



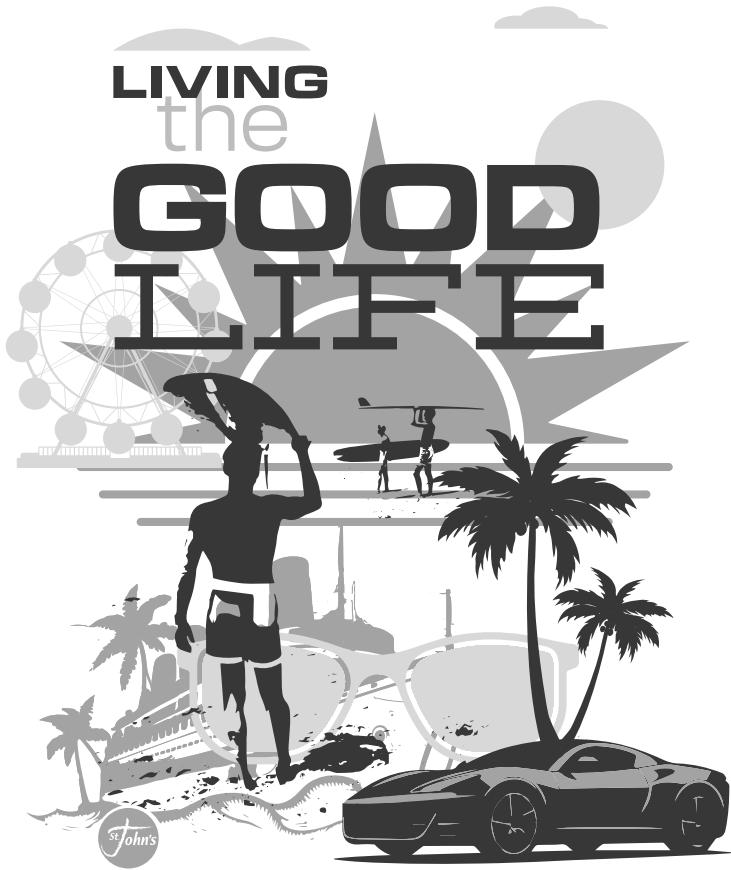
LIVING
the

GOOD LIFE

A STUDY IN THE
BOOK OF PROVERBS



STUDY GUIDE



A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

LIVING THE GOOD LIFE

Study Guide for Groups, Families, and Individuals

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Surfer graphic inspired by the iconic surf documentary film, "The Endless Summer," 1966 - Bruce Brown Films. Original movie poster artwork by John Van Hamersveld.



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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever found guidance in a favorite saying or proverb? Perhaps you've heard “a penny saved is a penny earned” or “do the right thing.” These timeless pieces of advice have been around for ages, offering practical wisdom for daily life.

One of the most famous collections of wisdom is the Book of Proverbs found in the Holy Bible. Proverbs 9:10 reminds us, “*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*” King Solomon, renowned for his legendary wisdom, is often associated with this book as its primary author. At the onset of his reign, the Lord asked Solomon what he desired as king. Solomon requested a wise and discerning heart, and this request pleased the Lord. [1 Kings 3:9-10]

The Book of Proverbs dates back to 10th century BC, a time of peace and unity in Israel, and offers insights that remain highly relevant today. Additional sections were incorporated later during the reign of King Hezekiah (around 715-686 BC).

The purpose of Proverbs is to impart practical knowledge and discretion, particularly to the young, and to foster greater wisdom in all readers of any age. The book is filled with advice on how to speak, act, and relate to others in a way that honors the Lord. It encourages us to live wisely and remember God's guidance.

The book of Proverbs often employs contrast to teach its lessons—wisdom versus foolishness, hard work versus laziness, and reigning in the tongue versus over speaking. These comparisons help us distinguish between wise and unwise choices, guiding us toward positive thinking while warning us of destructive thoughts and behaviors.

Proverbs can be outlined in the following manner:

Purpose and Theme Proverbs 1:1-7

Superiority of the Way of Wisdom Proverbs 1:8-9:19

Solomon’s Proverbs Proverbs 10:1-22:16

Thirty Sayings of the Wise Proverbs 22:17-24:22

Additional Sayings of the Wise Proverbs 24:23-34


Hezekiah’s Collection of Solomon’s Proverbs Proverbs 25-29

The Words of Agur Proverbs 30

The Words of King Lemuel Proverbs 31:1-9

Epilogue: The Ideal Wife Proverbs 31:10-31

We are excited to embark on this study with you. Our hope is that through exploring the Book of Proverbs, you will grow in wisdom and deepen your reverence for the Lord. We pray that embracing these timeless truths will lead you to a more fulfilling and peaceful life, while drawing closer to God and developing a deeper relationship with Jesus. Let’s journey together into the wisdom of Proverbs and discover how its lessons can bring clarity, purpose, and enrichment to our daily lives!

 **Welcome, Introduction, Ice Breakers and Opening Prayer**

(Ask one of the group members to open in prayer)

 **Review the 'Small Group Essentials' on PAGE 40** **PROVERBS 19:23**

*The fear of the Lord leads to life;
then one rests content, untouched by trouble.*

 **Answer Questions, Discuss, and Close in Prayer**

LESSON

In high school, my church youth choir (St. John's Lutheran Church in Orange) put on a musical called *Celebrate Life* that chronicled the life of Jesus. The decade was the 70s, and St. John's youth were getting involved in singing and acting out their faith on stage (even Lutherans can be inspired by Chuck Smith and the "Jesus Movement").

The songs in that musical were inspirational and moving and, truth be told, I really wanted to try out for a solo. For months, I had been praying for God to give me a beautiful soloist voice because I loved to sing. I thought this would be the perfect opportunity for God to answer that prayer. At choir practice every Thursday evening, we learned all the songs (back in the day, the youth choir met before the senior choir). There was one song in particular that still inspires me from that musical. It was called, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*. Lyrics like "He's the wind I soar on; He's the grass I run through..." were constantly being sung in my head. The basic theme was — Jesus is everywhere, in everything. Knowing that truth, and living in His love, gives us total peace and contentment. Or, like the author of Proverbs states, knowing that truth allows us to "rest content."

I suppose it would be great if we could all live in a musical. There would be compelling characters that face adversity, and ultimately the conflict would (of course) be resolved after an exciting climax and a happy resolution. But real life is actually filled with more conflicts and questions than catchy tunes and happy endings.

How do we get there? What is the real-life solution?

Our Bible verse for this devotion starts with the words, “The fear of the Lord.” That phrase can be difficult to understand, as the word “fear” causes anything but peace, rest, or contentment. Often, as in this case, the fear of the Lord means that we must know God, pursue a relationship with Him, and trust Him.

What does it take to rest content, to be untouched by trouble? It is hard to rest content in a world that is constantly changing. When it feels like something is mastered or understood, and you think you can finally catch your breath and get some peace and quiet, that thing suddenly evolves and needs to be rethought. We must accept in our hearts that knowing God and only living in His truth is the way to have a life filled with contentment and peace.

There are plenty of examples of God and His truth prevailing over evil. God used many prophets in the Old Testament to teach His people about truth. In 1 Kings, we read that Elijah was God's truth teller. All of the attendees and volunteers, from three-year-old children to adults, learned about Elijah at St. John's VBS this summer. We learned that God is real! God keeps His Word. He is the One True God.

