

GOOD
SENSE!



HELP FOR TEENS FROM THE
BOOK OF PROVERBS

PHILIP NEAL

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Note to the reader

As a teenager, the Book of Proverbs was always one of my favorite books of the Bible. But it has taken me years to really appreciate—and learn to apply—the simple yet profound principles it teaches. Hopefully this little book will give you a head start on that same path.

One of the challenges in writing this book has been figuring out how to translate the biblical passages into an easy-to-read, *teen-friendly* rendering. My goal was to make the passages clear and alive with meaning—as well as fun to read. I hope I have succeeded.

I'd like to thank Fred R. Coulter, publisher, for giving me the opportunity to produce this book. And special thanks goes to Hiedi Vogeles for her skillful handling of the layout and design of the text.

My background: I graduated in 1988 from Ambassador College, Big Sandy, Texas, where I studied theology and journalism. I later spent ten years as a designer and copywriter for an advertising agency. Since 2006, I have worked as an editor for York Publishing and the Christian Biblical Church of God, Hollister, California. I presently live near Meridian, Mississippi.

Introduction

“Wisdom begins with properly fearing God, and extraordinary insight comes from understanding what is holy.”

Sorry, there’s no app for this . . .

The throne over Israel had just been passed to Solomon. His father, David, a mighty man of war, had made the Hebrew nation one of the greatest and most feared in the region. But Solomon was a young man, and he had real doubts about his ability to lead the thriving kingdom. He knew he had big shoes to fill. *Very big.*

God knew this too. A short time after Solomon was anointed as king, God appeared to him in a dream. He told him, “Ask for anything you want, and it’s yours!”

God was offering Solomon *anything* he wanted: riches, fame, territory, a long life, revenge on Israel’s enemies—he could have it all. He only had to ask.

But Solomon was smarter than that. He knew what he *needed most*—and his answer both surprised and pleased God. Solomon began by thanking God for the tremendous favor He had shown to David, and he reminded God that his father had faithfully walked before Him with an upright heart. Solomon also thanked God for extending that same favor to himself—for allowing him to sit on his father’s throne. Then he said, “But I am a young man, with no experience. Unlike my father, I don’t know how to conduct myself as a

leader—how to command respect or inspire loyalty. How can I lead such a great nation as this?”

Finally, Solomon made his simple request before God: “Give me an *understanding heart*—so that I might rightly judge your people, so that I might *discern* between good and evil.”

Solomon's response showed what he was made of. You see, the young king knew he had a lot to learn—in a very short time. Simply put, Solomon wanted *wisdom*—the *good sense* to rightly lead his people.

Pleased with Solomon's request, God answered: “You have not asked for a long life, for riches, or for revenge on your enemies. Instead, you have asked for *understanding* and *discernment*—for the ability to *rightly judge* your people. You have answered well, and I will indeed give you a *wise* and *understanding* heart—one unlike any other king before you or any king after you.”

Solomon's extraordinary wisdom quickly became the talk of all Israel—and the people could clearly see that God was with him. In time, kings and queens from around the known world were coming to Solomon for help with their thorniest problems. They too hoped to benefit from his wisdom and insight. Indeed, as I Kings 10:24 says, “People from around the world were coming to Solomon to learn from his wisdom—the wisdom God had given to him.”

The narrative above comes mostly from I Kings chapters 1-4, and you can get the whole story by reading through I Kings and I Chronicles. But what about this thing called *wisdom*—what is it, and how can *you* come to have it?

“So what is wisdom, anyway?”

When most people think about *wisdom*, they imagine an “aged wise one” with a long gray beard giving out sage advice from some mountaintop. But this stereotype shortchanges the truth about wisdom.

Yes, wisdom does often come with age—because with age comes *experience*. And experience can be a great teacher, even the best teacher in many cases. But experience can also be a harsh and painful teacher. You see, experience is always a day late. It always teaches us the lesson we wish we'd learned *before* we had the experience!

So we make mistakes and suffer for it—and, hopefully, we learn from those mistakes and develop some “good sense” along the way. But as a young person you'd rather have wisdom *now*. Surely there's a quicker path to wisdom—right?

The good news is, you too can begin to have real wisdom, even as a teenager. But before we talk about *how*, let's understand *what wisdom really is*.

Wisdom is not simply being smart, or having a lot of brains. It doesn't necessarily come with intelligence or knowledge—so you can't just “get wise” by reading a book. (Including *this* book!) Even the smartest people in the world—including geniuses—often fail to demonstrate or exercise wisdom. But as you'll see, wisdom does depend on having the *right kind* of knowledge—and *acting* on that knowledge.

Perhaps the easiest way to understand “wisdom” is to think of it as “having the *good sense* to make *smart decisions*.” Throughout life we make lots of decisions—some good, some not so good. And decisions are important, because our choices have consequences! (Throughout this book we'll have a *lot* to say about choices, decisions, and consequences.)

A person with wisdom shows *good judgment*—they are able to discern or recognize *why* a certain decision or choice or action is *best*. Wisdom, then, is *thinking* and *acting* in such a way that one's decisions or choices are beneficial and productive. In the Book of Proverbs, wisdom is represented as a *way of thinking*—and thus *living*—that is disciplined, socially acceptable, and morally upright.

That's really what Solomon asked for—the ability to make *right decisions* for the good of the people of Israel.

So what about you—how can a *young person* have wisdom? How can you make sure your decisions and choices are *wise*—are good and right, without negative consequences? You certainly don't want to have to develop wisdom through the “school of hard knocks”! So *where* and *how* do you begin?

“Okay, I need good sense! Where do I start?”

