other Scriptures. This principle is especially helpful for understanding Proverbs 31:6-7, which should be read in the context of passages like Proverbs 23's warnings: lingering over wine "bites like a snake and poisons like a viper."

Lemuel's mother was suggesting that alcohol might serve as an anesthetic to alleviate needless pain and anguish. But kings and other leaders, she said, must be sober in order to govern justly. Similarly calling each

of us to "follow God's example," Paul states, "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:1, 18). The influence of the indwelling Holy Spirit is what leads to a life that pleases God.

Jesus declined any drug while accomplishing his mission to die for our sake (Mark 15:23); with a clear mind he bore the weight of all our sin. Remember and believe, while striving to be more like him—an obedient servant of God.

Gracious God, thank you for the power of your indwelling Spirit, who makes it possible for us to live gratefully, gracefully, and soberly as your children. In Christ, Amen.

WHAT TO ASK

“Two things I ask of you, LORD . . . : Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.”
—Proverbs 30:7-8

Describing Proverbs 30:7-8 as her favorite proverb, a thoughtful niece wrote: “It has helped to keep me grounded as I have moved through my career: ‘Am I honest at work, or am I starting to stretch the truth? Do I need the Lord, or do I disown him with my thoughts and actions?’” It’s really all about a life of integrity! Lies and dishonesty remain a temptation in a world focused on success.

She also added wisely, “When looking for a spouse, this proverb was a guide: ‘Does this man have God in his life? Is he honest?’” It’s important to ask such questions when we look for a marriage partner. Marriage calls for mutual dependence on God.

What’s more, having too much or too little endangers our ability and desire to live God-honoring lives with integrity. Affluence may occasion pride

and self-reliance, while poverty can lead to stealing out of desperation. Having taught us to pray for our “daily bread,” Jesus warned about the allure of riches while showing compassion for the poor (Matthew 6:11; 19:21-23).

My niece concluded, “[This proverb] reminds me to ask, ‘Do I still need the Lord? Do I know who he is, or am I too busy to care?’ Lastly, it reminds me to be thankful. He has supplied my daily bread.”

Do you share these thoughts?

Father, we have so much to learn from each other as we desire to honor your name. Help us to be like Jesus, we pray. In his name, Amen.

A WISE WOMAN

*She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.
... Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and
he praises her.*
—Proverbs 31:26, 28

The book of Proverbs begins by stating its intent: “for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight” (Proverbs 1:2). In our reflections this month we’ve considered many proverbs, and we’ve applied their teachings to living as followers of Jesus Christ. Repeatedly we’ve recognized Jesus as the example of wise living.

Proverbs 31 closes with a word picture of a wife and mother who “fears the LORD” and is thus wise, diligent, compassionate, a hard worker, financially astute, insightful, and much more. Like Lady Wisdom, she makes sensible decisions and lives according to God’s Word. Such a mother and wife is worthy of her husband’s praise and her children’s blessing. She’s the example to be followed.

And yet, if anyone could do all that she does, she’d be super-human. Her example is virtually unattainable. We’re best served by seeing her as the full compilation of Proverbs’ characteristics for wise living as followers of Jesus Christ.

With this intriguing twist, Proverbs, written in a time of male dominance, closes with a picture of a wife and mother as an embodiment of Lady Wisdom, whom we’ve been encouraged to seek and know. Wisdom is God’s gracious gift showing us how to live as his children. It’s the way of the full life that Jesus has provided for us!

God of wisdom, thank you for all you teach us in Proverbs. Help us to live by your wisdom in faithful obedience, following your Son. In his name, Amen.