In the New Testament, Jesus told us this life would be difficult, nothing worth pursuing is ever easy to attain. We are reminded in the Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:1-8) that God's truth is available to everyone, but not everyone accepts it. The devil is always choking us with lies and putting rocks and obstacles on the path. When we have a relationship with God, read about Him, serve Him, and tell others about Him, we live in His truth.

Interestingly, the word “truth” is mentioned over 230 times in the Bible. We keep many truth verses in an arsenal of memorized passages, available to be recited at the most needed times. For example: *I am the Way, the **Truth** and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me* (John 14:6); *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us; We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and **truth*** (John 1:14); and *Stand firm then, with the belt of **truth** buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place* (Ephesians 6:14).

We may know those verses well. However, there are times that we may still find ourselves repeating those haunting words spoken over 2,000 years ago by Pontius Pilate, "What is truth?" (John 18:38a) Some find this to be one of the most depressing passages in the Bible (he was face to face with Jesus, the Truth, yet he rejected that truth). Does it surprise you that Pilate's question still remains relevant? Ask the question today, “What is truth?” and our world answers, “Whatever you want it to be.” Each individual gets to decide their own truth.

Yet, we are constantly bombarded by everyone else's definition of truth. On the TV, through social media, and in everyday conversations with people we meet. "Influencers" and advertisers are always competing for our attention, trying to convince us that their truth is the truth. Listening to all those voices defining their truths is exhausting and draining, the opposite of one who rests content.

God's definition of truth is so different and yet so simple. Jesus is the only perfect and flawless truth. We can rest content in the fact that the Truth never changes, and the Truth is always with us. He comes to us through the Holy Spirit and the Bible. God's Word never changes. It is constant and everlasting! We can rest content in that truth. The fear of the Lord, living in His Truth is our real-life solution.

Our Youth Choir performance of *Celebrate Life* was a success. Many people were moved by its dialogue and beautiful songs. The aromas of the wooden stage and brick walls of the St. John's Auditorium, the brightness of the footlights, and the loud applause are still poignant memories for me from almost 50 years ago.

And God answered my prayer. I got the solo I so badly wanted. My one and only solo. As time went by, however, I learned one more truth. I am more of a choir singer than a soloist.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. There are many verses about truth in the Bible. What is your favorite truth verse? Why did you choose it?

2. God's Truth, the Bible, has never been so accessible (it can even be on your phone). Why do so many avoid God's Truth and replace it with their own version of truth?

3. What do you think being “untouched” by trouble means? Does it mean that we will never have trouble in this life?

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Good Shepherd, we seek you and trust you for direction in our lives. Lead us, Lord, and guide us on our paths. Help us to live in ways that are pleasing to You and that align with Your plan for us. Help us to listen faithfully and grow in Your wisdom. Help us to remain strong in our faith and draw closer to You. As we pursue a relationship with You, give us daily reminders that You keep Your Word and You are our one true God. Help us to remain disciplined and wise in Your Ways. Teacher, help us to spread the truth and Good News about You to everyone we encounter. May we continue to sing your praises with our every breath. With humble gratitude, Amen.

 Welcome, Introduction, Ice Breakers and Opening Prayer

(Ask one of the group members to open in prayer)

 Review the 'Small Group Essentials' on PAGE 40

 **PROVERBS 11:24**

*One person gives freely, yet gains even more;
another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.*

 Answer Questions, Discuss, and Close in Prayer

LESSON

Proverbs 11:24 refers to the generous person who scatters, yet not in the sense of wasteful distribution. This is Biblical generosity, which is like the scattering of seed that Paul speaks of in 2 Corinthians 9, that will later bring a great harvest. We never lose when we give generously unto God and His work.

To be stingy and to hold on to more than is right leads to a poverty of the soul. When we are selfish and ungenerous with what God has given us, we are refusing to trust and put him first – leading ultimately to poverty.

The next four proverbs that follow this one, speak to the same idea of living generously. It's almost as if Solomon was driving home a point that he knew would need several different metaphors to make sure that no matter who we are and what our background or understanding was, we wouldn't miss the point he was making.

Not surprisingly, Jesus takes a similar approach when He speaks in parables about seeds and sowing and barns and hoarding and being generous, and the many examples He gave as well.

Perhaps it's because parables, proverbs and metaphors allow us to say something without being so direct, because who likes to respond to being directly told to be generous?

Or, perhaps it's because parables and proverbs have a way of breaking down the barriers we are so quick to put up and find a way into our hearts.

Because generosity always starts in the heart. The head finds ways to make

excuses and the hands tend to hold on tight. But the heart, well, the heart is different and has a way of surprising us.

If there is one behavior that constantly surprises people, it is the act of generosity. Whether you are talking money, materials, or time — when we give or when we receive, there's always a bit of surprise. Because when we are generous, it creates an experience that leaves both the giver and the recipient different than they were.

I thought about filling this study with examples of generosity and how it brought change and joy, and you could read about them and smile. And I know you could share your own examples as well. For when we ourselves choose to give freely, not only is something exchanged like things or money, but also an intangible currency is passed from giver to receiver and from receiver to giver — a currency so powerful that it inspires both people to be changed and experience firsthand the change and the joy.

We see and experience this at the individual level, but with a church, the result is even greater. It's like straw scattered here and there: if you set it on fire, it makes a lot of little flames. But gather these straws into a bundle and light them, and you get a mighty fire, rising like a column into the sky. There's a reason we gather to give and pool our gifts and resources to be used together.

But when a church operates out of the belief that there are limited resources for ministry, it doesn't operate at full capacity. Instead, it begins to have what is called a "scarcity mindset." The church stops dreaming, stops trusting, and exists in fear that one day we won't have enough, so they do nothing but make sure they can stay afloat.

For over 140 years, St John's has not and will not ever operate this way. From the first farmers who mortgaged their homes to build a sanctuary to the widow who put in her two mites to the family who makes a point of giving generously, we as a congregation believe in an all-powerful, all-knowing, and always present God who creates resources when they don't exist — who gives to us so that we can give to others. We don't say, "what should we cut to survive?" We say, "What is God calling us to next?" For whenever God calls us to something, He has already equipped us with the resources we need to do what he asks of us.

Just ask Dr. Susan Njemanze or Mary Salgado or Dr. Jake Hollatz or Irma Bates or any leader or volunteer who has ever started a ministry, served in a ministry, or given to a ministry. You can't outdream or outgive God, you just can't.

Consider then how, as a church or as an individual, we at times feel listening to the call to be generous is unwise and defies common sense — it asks too much of us. What if there isn't enough to go around, and how can we be sure what we give will be used smartly, and correctly!

It's times like these where we must remember that God is inviting us to listen to his call, to take steps of obedience, and to give generously. And He, He is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us. To Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. For he will meet all our needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

After all, God is the owner of all things – including the resources we have been given and/or worked for –we have no choice but to be like our Father who gives and shares. For we are as Paul says, imitators of Christ, who must be willing to give up the feeling of security that comes from thinking we have control over our future and that only by building bigger barns for ourselves, can we be sure we will be OK. This type of thinking moves us away from a heart like Christ, one filled with love and joy.

This proverb drives us back to our hearts and reminds us that we all have something, but ponders whether will we hold onto the little or much we have, or will we have faith to give. Will we store for ourselves only, or will we respond to the generosity of God. One thing is clear: it's not that we're supposed to just rely on faith in Jesus when we give; the key is love. Because Jesus asks us to love Him more, not just believe in Him more, not just trust Him more, love Him more.