Solomon's wisdom was a special *gift* from God. And except for Jesus the Messiah, no one has since had *that* kind of wisdom. So let's face it: God's not going to make you or me into another Solomon. But God can still *help you develop wisdom*—the *good sense* you need to lead a happy and productive life. The key is to learn from others—to benefit from *their* experiences. This could include the experiences of your teachers at school, your pastor at church, or other trusted adults. And it definitely includes your parents!

But most importantly, it means *looking to God*. And Solomon tells us right where to start: “Wisdom begins with properly *fearing God*, and extraordinary insight comes from *understanding what is holy*” (Proverbs 9:10). Let's dissect this verse a bit.

First, this is *not* talking about being fearful of God—like He's going to strike you dead or something. Rather, it's a healthy fear. It means having genuine *respect* for God—honoring His position as Creator and Ruler of the universe. *And of your life*. As you'll see throughout this book, God wants a *real* relationship with you. He's not interested in a part-time relationship or an on-again off-again relationship. He wants the real deal. And that relationship must be based on your willingness to honestly *live* according to what He shows you in the Bible. That's respect—that's fearing God. And

that's where wisdom truly begins.

God absolutely *can* and *will* begin to give you real wisdom—but only within that relationship. You see, having God at the center of your life will *change* the way you make decisions; it will affect every choice you make—for better.

Now look at the second part of this verse—“extraordinary insight comes from *understanding what is holy*.” Understanding what God considers *holy* means understanding what He has planned, determined, and ordained. It means understanding *how God thinks*. And that only comes by reading and studying the Bible—which will give you uncommon *insight* in this confusing world.

So here's what this verse is really saying: “Wisdom—having the good sense to make smart decisions—starts with having a *real relationship* with God. And understanding how God thinks—which comes by having your nose in the Bible—will give you extraordinary insight into this complex thing we call life.”

“What can Proverbs do for me?”

Solomon wrote the Book of Proverbs primarily for his own children—so they could benefit from his wisdom and experiences. And just as God was the *source* of Solomon's wisdom, He was also the *inspiration* behind the book. This means Proverbs is actually a God-inspired book intended especially for young people. So when you read Proverbs, read it as if God is *talking to you*—because He is!

A lot of Solomon's wisdom resulted from things David taught him—things David later wrote about in the Book of Psalms. Here's a good example: “A righteous man”—one who genuinely *lives* God's way of life—“focuses on wisdom, and speaks only of what is good and right. *God's teachings* fill his mind—so he never strays from the right path” (Psalms 37:30-31).

Solomon learned from an early age that *God's teachings* were the true foundation of wisdom—and the key to living a happy and successful life. These *teachings* include God's instructions and guidelines as well as His rules and commandments.

But many people have the wrong idea about God's "rules"—thinking they make life too hard, or that they hinder us from really enjoying life. So try thinking of God's rules as *fences* put up around dangerous areas of life—not to limit us, but to *protect* us. Other "rules" show us exactly *how* God wants us to worship Him, relate to Him, and please Him. Here's how Moses put it: "Listen to these teachings—*live by them!* Do what is good and right in God's sight—so that *your life will go well*, and your children's lives after you!" (Deuteronomy 12:28).

This is the whole idea behind Solomon's collection of "wise sayings"—to help *your life go well*. In short, the *purpose* of Proverbs is to help make your journey from teenager to adult both happy and successful—and without regrets.

Sorry, there's no app for this. But as a teenager in a crazy, mixed-up world, you really do need *good sense*. So keep reading—because *wisdom* starts right here!

1

“Take time to ponder the path of your feet, then all your ways will be well established.”

Eyes on the road!

The old farmer chuckled as the befuddled city slicker tried frantically to make sense of the map he was studying. “You look like you’re just a little bit lost,” he quipped. “Where you headin’ anyway?”

The well-dressed traveller looked anxiously at the farmer. “Nowhere in particular. Just out for a drive.”

“Just out for a drive, huh? Well, you’d better be careful. Folks get lost out here in these parts for days,” the farmer advised. “I’m guessin’ you’ll be wantin’ me to show you how to get back to town?”

“I’d be much obliged.”

“Ain’t no problem. But just remember, next time you take a mind to get out on the road, think about where that road’s gonna take you. Or you’ll end up someplace you don’t wanna be!”

Seems the young traveller had chosen a road without being too concerned about his destination. Life can be a lot like that. In fact, most people go through life giving little thought to *where* they’re headed. We sometimes have a vague idea about what we want to *be*

or what we want to *do*. But when it comes to how we actually live our lives, we seldom take the time to ask if we're on the right road.

There's an old Chinese proverb that says, "Choose the path, choose the destination." At first glance, this proverb seems to have it all backwards. After all, we usually choose a destination *first*, then worry about how to get there—right? But this proverb emphasizes the need to focus on the *path itself*. The idea is that if you choose to follow a certain path—*good or bad*—you also automatically choose the *destination* that path leads to. That may not be what you want, but that's exactly what happens. The lesson here is to avoid going down a certain road without thinking about *where* that road might lead.

In the Book of Proverbs, Solomon encourages young people to stay focused on their *path*. He wrote, "Take time to ponder the path of your feet, then all your ways will be well established" (Proverbs 4:26). Of course, Solomon wasn't talking about walking a footpath or taking a road trip. He was talking about *how you live your life*.

The Hebrew word for "ponder" means to *weigh*. We are to *weigh*—to consider, examine—the "life-path" we are following. And we should do so regularly. *If we do*—if we make sure the path we are following is good and right—then we can have confidence that our life will pretty much go well.

Adding in verses 25 and 27, here's what Solomon was saying: "Pay attention and watch where you're headed in life. Continually *evaluate* the path you're following. Make sure it's good and right and don't stray from it. Only then will your life be well established."

"Where you headin' anyway?"

What do you want to be when you finish school? Got any plans? If you do, that's great. If not, no worries—take your time. After all, it's a really big decision.