And that is difficult when we love our things, our image, and even the people in our lives more. Yes, we love all the gifts He gives us, love the people in our lives He has placed, and all of the blessings in our lives — but we are called to love Him more.

And it's the love that makes giving not just a thing you have to do, but a thing that gives you joy. It is when you don't hold so tightly to those things, you find you get more of Him and His love, and discover the difference that love makes in your life and others lives as well.

So, when it comes to giving, the difference faith makes is the feeling of, "I'm not afraid." The difference love makes is the feeling of, "I'm excited!" Having that faith makes us feel that we can walk forward confidently knowing that God has me in His hands. But the difference love makes is joy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

When God speaks to giving generously and stepping out in faith, He is not talking about a health and wealth theology. There is no "give to get" strategy here. That type of thinking doesn't line up with the way God works, as if He

only gives to you if you give to Him. Our giving is motivated by the gospel of God's grace, not by an expectation of getting something in return.

1. With this in mind, what is your goal when you give?


2. What is the mission of the church? What role does giving play in that mission?

3. What is the hardest obstacle that prevents you from living generously?

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Dear Lord, Hebrews 13:16 reminds us that doing good and sharing with others pleases you. May you continue to remind us that giving graciously allows us to shine Your light to others. Messiah, we seek Your love in everything we do. Just as You give to us, and bless us daily, we should freely give to others around us. And as we do so, may we continue to grow in our faith, as our reward comes from You alone. Paul tells us to give cheerfully, so as we give what we are able, continue to fill us with Your joy. Jesus, as we feel led to give, we ask that You use our offerings for Your glory, and not ours. For any gift we give is merely our grateful hearts thanking You for giving us the greatest gift we could have ever asked for – Your only Son; our Lord and Savior. In Your Holy Name we pray, Amen.

LIVING IN AND GROWING THROUGH DISCIPLINE

 Welcome, Introduction, Ice Breakers and Opening Prayer

(Ask one of the group members to open in prayer)

 Review the 'Small Group Essentials' on PAGE 40

 **PROVERBS 19:20**

*Listen to advice and accept discipline,
and at the end you will be counted among the wise.*

 Answer Questions, Discuss, and Close in Prayer

LESSON

My kids often look at me in awe and wonder, and not the type I take pride in as a father. Sure, there are moments when the light bulb turns on, and I can see that the wisdom I am trying to impart on them is sinking in. However, there are many times when my kids, like all children, roll their eyes, give me “that look,” or flat-out can’t relate to what I am saying.

I remember when I was young, my dad would tell me something and I would respond with “What?” Well, during my teenage years, the word “WHAT” was banned in my house. My dad instilled in me how constantly saying “What?” displayed a lack of respect for the person I was talking to. Of course, “What?”, does ask for clarity, but constantly using that word after posing a question or when in a meaningful conversation only demonstrated that I thought I knew it all already. A typical issue with adolescents. However, now that I am older and in my 40s with 3 children of my own, I understand how wise it was to show discipline while removing that word from my vocabulary.

King Solomon writes about being wise, time and time again in the book of Proverbs. Our focus today comes from Proverbs 19:20b “...*will be counted among the wise.*” You see, King Solomon knew how important it was to be wise. In 1 King’s 3:1-14, a young King Solomon prays for wisdom. He knows that he is not ready to lead a nation as great in number as the Israelites, but he thanks God for the blessing anyway. His prayer of praise and gratitude is concluded with one request:

“9 Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?”

This chapter in 1 Kings continues with the explanation of how pleased the Lord is with Solomon’s request. So pleased, he gives King Solomon a wise and discerning mind, unlike anyone before him or anyone who will come after him.

King Solomon blesses all of us with his wisdom, the book of Proverbs is filled with verse after verse of mottos for all believers to live under. One of those challenges, I believe, is to *“listen”* faithfully. King Solomon knew that he could not become wise on his own; that he needed help to rule his nation. King Solomon turned directly to God for that wisdom.

As we grow in life, words of wisdom are constantly surrounding us. I once heard a pastor say that there are no chances or happenstances when it comes to who God has placed in your life. Good, bad, or indifferent, God has placed all these people in our lives as vessels of wisdom. It may not be apparent, it may not always be in the form of good examples, and you may not have recognized its significance in the moment, but all these encounters shape and mold us. These relationships and interactions with others provide opportunities for us to grow in wisdom.

The lessons God imparts on us throughout this journey of life may not always be apparent. Jesus never promises that our lives will be perfect at that our faith in him guarantees that we will make the right decisions. We are not perfect. We need a Savior who comes to our aid when we make the wrong decision. But what does that look like, are we willing to listen to God, to Christ, when the wisdom of our way falls completely short of God’s way?

Our family is big into sports; we believe that there are so many life lessons that can be learned through a team atmosphere. One of the greatest lessons that comes from sports is discernment. Throughout their lives, my children have had many different coaches. Each coach has something unique to offer; each coach has strengths and weaknesses. It is important that our children listen to their coaches, gather wisdom from them to advance and get better, and find even the smallest seed of wisdom on even the toughest day. With our children, we regularly discuss what they have learned from their coaches. We believe ALL coaches have the best intentions with their players, even those coaches with flaws. We teach our kids to respect, listen, and apply what they are learning from these coaches. Too often, I can admit, coaches are put on pedestals. For some, the pedestal is so high, they can only fail. As I write this now, I wonder how often we sit and have the discussion about who is the King of Wisdom, about listening to the voice of their creator, and leaning on the grace they are granted because of their Savior. How often do my wife and I discuss the perfect wisdom that comes from the Father with our children?

I think in the business of life, we forget to go to the source. We forget to sit back and as King Solomon did, simply ask God for Wisdom. What seems to have slipped away in the world today, is that there is only one **“TRUE SOURCE OF TRUTH.”** We look to coaches, social media, cultural trends, and other pressures of this world, rather than looking to our Savior. As we mature in our faith, learning more about who God designed us to be, it is important for us to become better at “Letting Go, to Let God” take over. Prayer is powerful and God hears our prayers. We may not always like the answer or understand his timing. We may even get upset that we must deal with so much. But through it all, He is imparting wisdom. I don’t know about you, but the toughest times in my life have often provided the most opportunity for gaining wisdom.

The hardest part to accept about this proverb, is not only the reality that we need to stay quiet and listen, but that we need “Discipline” in our lives. We are called to be people who make wise decisions, who stay devoted to God’s mission, who answer His call for purpose in our lives. But when we fail at that, are we willing to accept the discipline so that we can grow as individuals? Are we willing to heed the advice of our Lord and Savior? Or do we simply fight the fight, look to ourselves for answers, and just try to push through the mistakes on our own?

Looking back on my life so far, God has blessed me richly in many ways. One of my greatest strengths is being a fixer. I love going to friends’ houses and working on projects. I love teaching my children, especially with my boys, about what it will take to be a good father, a good husband and creating a good family foundation. These are just a few reasons as to why it is important to be a fixer. To that, it also leads to what many people will agree is my greatest weakness. You see, as a fixer, I am not the best listener. I am not the best at taking advice. I tend to offer a solution before I even realize what the true problem is. I will paraphrase what Martin Luther said...It is important that we as Christians boast in our weakness; it shows our need for a Savior. It shows that we cannot do it all on our own. Wisdom is gained through the willingness to listen and accept discipline. Don’t forget...like my wife and I tell our own children... **“We discipline you because we LOVE you.”** It is important for a person like me to rely on God and ask him to provide those opportunities for me to listen better and to heed the advice of others. In all of this, look back on your life. Were there times when you thought nothing could be gained from an experience? Did you miss it? Were you really listening? God is always providing opportunity for us to learn and grow whether it be through discipline or simply focusing on listening in the moment.

Let’s prioritize, like King Solomon, to seek God’s wisdom. It comes in many forms: His Word, Pastors, counselors, friends, loved ones, etc. God is present in our lives and His wisdom dwells in us through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives us the courage to make tough choices and to focus on the ways of our Heavenly Father. Through prayer, devotion, Bible studies, we have

so many opportunities to apply what King Solomon is writing about here. ***“Listen to advice and accept discipline, and at the end you will be counted among the wise.”*** Proverbs 19:20. It may take an entire lifetime, but through intentional listening and accepting discipline, we too may even be counted among the wise.

I leave you with some words of wisdom from the New Testament:

Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders: make the most of every opportunity.

— Colossians 4:5

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

— James 3:13

Lastly, remember that the ways of the world are unwise and foolish, but the ways of God are righteous and wise. Pour your efforts into the ways of God’s Kingdom, humbly submit yourself to His will, listen to His voice, and you too will be blessed with a wisdom unlike any other.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Read 1 Kings 13:1-14.

1. Are your prayers like King Solomon? Purposeful? Intentional?

2. Do you trust that God is listening and that He will answer your prayers?

3. When you look back at some of your prayers in your life:
 - a. Were your deepest desires self-serving or “me” focused? Did God maybe look at your prayer and not grant your “wish” in a way of showing discipline?

 - b. What about those purposeful prayers, the Kingdom-focused prayers? What type of response do you recall God having in those instances?

Proverbs 19:20: Listen to advice and accept discipline, and at the end you will be counted among the wise.

1. What was the first thing to cross your mind when you heard this Proverb?
2. Are you the listener who seeks advice from the wise? Or are you the person who constructs ways to utilize your own power to solve problems, to push through obstacles?
3. Were there times when you thought nothing could be gained from an experience? Did you miss it? Were you really listening?
4. Why do we as followers of Christ find it difficult to accept discipline?
5. What are some ways in your life that you can make adjustment to be a better listener to the people God has placed in your life?
6. What are some strategies that even in the hardest days you can utilize to still find wisdom in what has been said or the trials you have faced?
7. Is there a specific time in your life that you look back and can honestly say, "I missed that opportunity to learn." How can you/do you approach those situations now?

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Lord, like Solomon, we thank you for all the blessing You have bestowed in our lives. We humbly ask that in those times of trials, in those times where careful discernment is needed, that You would open our ears and humble us to accept the advice that comes only from You. You are the wisest of all Lord, our Creator, our Father. You saw that we were broken, that wisdom often escapes our actions in life. You Lord, took it upon Yourself to send your only Son to the cross for our sins. Please remind us that even when we fail, your gift of grace allows us to come back to You to surrender and ask for wisdom. Give us the courage to listen to those whom You have put in our lives, those who offer guidance. Help us to invest our time in wisdom, seeking to glorify You and all that You are. Amen.

SESSION FOUR

FAITHFULLY LIVING

4

 **Welcome, Introduction, Ice Breakers and Opening Prayer**

(Ask one of the group members to open in prayer)

 **Review the 'Small Group Essentials' on PAGE 40**

 **PROVERBS 21:3**

*To do what is right and just
is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.*

 **Answer Questions, Discuss, and Close in Prayer**

LESSON

As simple as the concept sounds, “*Faithfully Living*” is a rather broad and all-encompassing term that means many things to many people. I chose this devotion title because it seemed like a simple, straightforward concept. After all, it should be easy to write about. Do you agree? Yet, I quickly learned that the more I studied and read about *faithfully living*, the more it became enormous and frankly intimidating. After all, who am I to write about *faithfully living*? Who are any of us to describe such a life, especially in light of our sinful nature, considering we all fall short of His glory (Romans 3:23), Amen?

I was glad that a verse from Proverbs was recommended, as it quickly served to remind me that although it makes me uncomfortable to author a devotion on a humbling concept like *faithfully living*, King Solomon’s words in Proverbs 21:3, along with many other God-breathed scriptures, provide wisdom and guidance on *faithfully living*. Solomon writes in Proverbs 21:3, “*To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.*”

It may be helpful to read the two verses before this one to help gain an understanding of this verse. As Lutheran Christians, we seek to have scripture help us understand scripture. Here are the first three verses in Proverbs 21:

¹ *In the LORD’s hand the king’s heart is a stream of water
that he channels toward all who please him.*

² *A person may think their own ways are right,
but the LORD weighs the heart.*

³ *To do what is right and just
is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.*

Seeing the first two verses helps us formulate a few themes: the Lord is sovereign (even over kings), man's sinful and prideful self paints his ways (and his heart) better than they actually are, and only the Lord can weigh humanity's heart. Verse three crescendos into the truth that living a good life (doing what is right and just) is more pleasing to God than pious and pompous sacrifices that we attempt to provide rather than serving and loving our neighbors.

The Old and New Testaments give many examples of Solomon's truism stated in Proverbs 21:3. For example, 1 Samuel 15:22 tells us that obeying and listening to the Lord is better than any sacrifice. In Matthew 23:23, Jesus reminds the scribes and Pharisees that they are hypocrites and have neglected what matters: justice, mercy, and faithfulness. The remainder of Proverbs 21 reinforces godly wisdom and living justly. It also provides other reminders that all attempts to fool the Lord with sacrifices over obedience will fail, as the Lord knows our innermost thoughts and motives.

From Proverbs 21, it becomes clear that the Lord sees our disguised sacrifices for what they are. In our contemporary times, these offerings certainly must look different than those described in the Old and New Testaments. When was the last time you offered a burnt offering or sacrificed a lamb as an offering for the Lord in your backyard?

The good news is that we no longer have to offer sacrifices on the altar of the Lord. A once-and-for-all sacrifice has been made for us, for our sinful selves: For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life, John 3:16. So, what then is required of us to faithfully live? St. Mark says it this way,

To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices. Mark 12:33

In *The Freedom of a Christian*, the reformer Martin Luther addresses *faithfully living* as a Christian in depth. In this brief yet power-packed writing, Luther frames it with two propositions: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none," and "A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." For the sake of brevity, I will mention that the first considers a believer's relationship to God, and the second addresses a believer's relationship to others.

Faithfully living is how Luther defines Christian freedom as having a right relationship with God. No external good works can produce this righteousness. The only thing that can make a person free is trusting in the Word of the gracious God. Luther would say that if we have this faith, nothing can hurt us. If we lack this faith, nothing can help us. As humans, we can do nothing to earn faith, but faith is freely given in the message of the Word of God as we receive it by faith. Luther believed that our faith has three powers:

1. First, faith derives its power from the Word of God. Christians have all the power they need from God's Word, no good work or all good works cannot equal it, for faith alone and the Word of God rule in the soul (The Freedom of a Christian p. 17).

2. Second, the very highest worship of God is that we ascribe to Him truthfulness, righteousness, and whatever else should be ascribed to one who is trusted (p. 17).

3. The third incomparable benefit of faith is that it unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom (p. 18).

Luther concludes that a *faithfully living* Christian also gives an understanding of our dedication and love to our neighbor. He says, "We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise, he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor. Yet he always remains in God and in his love, as Christ says in John 1:51, He then added, "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man."