But a more important question is, *Who* do you want to be?

Like someone out for a casual “Sunday drive” with no particular destination in mind, a lot of young people drift aimlessly through life never thinking of the *kind of person* they want to “grow up” to be. They haven’t really chosen a *life-path*—so life just sort of “happens.”

The result is that you end up following the crowd—whatever is popular, whatever is easy. Jesus warned about this “wide path” that everybody seems to follow. “There is an open, wide road that most people follow, but it only leads to ruin. Only a few find and follow the narrow road that leads to life” (Matthew 7:13-14).

No matter what kind of plans you may have, your ultimate destination should be the Kingdom of God. That’s where the narrow road leads. Jesus said we are to seek God’s kingdom *first*—above all else (Matthew 6:33). So your life-path *should* be one that prepares you for that kingdom. Problem is, there are so many *distractions* in this world that it’s really easy to forget about where we’re supposed to be headed. But like Solomon says, the answer is to regularly “ponder your path”—*check to see* if you’re still on the right road.

The apostle Paul encouraged Jesus’ followers to do just that: “Take the time to really examine yourselves—to see if you’re still living according to the faith you profess. Test yourselves to be sure!” (II Corinthians 13:5). Paul also wrote that if *we* would “judge ourselves”—again, take the time to really evaluate our life-path—then *God* would not have to judge us (I Corinthians 11:31). The fact is, even if *we’re* not “pondering our path,” God is: “Everything you do is right before the eyes of God, for He ponders all of our paths” (Proverbs 5:21).

Every path leads *somewhere*—including the life-path you’re *now* following. Are you sure of the path you’re on—sure of *where* it will take you? Remember the old farmer’s advice: If you don’t pay

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attention to the road, you'll end up somewhere you don't want to be!

Now it's up to you... Solomon also wrote that “those with *good sense* carefully consider their path” (Proverbs 14:15). They ask, “*Where* will this road take me?” So don't let life just “happen.” Instead, take time to “ponder the path of your feet”—and end up where you're supposed to!

2

*“The warhorse is well prepared for the day of battle,
but victory rests with the Lord.”*

Who’s fighting for you?

King Solomon’s reign over the nation of Israel was almost entirely peaceful. His father, David, was a great warrior-king who spent most of his life taking possession of the land God had promised to their forefathers. By the time Solomon was ready to ascend the throne at age 30, David’s armies had purged the land of all enemies.

To maintain the respect of the nations of the region, Solomon amassed a sizable standing army—including a well-trained *cavalry*. Armies throughout the Middle East had long used horses in battle, but this was the first time Israel had employed mounted soldiers. And Solomon spared no expense in making sure the horsemen and horses were fully prepared.

Cavalry horses were specially chosen for strength, agility, and endurance—and their training was rigorous. The warhorse had to learn to stay calm in the noise and clamor of battle, to remain fearless and not bolt and run away. Because the horseman was so focused on fighting with a sword or firing an arrow, he could not depend on ordinary reins to control the horse. Rather, the horse had to be taught to

respond to subtle movements the rider would make with his legs. A special lightweight saddle was used in battle, and in some cases the horse and rider were protected with light armor.

But as important as the cavalry was in ancient warfare, Solomon also understood a bit of profound wisdom: “The warhorse is well prepared for the day of battle, but *victory rests with the Lord*” (Proverbs 21:31). As we will see, there’s *more* to this verse than meets the eye.

Need someone in your corner?

A well-trained cavalry struck fear in the heart of the enemy. But even with a highly skilled and experienced army, Solomon knew that the *outcome* of any battle was in God’s hands. After all, Israel was God’s chosen nation, a people He had prepared to model His way of life to the world. God would protect Israel and give them victory over their enemies; He would *fight their battles* for them—as long as they were faithful in following His ways.

“But I’m just a teenager,” you say. “Will God really fight *my* battles too?”

Absolutely! David, Solomon’s father, was “just a teenager” when God started fighting his battles. As a youth, David chose to go one-on-one with the Philistine mega-warrior, Goliath. The giant mocked him, but David said, “Today God will deliver you into my hand. I will strike you down and take your head!... Then everyone will know that there really is a God in Israel. And Israel’s army will see that God doesn’t need swords or spears to bring deliverance—for *the battle is the Lord’s*, and He will give you, Goliath, into our hands!” (see I Samuel 17).

God fought for David. But David was a “man after God’s own heart” (Acts 13:22)—that is, he put *pleasing God* above all else. And

that is the key to God fighting your battles. If you're willing to put God first in your life and trust Him, He will fight for you too.

What kind of battles do you face? Difficulties at school? Finding it hard to make friends? Issues with your parents? Trouble finding a job? Dealing with negative peer pressure? Those are real concerns for many teens. And they're just the kind of "battles" God is happy to help you with.

But you have to take God out of your pocket!

Is your God a "pocket-God"?

Many people have a shallow relationship with God. It's like they keep Him in their pocket, all nice and safe. They know He's there, but He's "out of sight, out of mind." After all, they don't want Him *getting in the way* of some of the things they really want to do. So they pay lip-service to Him by going to church once in a while—and they do nice things for people. And off they go feeling good about themselves. Then, all of a sudden...

Bam! They've got a problem.

In the teen world, maybe it's a big test at school they forgot to study for, or maybe they find out their parents might be splitting up. Whatever it is, they need God—*fast!*

So they pull God out of their pocket. Maybe they go to church more, or even start praying and reading their Bible some. Maybe they even try to be *nicer* to their little sister or brother—because now they really need God's help!

But God doesn't like being a pocket-God. He likes being at the *center* of your life—all the time. David didn't keep God in his pocket. He talked to God every day. He read God's Word every day. (Of course, they didn't have the whole Bible in those days, so David mostly read and studied the books written by Moses.) And David

thought deeply about God and His greatness, and what He was doing through Israel. Most importantly, David loved God's teachings—His instructions on how to live (Psalms 119:97, 165). David wanted to please God and do what was right in His sight.

If *that* is your approach to God—*for real*—then you can expect Him to fight your battles. But don't expect God to be much help if you're keeping Him in your pocket!

Solomon learned this lesson from David. He wrote, "Trust in God with all your heart, and don't rely on your own understanding. In everything you do, *include Him* and He will show you the way" (Proverbs 3:5-6). In modern language, here's what Solomon was saying: "Look to God, relying on Him in everything—and don't think you've got it all figured out! In every part of your life, *include Him*—and then He will show you the way."

The key is to *include God* in everything. Front and center. No pocket-God.

Preparing your horse

By now you can see that the great lesson of Proverbs 21:31—"The warhorse is well prepared for the day of battle, but victory rests with the Lord"—is to learn to trust in God and not so much in ourselves. But there's more to this verse than meets the eye. There's the flipside.

What do you suppose would happen if Israel went out to battle *without* having prepared their horses or horsemen? Would God still give them the victory? Not a chance. Yes, the battle belongs to God and victory is in His hands—but He only acts when we *first* do our part. No warrior would go into battle with anything less than his *best* effort.

What does that mean to you as a teenager—in the battles you fight? Think about it. If you blow off studying, can you really expect

God to help you get an A on the exam? If you're always late to work, do you really think God will help you get a promotion?

I think you get the point. If you *really* “prepare your horse for battle” the very *best* you can, *then* you can have confidence that God will help. *Then* God will fight your battles.

Now it's up to you... Whatever you face in life, prepare your horse well. Always give your *best effort*—especially in your relationship with God—and then watch God give you the victories you need.

3

“There is a way of living that seems so right to almost everyone, but that way really leads only to trouble...”

Don't jump that fence!

Rules. Rules at home, rules at school—rules everywhere! But...we all know that this world would really be crazy without at least a few rules—right?

Okay, so we need rules. But *who* gets to decide what rules we follow? If you're like most teens, you'd like to make up your own rules—wouldn't you? But be honest. Do you really think you'd always make good choices?

Having rules means having *standards*. Standards are what we try to live up to, and they define what is normal and acceptable in *how we live*. Think of rules as *fences* put up around dangerous areas of life—not to limit us, but to *protect* us.

But again, *who* gets to decide what is normal and acceptable?

In Proverbs 14:12, Solomon wrote: “There is a way of living that *seems so right* to almost everyone, but that way really leads only to trouble—and possibly even death.”

Wow! This one verse pretty much explains why the world is so messed up: we've been following a wrong way of life—a *wrong*

set of rules! Jesus said the same thing in Matthew 7:13-14. “There is an open, wide road that most people follow, but it only leads to ruin. Only a few find and follow the narrow road that leads to life.”

In this passage, “road” simply means *way of life*—based on rules or standards. The narrow road is God’s way of life as defined by *His* “rules of the road.”

Even though it “seems right,” *most* people are headed in the wrong direction—headed for ruin. They have accepted a *man-made* set of standards or rules—not God’s. How did this happen? You’ll find the answer in Genesis 3:1-6. Here’s basically how it went down...

Talk about gullible!

Eve looked closely at the curious fruit hanging from the tree. It was beautiful, and she just knew it would be delicious. But most importantly, she believed eating it would *make her wise*—like God.

It was called the “Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil”—and God had said to not even *touch* it. But the charming “Serpent” said it was okay, and he *was* pretty convincing. “Look, eating it *won’t* kill you,” he said, twisting God’s words. “God just doesn’t want you to be like Him—to be able to decide what’s good and what’s evil.”

Eve was sold. After all, what could be wrong with being able to *define* good and evil for yourself? So, Eve ate of the forbidden fruit—and Adam quickly did likewise.

Now don’t fall for the popular idea that this is just some fable. This really happened. But nothing in that fruit was actually harmful. And eating from that tree could never really make one wise. So what was going on? God was testing Adam and Eve. He set before them a simple *choice*. By obeying Him and *not touching that tree*, Adam and

Eve would have proven themselves faithful; they would have remained in a close relationship with God, following His instructions and teachings in every area of their lives. But by foolishly taking of that tree, they in effect said to God, “We will decide what is good and evil. We will make our own rules, set our own standards.”

As a result, mankind has been making the same *choice* ever since!

According to the Bible, determining what is good and evil, or right and wrong, is God’s business. Not mine. Not yours. As James 4:12 says, “There is *one* lawgiver”—God. That’s what your Bible says. We don’t get to decide. *God does.*

So why *can’t* we just decide for ourselves what is good and what is evil? Because we’d get it all wrong. There would be a gazillion different ideas about morals, religion, culture—the way we live. But wait—we *do* have a gazillion ideas about what is acceptable! This is the “wide road” Jesus talked about—the way that “seems so right” to everyone. And it has only brought conflict and division along with pain and suffering. Just look around you. Can you begin to see how taking of that “forbidden tree” has made the whole world a mess?

Faulty thinking

We hear a lot about *tolerance* today—an “*It’s all good!*” approach where anything goes and nothing is judged. But the truth is, it’s *not* “all good.” When people take to themselves the right to decide what is good and what is evil, confusion results. We get things upside down. God warned of this very kind of thinking. “*Woe* to those who say that something *good* is actually evil, or that something *evil* is really good—who call light *darkness* and darkness *light*, or say that something *bitter* is sweet and that something *sweet* is bitter!” (Isaiah 5:20).