In Luke 18, Jesus gives us a parable to consider: The Parable of the Persistent Widow. Jesus uses a faithless, fearless judge and a persistent widow to address treating others justly.

" He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. ² He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. ³ And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' ⁴ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, "Though I neither fear God nor respect man, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming."⁶ And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. ⁷ And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? ⁸ I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Unlike the judge in this parable, we serve a loving Lord who cares about us. Our prayers do not fall on the ears of an unjust, reluctant God, like the requests of the persistent widow. Although we may not hear or see the response we desire, we can pray with confidence, hope, and faith, by God's grace, that we have a saving faith that will please Jesus when he returns.

Until now, we've spent time in scripture, reading Luther, and considering The Parable of the Persistent Widow. I'd like to explore what *faithfully living* looks like from a practical perspective in our St. John's community. In his book, Community, a collection of writings by Dutch Catholic priest and au-

thor Henri Nouwen (edited by Stephen Lazarus), he makes a few comments that point to *faithfully living* as a Christian which I think are important to consider.

Nouwen says, “*What counts in your life and mine is not success but fruits. The fruits of your life you might not see yourself. The fruits of your life are born often in your pain and in your vulnerability and in your losses. The fruits of your life come only after the plow has carved through your land. God wants you to be fruitful.*” Nouwen’s view on what counts in life is the opposite of the world’s view. He puts the brakes on personal success and points us to the fruits of love in our lives and in our community. St. Paul says it this way to the Galatians, “*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*” Galatians 5:22-23.

What does *faithfully living* as a Christian look like? It can be narrowed down to these fruits: living in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. It is also living in God’s grace and extending that grace to others daily. It requires discipline and being in God’s Word daily. However, it should not be mistaken as perfection in any sense of the word; in fact, it is the opposite. It is a recognition of our imperfection and the humbling need for a Savior by God’s grace. One of my favorite life verses puts it this way, “*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.¹⁰ For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*” Ephesians 2:8-10.

I have had the blessing of growing up in the Christian Church and being a member at St. John’s since I moved to California in 1986. I was blessed to attend a Lutheran High School in Denver and Concordia University Irvine. As I look back, I can think of many examples of people in my life who demonstrated these fruits of the Spirit and encouraged me; they understand *faithfully living*. I hope you can think of a few in your life, too.

While I am not a self-proclaimed expert on *faithfully living*, I hope these few thoughts are a blessing in some way. One thing is for sure: A lot more can be said about this topic. Blessings on your reflection.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Spend some time reflecting on your life and the topic of Faithfully Living. What comes to mind as you reflect?
2. Proverbs 21:3 reflects a truism that King Solomon points out that the Lord knows our inner thoughts and motives behind our actions, including attempts of burnt offerings and sacrifices in lieu of discipline, honesty, justice, and mercy to others. What offerings and sacrifices have you tried to offer that may have had an alternative motive?
3. In the Parable of the Persistent Widow, the judge is unjust. As faithfully living Christians, what is our response to unjust and uncaring people?
4. Luther describes “a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God.” Reflect on Luther’s description of living in Christ, through love, and beyond yourself into God.
5. The world views personal success as its key goal. How is this different from the life of a Christian striving to faithfully live? How do you describe your goals?
6. What fruits can you identify as faithfully living in your own life and as you look around the St. John’s community?
7. Today’s devotion touched only briefly on the concept of faithfully living. What other attributes do you or your family members value that may not have been mentioned?

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Faithful Father, help us to spend every day doing what is right and what is just. Teach us Your ways, oh Lord. You know our hearts and You know that we want to spend our days pleasing You and doing right by You alone. Open our eyes and ears to obey and listen to You. To delight in Your Word daily. Teach us to love You with our whole hearts. Clear our minds of all disruptive thoughts that may lead us astray. Let us embrace our imperfections. Strengthen our trust in You. Help us to experience Your power and Your love in all of our days. Hold us tight as we cling to you and walk in Your knowledge. And let us rejoice knowing that we are faithfully living every moment of our lives. Thank you, Jesus, for saving us through Your grace. Amen.

DARING TO TAKE A CHANCE

 Welcome, Introduction, Ice Breakers and Opening Prayer

(Ask one of the group members to open in prayer)

 Review the 'Small Group Essentials' on PAGE 40

 **PROVERBS 16:1**

*To humans belong the plans of the heart
but from the LORD comes the proper answer of the tongue.*

 Answer Questions, Discuss, and Close in Prayer

LESSON

Being a new mom, I can honestly say this season of life for me has been one of the most challenging, but also one of the most rewarding and beautiful. Change is something that I've always struggled to find patience with, and I think for most, having a routine is comforting. And, well, when you have an infant at home, most of those game plans tend to go out the window. Life changes constantly in the first year of life with a baby. Just when you finally think you've "mastered" something, there's a sleep regression, they have a growth spurt, and eventually you can't wait any longer to babyproof the house. But there's also moments of pure joy - hearing "Mama" for the first time, their initial wobbly steps, the facial expressions they make as they try new foods, and my favorite ... the sense of peace they feel as they melt into your arms when you hold them close.

There's so much information thrown at you when carrying a baby for nine months, but many don't talk about the struggles of postpartum. My postpartum journey has been a humbling experience, to say the least. I have a whole new understanding and respect for those struggling with anxiety. At times, it can feel crippling the way your mind takes control of your body. It's difficult to find peace when there's so much fluctuating around you and inside of you. And for someone who likes to feel in control, and appear as though she has it "all together," my initial coping mechanism was to draw inward and away from people. My fight or flight mode had me tuning out God's voice, not recognizing how much worse things were getting when I wasn't allowing Him to be in control. He already had everything planned out, and all He wanted from me was to lean in and trust Him. He wanted me to *take a chance* on

Him and melt into His arms like my sweet little boy does to me when he's looking for comfort and guidance.

When I think about *daring to take chance*, my mind immediately thinks about the book The Road Less Traveled by Scott Peck. For many of us, we are comforted by routine and structure. And when we think about wandering down the path less likely to be traveled, our tendency is to run in the opposite direction or hunker down, letting fear and anxiety overcome us and drive our decisions. We like to learn from watching others take the lead, hoping they can test the road out for us before we lace up and eventually jump into the race. Forgetting that our Lord and Savior has already ventured down the road less traveled and has now circled back to walk alongside us as we step onto the path.

Every few months, I get to connect with counselors from other Lutheran schools, and during our last meet-up, the presenter had us focusing on the question, "Is this stressful or just uncomfortable?" When you are in the thick of a challenging situation, it can be hard to pause and recognize that the feeling of uneasiness surrounding you is not in control of you. Taking a leap of faith is the farthest thing from your mind. You may even feel that God has stepped away, letting you fend for yourself. But in those difficult moments, He's much closer than we think. He utilizes those stressors to develop growth and draw us closer to Him. And He very well may even use your experiences to draw others closer to Him as well. Our lives are made up of various pieces, broken and misshaped, but when bound together – they make something extraordinary.

Our Lord and Savior takes chances on us each and every day, so why is it difficult for us to do the same? We become creatures of habit in our day-to-day lives, we hesitate to speak up for fear of judgement or being misunderstood, and honestly, we get lazy and put our faith on the back burner. Taking a chance means trusting God with our whole hearts, taking a moment to be present and listen, and following through even in those uncomfortable moments. He has already given us a purpose: to share the Good News with others. And He wants us to share that Good News, not just with our words, but living out that purpose for all others to see with our actions as well.