This verse describes a bad case of upside-down moral standards. Look at drug and alcohol abuse, abortion, sex before marriage, alternate sexual lifestyles—these all result from confusing evil with good. But if we listen to God, and let *Him* tell us what is right and what is wrong, then we have *zero* confusion.

To most people, *tolerance* means being against any form of discrimination—religious, social, racial, or sexual. But this line of thinking promotes an “anything goes” mentality where we are expected to *accept anyone* regardless of their views on religion, sex, moral standards, etc. In fact, this “just come as you are” approach is common in many churches today.

Of course, we are to *never* hate anyone or be hurtful to anyone because of their personal beliefs or preferences. But the idea that we should be tolerant and accepting of whatever is popular or trending is just plain wrong—according to your Bible.

Are we really to accept whatever people do without question or judgment? Those who promote *tolerance* think so. According to them, no one is really wrong—just *different*. They say, “God loves me too! So don't judge me!”

But we *are* to judge—and that just means to *discern* between what is right and what is wrong. How? Based on what *God says*. It's a question of *whose* rules matter.

You might ask, *Why can't I just follow my conscience?* That's a good question—and we'll have a lot more to say about your *conscience* later. But for now, think about this: Your conscience is not foolproof. Like Eve, you can *think* you're right when you're actually wrong. Plus, your conscience can be *deadened* or *numbed* to the point that it just doesn't work.

So how can we know that we have a good and right set of standards?

Door A or door B?

If only God gets to decide what is right and what is wrong, what do we get to do? Simple. We get to *choose* whether we will follow God—or not.

There's a great passage from the Old Testament that sums up what God expects. (In case you're wondering if the Old Testament is all that important, just remember that *all* of the New Testament writers quoted from it. Plus, it was the only "Bible" the early church had.) You'll find this passage in Deuteronomy 30:19. Here's the gist of what God said to the people of Israel: "I have *set before you* life and death, good and evil—*now choose!* Yes, *choose life*—so that you may live!" How did God do this? What did He actually "set before" the people? He gave them His teachings and instructions—*His rules*. He gave them *His standard* of how to live (verse 10).

All they had to do was *choose* to follow God's ways—summed up by the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5). Like the Bible hero Joshua said, "*Choose* today whom you will serve!" (Joshua 24:15).

There is *one standard* of right and wrong—God's. His rules *rule*. And we cannot alter or customize that standard in any way. As Proverbs says, there is a way that *seems so right to most people*—it seems logical, it's tolerant, and it appeals to our natural desires and inclinations.

But it's not God's way.

Do you want to learn God's way? Then acknowledge Him as creator—the one who knows what's *best* for us. Acknowledge Him as *lawgiver*—the one who gets to decide between right and wrong, between good and evil.

And remember, God's rules—His instructions and commandments—are like "fences" put up around dangerous areas of life. Their

purpose isn't to limit you, spoil your fun, or rob you of joy. They're designed to *protect* you—and to help us draw close to Him. But you'll only recognize those “fences” if you read the Bible!

Now it's up to you... Even if you don't realize it, *you choose every day* whose rules you will follow. And you are going to follow *somebody's* rules. So why not choose God's standard?

4

“Trust in God with all your heart, and don’t rely on your own understanding. In everything you do, include Him and He will show you the way.”

Playing for an audience of one

Approval. It’s what every teenager wants most. Not food, not more sleep, not even a new smartphone. Well, maybe a new smartphone—but *approval* is right at the top of the list.

And why not? Everyone wants to be liked and accepted. I know I do, and I’ll bet you do too. Wanting the approval of others is totally natural. In fact, feeling accepted by one’s family and friends helps to foster healthy self-esteem.

But today, it seems that many teenagers find themselves becoming *approval-seekers*. For them, the approval and acceptance of others has become paramount, so they tend to *make most of their decisions* based on what they believe other teens will think about them. Rather than following their own conscience or good sense, they are more concerned with gaining the approval and acceptance of others—usually the more popular teens.

But being an approval-seeker robs you of just being *you*—of making decisions that are important to you. Approval-seekers often

find themselves putting their real desires on the back burner and opting instead for what others want—just to gain their acceptance.

Now, don't misunderstand. It's certainly right and good to please your parents and teachers; and it's okay to choose things that make your friends happy. You just don't want your *decision-making process* hijacked by an unhealthy desire for peer approval.

Approval that matters

At the root of all this approval-seeking is the fear of being *rejected*. And nothing hits a young person harder than rejection. Again, everyone wants to be liked and accepted—especially by those who make up the in-crowd. But maybe this whole in-crowd thing is kind of overrated. Maybe you should reconsider just *whose* approval really matters.

As you might have guessed, Solomon had something important to say about this—in a passage we looked at earlier. He wrote, “Trust in God with all your heart, and don't rely on your own understanding. In everything you do, include Him and He will show you the way” (Proverbs 3:5-6). Solomon was saying: “Don't think you've got it all figured out! Look to God instead, relying on Him in everything. *Include Him in every part of your life*—then He will show you the way.”

The key is to *involve God* in every part of your life. That's right—*every* part. You see, God wants the *front* and *center* position in your life. Nothing less will do. And when that happens, you start to get a new perspective on what's really important—and on *whose* approval really matters.

When God is at the center of your life, being an approval-seeker will become a thing of the past. You'll no longer worry about gaining the approval of others—you won't need it. You'll come to

realize that you only have to be concerned about *God's* approval. And all of your decisions will be based on what pleases *Him* first and foremost.

Solomon's best advice

Still, it's totally natural to want people to accept you. And here in Proverbs 3, Solomon actually gives us the *secret* to being accepted by others—and it has to do with putting God *first*. He begins by saying, “My son, don't forget my teachings, but live by my instructions—then you will have a long and peaceful life” (verses 1-2). Of course, Solomon was writing this to his children; but we are to read these passages as if God was speaking *directly to us*.

Verse 3: “Don't forget kindness or neglect faithfulness; bind them like a necklace around your neck and write them on the tablet of your heart.” These verses emphasize the importance of following God's teachings and instructions—and our unwavering faithfulness to Him. When you wear an ornament around your neck, you're continually reminded of its presence. Likewise, we are to be *continually mindful* of our commitment to God. Figuratively, His teachings and our faithfulness to Him are to be inscribed, etched into our minds. This means they are *always in our thoughts*. Remember, God wants the *front* and *center* position in our lives.

Now notice what happens when we really *do* put God first. Verse 4: “For then you'll have *favor* and a *good name* in the sight of both God *and man*.”

Did you catch that? When you put God first, you'll not only gain *His* favor, you'll also gain the acceptance and approval of *other people*. No more approval-seeking!

By keeping God at the center of your life, you'll ultimately get the approval you need from those who really matter: family,

friends, teachers. Think about it: Proverbs 16:7 says that when your life pleases God, He will make *even your enemies* be at peace with you. I'm betting you don't have any real enemies. But if God can do that with your enemies, think of what He can do with those who are important to you!

Involving God in *every area* of your life isn't easy, but it can be done. You can start by praying to Him about *anything* that concerns you. And don't think for a moment that God isn't interested—*He is*. He just needs you to involve Him. Ask Him to show you through the Bible (and through the godly advice of your parents or others) what He expects of you. Ask Him for help in making decisions—how to make smart decisions and avoid making bad ones.

Not everyone will appreciate your desire to put God first. But that's okay. The important thing is that you are making the best decisions you can—based on God's way of life—and are acting honestly and responsibly.

Remember, you're really only “playing for an audience of one”—*God*. Seek His approval, then everything else will fall into place.

Now it's up to you... When important issues come up, ask yourself: *Does my decision reflect what I really believe, or am I just seeking the approval of others?*

5

“A true friend is more faithful than even a brother.”

Friend me—please!

As a teenager, it’s likely that your *friends* are the greatest influence in your life—for better or worse. One could argue that your parents (or even your teachers) *should* be first, but let’s be realistic: a teen’s world revolves around his or her peers.

And like most teens today, you’re probably on Facebook—with *loads* of “friends.” But are these *truly* friends—or just people you sort of know, have something in common with, or met somewhere along the way?

What is a friend, anyway? I mean a *real* friend—one who has a lasting, tangible influence in your life. Do you ever stop and think about *why* someone is your friend? Do you actually *choose* your friends, or do your friendships just sort of “happen”?

Solomon had a lot to say about friendship. He wrote, “Even with lots of friends, you may still find yourself forsaken. But a *true friend* is more faithful than even a brother” (Proverbs 18:24). There are two kinds of friendships contrasted in this proverb. Generally speaking, we all have a number of *casual* friends. And these *are* friends. We usually share common interests with them and enjoy

their company. But frankly, our relationship with them is more on the superficial side. Many of these friendships just sort of “happen” without any effort on our part. And really, when push comes to shove, these friends are nowhere to be found.

But then there is the friend who is “more faithful than even a brother.” This kind of friend—*and they are rare*—sticks by you through thick and thin. As we will see later, these friendships don’t just happen—they take time and effort to develop.

So here’s what Solomon was trying to say: It’s great to have lots of friends. But if you’re like most people, many of your friendships came rather easily and somewhat indiscriminately. In other words, you didn’t exactly *choose* them.

This means many of these friends are “fair-weather” friends, and it’s likely that they won’t be there when you really need them. In fact, today’s “social media” seems geared toward such superficial connections—and the more the better. But are these “friendships” for real? The truth is, most of us have *few* genuine friends, and even the most “connected” among us are often lonely.

Ultimately, Solomon is suggesting that we put more effort into cultivating *real* friendships—those that will stand the test of time and hardship. So don’t just settle for whoever *wants* to be your friend—*choose your friends*, and do it wisely. It really is better to have a few *real* friends than a ton of pseudo-friends!

A sharper image

But there’s another reason Solomon warns young people to pick their friends carefully: Your friends will have a *huge influence* on you—good, or not-so-good. And sometimes this influence is so subtle you won’t see it—but it’s there.

Looking at the positive side of such influence, Solomon

wrote: “Just as iron sharpens iron, a thoughtful person will *sharpen* his or her friends” (Proverbs 27:17). So just as an iron file can be used to sharpen the blade of an iron tool, good friends will “sharpen” one another. They will bring out the *best* in one another. They will encourage, build up, and inspire each other—especially when one is going through a tough time. *Do your friends bring out the best in you? Do you bring out the best in them?*

Good friends will even correct or admonish one another. Some of my best friends have told me things I didn’t want to hear—but *needed* to hear. That’s because they understood Proverbs 27:5, which says, “Honest correction is better than veiled friendship.” In other words, if you really care about a friend, don’t be afraid to point out where they might be wrong or headed for trouble. Of course, do it lovingly—but *do it*. If you don’t, your “loyalty” to your friend is actually hidden or veiled.

When a good friend is going in the wrong direction, you know nagging them won’t change anything. But you don’t want to make excuses for them. So sometimes you have to care enough to *confront* them. That’s why Solomon adds that “the wounds of a friend are indeed faithful” (verse 6). *Do your friends care enough to confront you?*

And then there’s the not-so-good influence friends can have. Solomon wrote: “If you hang out with those who have good sense, you’ll grow in wisdom. But foolish friends will only get you into trouble!” (Proverbs 13:20). Paul said it this way: “Don’t kid yourself! Bad company will only ruin your good habits!” (I Corinthians 15:33).