Philippians 4:6 states, "***Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.***" We have a continuous line of communication with someone who knows every hair on our head, has combated sin and the devil, unconditionally loves us, and wants more than anything for us to take a chance on Him like He has on us. Christ is not here to walk the road FOR us, but to walk the road WITH us. Through the various twists and turns, whether we

are dancing through the joyful moments or sitting in the trenches of the pressures surrounding us, He is ALWAYS present. So, instead of putting up our blinders or sticking our head in the sand because we think we have a better plan than our Messiah does, remember the following ...

Listen to God in the quiet moments and in the moments of chaos. Let His Word, the Scriptures, speak louder than your fears and anxieties. Don't let the voices of others take control of what you know to be the truth. God's plan is ALWAYS much better than our own. And His timing is ALWAYS perfect.

Learn from your mistakes. Jumping in with both feet and taking a chance means things could get rocky. You will have moments of failure, but those trials and tribulations don't define who you are. God has breathed life into you, knowing full well that you are His child. Use those life lessons to draw yourself and others closer to Him.

Love others. Showing grace is hard to do, but it demonstrates God's love in such a powerful way. Love is contagious and can be shown through words of affirmation and accountability, as well as our everyday actions. To love someone is to follow the greatest commandment of them all.

Seasons of change don't magically just disappear once you hit a certain age. We were created to be life-long learners, because once we stop learning, we become sedentary and too comfortable. There are seasons of joy, loss, growth, doubt, love, pain, triumph, etc. And the list goes on. But even with the ever-changing tide, one thing remains the same: our Lord and Savior. Hebrews 13:8 states, "**Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.**"

Some seasons you may feel more confident and settled, while others you may feel like you're treading water or running on fumes. Either way, Christ is there to give you what you need. Whether that's holding you close, surrounding you with the right people at the right time, providing an opportunity for growth, or even giving you a nudge when you get too comfortable and need to **take a chance.**

God invites us to lean into Him. To have faith. To jump in with both feet. And **dare to take a chance.**

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. We are constantly transitioning from one season of life to the next, planning for the next move. What season of life are you currently walking through?

2. Sometimes we are so caught up in our own plans and worries, that we forget God already has everything under control. Is there anything/anyone standing in your way to lean into God and take a chance on Him?

3. When you think about heading down the road less traveled, it can feel unsettling. And at times you may ask, “God, are you there?” Is there a time in your life that you can look back on now and see just how God was working through you (even though maybe you didn’t see it in the moment)? A time in your life that prepared you for where you are today or maybe is still preparing you for future things ahead?

4. The Word is God-breathed, holding all the answers to our fears and anxieties. What Scripture do you hold tight to in those moments of uncertainty? What words give you the hope that you need to dare to take a chance?

5. There is a consistent line of communication open between our Savior and us. Write down some prayer requests and life them up to Him. Our Lord Jesus is constant yesterday, today, and always, so lean on Him for security, celebrate with Him in those joyful moments, and ask Him for guidance as you step outside of your comfort zone and take a chance. Know that He is always listening and always present.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Dear Heavenly Father, just as parents receive great joy in hearing their child call out to them, we know that You also must be full of joy when we cry out to You. Whether we are praising You in good times or calling upon You in bad times, we know You love when we come to You, Father. And in all those moments, Lord, we turn to You to hear Your voice. To reflect on Your Word. To lean into. To trust. And to come to for comfort and guidance. Almighty God, You tell us to not be anxious about anything because You are always with us, walking right beside us. And in times that we may feel we are all alone, help us to draw closer to You and put our trust in You alone. In Jesus’ Name we pray, Amen.

SESSION SIX

LIVING GRACIOUSLY

6

Welcome, Introduction, Ice Breakers and Opening Prayer

(Ask one of the group members to open in prayer)

Review the 'Small Group Essentials' on PAGE 40

PROVERBS 15:1

*A gentle answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.*

Answer Questions, Discuss, and Close in Prayer

It seems like a million years ago that the Klinkenbergs left Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin to come home to Orange County and serve at what was our rival congregation growing up. I remember having a bad haircut and having to get “Californiaized.” I remember living in the church’s little home off the corner of Cambridge and Sycamore Streets. Our little boy loved the backyard, and we learned together how a floor heater worked and, even more, how it smelled.

As a young pastor, I thought I was smart. I had been called to St. Johns, after all. But my education was only beginning. I had an opinion on everything and everyone, and I tended to make mistakes being aggressive, not passive. In one conversation I was having with my predecessor, Pastor Norb Oesch, he stopped me mid-sentence and flared his eyebrows. He looked at me and commented, “How do you find room to be gracious, Timothy?”

He had stopped me dead in my tracks. In all my pontificating, I had only been judgmental and only considered my own perspective and point of view. Perspective is looking through the lens of my own making and my own needs. Point of view then being a look only through my own mind’s eye and attitude. To be honest, both my perspective and point of view needed to be lifted to a different level.

We often think about what makes a “good life” and what it is to be a “good person.” The proverbs are rife with commentary and examples of what a good person says and what a bad person says. In this simple proverb, a good person responds to a comment with a “gentle answer,” and a bad person replies to a comment with a “harsh word.”

Now we have something to work on. Proverbs tend to be practical, and this

one is. What I don't want to do is reduce this proverb away to irrelevance and say, "Well, Jesus wants us to be kind, but we sin a lot, and he forgives us so, whatever." That sort of message washes away the sin, makes the grace cheap, and softens the proverb away to irrelevance. So, let's think it through another stream.

"A gentle answer turns away wrath." Solomon puts the good forth for us. And no doubt as the wisest king in Israel's history, he had to sort through any amount of silly and inane questions. Solomon would remind us that kindness is better than judgment and that kind and gentle answers leave margin for the future. When we answer a person from a perspective of kindness and grace, we build a bigger margin for us to speak and for them to respond. We speak in a way that warms the heart and draws the person close rather than seemingly punishing them for speaking to us. Leave room for grace.

In our culture as a congregation, we want to leave room for grace. So much of our Lutheran culture used to be kind of mean. Someone quipped to me, "You Lutherans have your picture next to the definition of passive-aggressive in the dictionary." Passive-aggressive behavior is when we smile at someone while we put a knife through their heart. It's a nasty way to be raised. It demeans people, and it leaves no room for grace. When people get used to it and figure it out, it can destroy family systems and familial relationships. It leaves no room for grace.

In our culture as a congregation, we want to leave room for grace. Not cheap grace that justifies the sin, rather expensive grace bought with the blood of Jesus. It's that costly grace that Solomon knew because his father David, pre-figured Jesus the Messiah. It's that grace that loves us that drives our conversations.

Leaving room for grace means a couple of things. Perspective is key. An angry response is a knuckle sandwich to the nose. An angry word shuts down the conversation, devalues the individual and fractures the relationship. We live in an era when margins for time and patience are eaten up with anxiety and hurry. Changing our perspective means we change our view. We see others and "those for whom Jesus died" and offer them kindness rather than judgment. To start here helps a kind word come a lot easier. Changing perspective helps build a bigger margin to be gracious.