He later wrote, “Don’t become *unequally yoked* with those who do not believe as you do” (II Corinthians 6:14). The imagery here is of two *mismatched* animals. Two oxen (or two mules) will plow together just fine. But an ox and a mule yoked together trying

to pull a plow—it'll never work. The ox will out-pull the mule.

Paul explains his thinking: “Can one who is upright really benefit from fellowship with a wrongdoer? After all, what does light have in common with darkness? And what harmony can there be between Jesus and the devil? Really now—what can a believer possibly have in common with an unbeliever?” (verses 14-15).

Like Solomon, Paul is convinced that *choosing* one's friends is something that should be taken seriously. You have to ask, *What kind of influence is this friend having on me?* If your friends aren't bringing out the *best* in you—sharpening you, making you a better person—then maybe it's time you reevaluated that relationship.

What do you bring to a friendship?

We all want good friends, but sometimes it can be rather difficult to develop close friendships. After all, it can be pretty scary to put yourself out there where you might get laughed at or ridiculed—or even betrayed!

So how *do* you go about building real friendships—or making existing friendships even stronger? Like anything else of value, it takes *time*. There's an old saying (not from Solomon) that goes something like this: “Wishing to be friends is quick work, but real friendship is a slow-ripening fruit.” You have to *invest yourself* in the process—for the long haul.

As you know, being a friend involves caring, loyalty, being genuinely interested in the other person—in his or her feelings, needs, and hopes. So ask yourself, *What do I bring to this friendship?* The key is to *give more* to the friendship than you take from it.

Here are some ideas from Proverbs that will help.

- Always *be there* whenever you are needed. “Don't neglect your friends, and remember those who have befriended you

parents” (Proverbs 27:10). “A real friend always cares”—not just when it’s easy or convenient (Proverbs 17:17).

- Be quick to overlook offenses—and be tight-lipped about it! “The friend who ignores an offence shows love, but the one who gossips about it will surely ruin the friendship!” (Proverbs 17:9).

- Never betray a friend’s confidence. “A blabbermouth tells secrets, but a faithful friend always keeps personal things confidential” (Proverbs 11:13).

- Be helpful. “Good advice from a discerning friend is like the sweetness of expensive ointment and the aroma of exotic incense” (Proverbs 27:9).

- Encourage your friends. “Anxiety can weigh a person down, but a *kind word* from a friend will cheer him up!” (Proverbs 12:25).

- As already mentioned, try to *bring out the best* in your friends—to “sharpen” them (Proverbs 27:17). And don’t be afraid to lovingly confront them if they *really need it* (Proverbs 27:5). Just be sure your motive is right, then state your case clearly with gentleness and humility. And choose friends who’ll do the same for you—not just tell you what you want to hear.

No cliques please!

God designed us to want and need close friendships. And you no doubt have your circle of best friends that you hang out with most of the time. But be careful to avoid a *clique mentality* where you ignore others who might want to get to know you. After all, your teen years are a time of growth and discovery. So why limit yourself to a closed circle of friends?

Being cliquish is perceived as being mean, selfish, and stuck-up. So make an effort to expand your circle of friends. Be open to

becoming friends with teens you never considered before—like newcomers to school or church or the neighborhood. And especially consider those who seem shy or who may be having trouble making friends.

But as brought out earlier, *never* associate with those who are a negative or ungodly influence! So be on your guard!

Eye to eye

Friendships are as important as ever. But thanks to today’s social media, the way we make friends and develop friendships has changed dramatically.

When I was in high school, we didn’t have Facebook, YouTube, or instant messaging. There was no such thing as e-mail, and cell phones didn’t exist—so no texting. My one and only “media device” was wired to the kitchen wall.

Gasp. How did we survive? Well, we looked each other in the eye and talked. A lot.

Clearly, social media is here to stay, and no one is suggesting that you should cancel your Facebook account. But there are some things you might want to think about.

Today’s social media technologies are intended to help us communicate better with our friends. But do they? Recent research suggests that while we *are* in touch with others more frequently through social media, texting, etc., we are *not* communicating more effectively. Studies show that the way we now connect—with a constant barrage of texts, e-mails, and “updates” that just *have* to be read—leads to superficial communication. Plus, researchers have noted an amazing paradox: Many young people are experiencing social detachment and isolation even while being engrossed in social media!

The reason is simple: Social media isn't designed for *deep* personal communication—the kind that builds *real* friendships.

About *half* of personal communication is *nonverbal*, which includes facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, posture—and the *tone* of our voice. The other half comes from the *actual words* we use. But e-mails, texts, tweets, Facebook posts, etc. have no body language. They cannot convey the tone of your voice. There's no eye contact, no facial expression. There are only *words*, usually in some abbreviated form.

On the other hand, face-to-face communication includes body language, tone of voice, and eye contact. These added nuances greatly enhance communication.

Social media does have its place; it can be a useful tool and a great timesaver. But the real problem here is that we're increasingly becoming *dependent* on it—and we're using it *in place of* real, face-to-face interaction.

You see, God created within us a need to *connect* with others on a deep, personal level. It's the only way to build real friendships: spending time together having real conversations. It's the intensity and depth of the conversation that forms bonds—not the shallow stuff typical of social media.

So we have to ask, *Is our electronic media producing the kind of communication God wants us to have? Or is it hurting us?*

Clearly, social media is here to stay. But do you realize that you can have a real social life with real friends without ever using social media? Really—we used to do it.

Now it's up to you... Ideally, friendships should never just “happen” by chance. So follow Solomon's advice: Choose your friends carefully, then *invest yourself* in them. And remember, you may meet someone through social media, but you'll never build a *real* friendship there.

6

“The right words spoken at the right time are like sweet, golden apples on a plate of silver!”

Sweet, golden apples!