Leaving room to be gracious means we may need to change our point of view. Again, in a culture that is so busy, and living a life that is filled with clutter, there's not a lot of margins. Everybody is a possible target of our anger. The server at the restaurant, the erratic driver in front of you on the smartphone, or the people you share life with that can wear you down. Maybe we can change our point of view. Instead of looking to dispose of the person or the conversation, we can take on the opportunity to be kind. Viewing the person as someone in need of kindness or some grace sure helps our point of view. We don't need to win the argument or slam them for being so short-

sighted. Rather we can offer a kind word and thus create a bigger margin for the relationship.

Leaving room to be gracious means we also have to check our tone. A kind word would be issued in a kind tone. It would be offered with a smile. It may be offered in a quiet way. Sarcasm is a hateful tone and is right alongside of passive-aggressive behavior for damaging a soul. Kind eyes, a kind voice, and a kind smile turns away wrath and creates a margin for grace.

Leaving room to be gracious also means we take a long view of our relationships. It's interesting to think that we will live with each other for eternity, so our words now should be a rehearsal for eternity. Let's be a church that is rehearsing for heaven. The culture of our church should take the above pieces of "leaving room" and mark how we love one another. St. Paul writes, *"Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."* [Colossians 4:6]

It seems like an eternity ago, but I was nominated to be Denominational President. I was third in nominations and eked my way onto the ballot. It was an exercise in pain. I received emails from pastors who had never met me, who thought I was a bad person. While the personal barbs were sadly a part of it, the commentary about our congregation, from pastors who hadn't even been on campus, was painful for me. Leaving a margin for grace was tough. After wading into this, I wanted nothing to do with it and have kept my nose at St. John's and very few other pieces except coaching some young pastors.

About three years, later I found myself as a delegate to our Denominational National Convention in the summer of 2021. The days were grueling. We sat and sat and argued and argued. Now as an older pastor, I paid attention, did my duty, and kept my mouth positive for the most part. "Leave room to be gracious, Timothy." One evening about halfway through the seven-day event, I went for dinner at Mader's Restaurant which was a short walk from the convention center and had German food. They had the best roasted pork shank and the finest sauerbraten you've ever had. The red cabbage and spaetzle are best in show. The five of us having dinner had been friends for years and told story after story.

After we had eaten the main course and before dessert, I headed back through the dining room to the men's room. On my way back, a pastor blurted out, "Hey, you're Klinkenberg." I smiled and walked over to the table that had six pastors and we started yapping. My friend came back also, and we sat down. One of the pastors asked if I knew another pastor who ran a podcast. I said, "Will you buy dessert if I can produce him?" He smiled, and I went and got my friend and we all sat down together and laughed and laughed. Finally, one guy who had been antagonistic toward me at first laughed and said, "You know Klink, you're not nearly as much of a jerk as I thought." I laughed and thanked him for the compliment. We all left, aching from the laughter, more graciously disposed to one another. We were a bit more than

divided colleagues, and maybe at some point friends. I'll never forget that night, and that comment. I'm glad I'm older, and glad I'm wiser. I try to be a good person, but I still sometimes struggle.

A kind word turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. It's not a bad proverb to memorize and thus remind yourself how a good life looks and how grace expands margins for love and how people connect in kindness. In a time of isolation, I want us to be a congregation that is known for being gracious to one another and to those looking to connect into community. Perhaps the world, and especially Orange County, needs a church like this. A church that is gracious, that loves people, and that creates margins for people to know Jesus and to speak kind words to one another.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is it so easy to snap off a short and curt answer to a person? Would you want some of those words back? How would you get them back?

2. Sarcasm is toxic, especially for children. Children have a tough time distinguishing what you really mean when you offer a sarcastic comment. Is there a filter or a way to slow down our words so that the sarcasm is filtered out before it is articulated? How does that work?

3. How can each of us in our congregational life be gracious and kind to one another? James encourages us to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. If we were marked by that as a congregation, would that make a difference in how we connect to other people? How would that look in our courtyard, in our fellowship events, in our Bible Studies?

4. Prayer...take a moment to write down some prayer requests and lift them up to the Lord Jesus. Ask the Lord to guide your words, to give you a positive tone, and to lead you to people to be kind to.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Gracious God, in the same way that You show us compassion, mercy, and grace, allow us to do the same to our brothers and sisters. Fill us with your love and kindness so that we may shine Your light to all those around us. Help us to choose our words wisely when speaking to others. Continue to show us Your ways and help us grow to be more like You. Jesus, help us leave room for grace so that we can reflect Your goodness. And remind us, Lord, even though we may struggle, we can always turn to You for guidance – for Your Word truly is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. In Your Name we pray, Amen.

HAVING HOPEFUL FORWARD FOCUS



 **Welcome, Introduction, Ice Breakers and Opening Prayer**

(Ask one of the group members to open in prayer)

 **Review the 'Small Group Essentials' on PAGE 40**

 **PROVERBS 16:33**

*The lot is cast into the lap,
but its every decision is from the Lord.*

 **Answer Questions, Discuss, and Close in Prayer**

LESSON

Have you ever made a difficult decision?

I know I've been faced with more than a few. (Spoiler alert: Keep reading to find out the most significant decision I've ever made at age 15 – the one that still affects my life to this day.)

And while I've never considered “casting lots” to help me figure out what to do, Proverbs 16:33 refers to a method – sort of like throwing dice – that God's people used in biblical times to help them commit a decision to God. The lot-casting was how they sought the will of their Lord God, Almighty Jehovah, the One who loved them, cared for them, protected them, and led them. Then, whatever happened, lot-wise, they went with it, trusting that God was at work.

For His part, God promised to direct the paths of his people as they trusted in him with all their heart, not leaning on their own understanding. [Proverbs 16:33]

Wouldn't modern life be much simpler if we still had this ancient tool to help us decide who to marry, where to invest our money, or what career to follow? (Roll a lucky seven and it's off to law school!)

Or would we still find a way to wiggle around it, kind of like what happens when I “seek God's will” in hopes it will somehow align with mine. If it doesn't? Maybe I'll just keep “seeking” until an easier solution comes along.

In 2024, instead of dice rolling, our Heavenly Father, in his timeless wisdom, has other ways to lead us: meditating on Scripture, praying (and listening as part of the prayer process), getting advice from wise Christian friends/family members.

It feels like a continuum to me: On one end, when I'm faced with a decision, I plead in prayer and God seems silent. Have I been abandoned? What should I do? Where is God when I need Him to tell me what to do?

At the other end of the decision-making spectrum, I can become hypersensitive to "signs" that, of course, absolutely, positively show God leading me in a certain direction. (This is especially common if it's a direction we already want to go in; I'll never forget the story of why a friend moved to Tennessee: He got his Bible out for direction, and it fell open to Ezekiel 30:13.)

The decision-making process can be downright messy, reminding me of how (non-controlling, non-micromanaging) parents allow their children, as they mature, to make more and more decisions on their own.

Since God, of course, is the perfect Father, could it be that sometimes His seeming "lack of concern" (i.e. silence when I'm pleading, "please, give me a sign!") is just His way of allowing us to mature?

Let's get back to our verse. In the beginning of Proverbs 16:33, if we equate the action of "casting lots" to the Old Testament practice of earnestly seeking God's will, then the second half of the verse comes into better focus: "Its every decision is from the Lord."

We seek God's will, make a decision as best we can, and then: Trust.

Which is difficult, to say the least.

It's difficult to trust that God's will is at work when life seems to be nothing but stress and strain.

It's a bummer, sometimes, to hear people say, "Oh, don't worry, God is in control."

If God is really "in control," then why is all this bad stuff happening to my loved ones?

In the midst of living in a sinful, fallen world, this brings comfort: My loving Heavenly Father has promised to never leave or forsake us, no matter what happens. [Matthew 28:20]

One thing that He never promised? That we would understand how He works. In fact, God says the exact opposite in Isaiah 55:9: "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." [Isaiah 55:9]

So, we are back to square one: On what do I base my decisions? What is God's perfect plan for my life? What am I going to be when I grow up? (The clock's ticking on that one; I just qualified for Medicare.) Am I a bad

Christian because I have so many questions?

God's Word, of course, holds all the answers (well, maybe not regarding specific career choices, but all the eternal ones).

How often in my searching have I overlooked the obvious Big Answer, from Jesus himself: Love God; love others. [Matthew 22:37-40]

We can only do that, of course, because we have been "so loved" by God. [John 3:16]

Loved from eternity, then gifted in baptism with the indwelling of the very Spirit of our living God, we now have a solid foundation for a life of meaning and purpose, wherever God leads us, no matter how mundane some days might seem.

We may never understand what God is up to this side of heaven, but we will never face our fears, struggles, and difficult decisions alone. Jesus, our Immanuel, is always with us. We walk with him, in love, as a beloved child who will always have a lot to learn.

And, in the meantime, there's always His love to share.

And a life spent acting out of love for God and others is a life well-lived.

But wait, there's more: What about the dark side of decision-making? You know, what happens when we make the "wrong" decision—up to and including willfully sinful ones?

I've sure made plenty. Some of my more non-stellar choices happened the year I was 15, culminating in an extremely unplanned pregnancy. Which was followed by a very big decision: Risk the wrath of my pillar-of-the-church parents vs. abort the baby secretly.

Here we are seven grandkids later with our 50th wedding anniversary coming up, which will be followed in four short months by our oldest son's 50th birthday. (A simple math equation that will always be part of the story of God's grace in my life.)

Bad decisions, better decisions, in-between decisions: Not a single one can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord. [Romans 8:38-39 and Genesis 50:20]

Paul also writes in Romans 8:28 that God works ALL THINGS together for our good – including the results of our own – and others – painful, pain-inducing decisions. (Who knew that being a teen mom would one day lead to being a YaYa to seven extraordinary grandkids?)

This, then, is the hopeful forward focus: We can walk life's paths without always knowing which way they will lead, or even which fork in the road to take, because God is with us the entire journey – creating good out of evil. This is never more evident than when He created the ultimate good – our salvation – out of Satan's evil actions on Good Friday.

Easter for the win!

So, seek his will, but be ready to step out in faith, not knowing exactly how something will play out, because: Immanuel, God with us. Our Lord and Savior and friend, Jesus, walks with us.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. List as many tools as you can think of that Christians can use in their decision-making process.

2. Can you remember a time (recently or long ago) when you had to make a big decision? Did you use any of the tools from question one? How hard or easy was it to discern God's role in your decision-making process?

3. Here are some Scripture passages that speak to the decision-making process: Psalms 25:4, Proverbs 3:5-6, Romans 8:28, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Philippians 4:6, James 1:5. Which one seems especially appropriate to any decisions you (or your loved ones) are facing right now?

4. Prayer ideas: re-read Romans 8:28. Think about and thank God for how He has worked through both good and not-so-good decisions in your life. Ask Him for grace and wisdom to trust he is at work right now in "all things" in your life – even the tough parts. Thank Him for His ongoing, always-there presence in your life through the Holy Spirit, a gift of your baptism who continues to work in your life through Word and Sacrament.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Jesus, we know that nothing can separate us from Your love. And that Your love for us is true and unconditional. So Lord, we come to You and ask you to continue walking beside us. And remind us that no matter where our journey takes us, You are always right there – in us. Help us, our Redeemer, to always look forward, even when we are unsure. Help us to stand strong in our faith. Help us to trust you with our whole hearts. And help us to bask in Your grace when we may stumble and waiver in our decision-making. To God be the glory, forever and ever, Amen.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

If you are participating with a small group, here is a suggested format.

Prior to each meeting, ask the group members to read the upcoming lesson and come prepared to discuss. Your small group discussion will consist of reading through the lesson and the discussing questions. Some leaders choose to ask their group members to answer the discussion questions prior to each week's meeting.

Welcome, Introduction, Ice Breakers and Opening Prayer, Read the Small Group Essentials (10-15 Min.)

We encourage you to spend a few minutes getting to know each other and reviewing the Small Group Essentials on page 40.

Read the Lesson (5-10 Min.)

Read the lesson aloud with the group. It's a good idea to have each group member take a turn reading a paragraph or two until you have read through the lesson.

Questions and Discussion (20-45 Min.)

Discussing all the study questions for each session is not expected or required. Your group may have robust discussion on just a few of the questions, or they may move quickly through many.

Prayer Requests and Closing Prayer (10 Min.)

Take time to use the prayer prompts and also note any praise reports and prayer requests from the group. Please pray for your group members during the week.

SMALL GROUP ESSENTIALS

Four key ingredients should be a part of every small group:

🔑 **The Word of God:** Whether we study straight from the Bible or study the Bible through devotional books/guides, we are committed to growing from the Word of God in Christ.

🔑 **Growth:** We are here because we want to grow and see our lives transformed to be more like Christ. As part of this growth we commit to pray for each other. We seek to encourage each other and hold each other accountable.

🔑 **Acceptance:** As members of this group, we seek to accept each other unconditionally as Christ does each of us, seeking to build strong friendships rooted in Christ.

🔑 **Confidentiality:** Everything shared in this group stays with this group. Gossip and slander are unacceptable. Like Christ, we seek the best for each other.

Ice Breakers To do with your group if time allows

Tell about the most positive conversation that you had today.

Tell about the most interesting thing that happened to you today.

Tell about the most humorous incident that you experienced in the last year.

My favorite fun activity when I was a child was...

The thing that drives me crazy is...

My favorite movie of all times is...

My idea of a great vacation is...

My favorite food is...

If I could visit any era of history, I would visit...

My favorite childhood memory is...

My favorite leisure activity is...

While growing up I saw God as...

What would you do if someone willed you a million dollars?

If you could do anything you want this time next year, what would it be?

Thank You!

We're grateful to God for all who have contributed to our *Living The Good Life* curriculum guide and St. John's 2024 spiritual growth campaign:

Pastor Tim Klinkenberg

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Vicar Micah Raebel

Sara Marko

Kenny Harrison

Thea Gavin

Jeffrey Beavers

Stephanie Van Blarcom

Renee Klein

Chris Higgins

Megan Gjersvold

Jen Bradtke



LIVING the GOOD LIFE

A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

One of the most famous collections of wisdom is the Book of Proverbs found in the Holy Bible. Proverbs 9:10 reminds us,

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

King Solomon, renowned for his legendary wisdom, is often associated with this book as its primary author. At the onset of his reign, the Lord asked Solomon what he desired as king. Solomon requested a wise and discerning heart, and this request pleased the Lord. [1 Kings 3:9-10]

Through exploring the Book of Proverbs, we can grow in wisdom and deepen our reverence for the Lord. We pray that embracing these timeless truths will lead us to a more fulfilling and peaceful life, while we draw closer to God and develop a deeper relationship with Jesus.

STUDY GUIDE FOR GROUPS, FAMILIES, & INDIVIDUALS

Gain the Wisdom of Proverbs and discover how its lessons can bring clarity, purpose, and enrichment to our daily lives!



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