You probably grew up hearing this age-old rhyme: “Sticks and stones might break my bones, but *words* can never hurt me.” Thing is, words *can* hurt—but they can also encourage, inspire, and even have a healing effect.

The Book of Proverbs has a lot to say about the *power of words*—about how a person uses his or her tongue. In fact, it’s one of the book’s main subjects. For example, “Some people’s words pierce like a knife, but those with good sense bring health and healing with their words” (Proverbs 12:18). Our words, including our tone of voice, can cause real emotional pain—or be a source of great comfort. Words can crush, humiliate, and cause fear—or lift up, inspire, and bring hope. As this proverb suggests, our words can even affect another person’s health—as well as our own!

Here’s a good one: “Kind, gentle words are refreshing, but harsh words only crush the spirit” (Proverbs 15:4). The right words, kindly spoken, can be like a breath of fresh air—uplifting and energizing. But unkind words can be disheartening. A gentle approach is

especially important when dealing with young people, since they are still forming their identity and are especially sensitive to what is said about them—as well as *how* it is said. That’s why the apostle Paul wrote, “Fathers, don’t be overly harsh with your children—they will only become discouraged!” (Colossians 3:21).

Ever heard of one’s “inner voice”? We all have one. It’s what we *say to ourselves*, a kind of running “inner dialogue.” This inner voice (or self-talk) is greatly influenced by what we *hear*. So the way we talk to someone—good or bad—can become part of *their* inner voice. This is especially true for children. A child who is continually put down, called names, or told that he or she is inferior will develop an inner voice that echoes those same negative views. But a child who is praised, encouraged, and given hope will develop a positive inner voice.

Solomon also warned about talking *too much*—about being a *flibbertigibbet* (yes, it’s in the dictionary!). He wrote: “When someone continually runs their mouth, something bad always slips out. But the one who controls his tongue shows good sense” (Proverbs 10:19). We all know people like this—big talkers who always seem to regret something they said. Better to just say what you mean and mean what you say. Right?

Put out that fire!

Another important proverb points out that our words—as well as the *tone* in which they are spoken—can either calm a tense situation or make it worse. “A gentle answer will calm another’s anger, but harsh words will only stir it up!” (Proverbs 15:1).

More often than not, a gentle approach to resolving conflict is most effective. Rather than fighting fire with fire, it’s best to defuse an angry or hostile situation with *softness*—without losing your

cool. Otherwise, an argument will develop and tempers will flare. There will be no winner—only frustration and resentment.

The key is to use a gentle, peaceful response. Sometimes that response might actually need to be a thoughtful question. At other times, it could mean saying *nothing* at all. The idea is to not over-react or become *defensive*. Keep this important proverb in mind: “Fools are quick to express their anger, but those with good sense *overlook insults*” (Proverbs 12:16). As a rule, your gentleness and lack of reaction will win the day.

And then there’s *scandalmongering*—you know, *gossip*. It’s an all-too-frequent misuse of our tongue. Being a *talebearer* is something the Bible strictly forbids—because it *hurts* others. But as we all know, it’s sometimes hard to keep really juicy gossip to ourselves, right? As you might expect, Solomon had a lot to say about this. “A busybody will betray another’s confidence, but a trustworthy friend will keep things secret” (Proverbs 11:13). The *right way* to deal with a problem with someone is to go directly to *them*—not talk about it behind their back. “Argue your case privately with your neighbor, and don’t go blabbing about it to others. If you do, you’ll be shamefully exposed and your reputation ruined!” (Proverbs 25:9-10).

People with good sense know that the way to stop gossip is to *refuse to listen to it*—and *refuse to repeat it*. “If there’s no wood, a fire will go out. Likewise, if people refuse to gossip, a rumor will quickly fade away” (Proverbs 26:20).

As Proverbs 15:28 notes, we need to *think* carefully before we say something that might have an impact on another person. “The righteous person carefully weighs his answers”—he or she *thinks* before speaking. And even something that’s *true* doesn’t necessarily need to be said—not if it’s negative or hurts someone. The second part of this verse adds, “but the ungodly person’s mouth pours forth hurtful words”—with no regard for the damage it might do.

So we should be careful to avoid saying what simply “pops into our minds.” Solomon wrote, “Have you ever met someone who doesn’t hesitate to speak his mind? There’s more hope for a fool than for him!” (Proverbs 29:20).

Today, many of these proverbs can be particularly applicable to the way we use social media. The nature of such media—texting, instant messaging, Facebook comments, Twitter tweets, etc.—makes it all too easy to post quick, spontaneous comments or clever comebacks. This sometimes leads to *careless words* that haven’t really been thought out.

Technology is wonderful. But in this digital age, we need to be especially careful in choosing our words. Why? Because what we post can often be far more hurtful than the spoken word. What we say to someone’s face usually affects only that person. But what we say *online* can be read by dozens—if not hundreds—of people. It can be reposted and ultimately gain “Internet immortality.” All of this only magnifies the hurt.

Right moment, right word

Have you ever said the wrong thing and later regretted it? We all have. Or maybe you said the right thing, but you said it in the *wrong way* or with a negative tone? Good message, lousy presentation.

But with practice—and by applying these teachings from Proverbs—we can all improve. And if we look to God for help and good sense, we can learn to use our words only to *uplift* and *encourage* others.

So next time one of your friends is facing difficulties, stressed out, or just a bit down, think about what you can say to encourage them. Solomon wrote, “Anxiety can weigh a person down, but a *kind word* from a friend will cheer him up” (Proverbs 12:25).

Indeed, “There is joy in giving an appropriate reply, and a well-timed comment is most delightful” (Proverbs 15:23). And nothing sums it up better than this one: “The *right words* spoken at the *right time* are like sweet, golden apples on a plate of silver!” (Proverbs 25:11).

Now it’s up to you... There is tremendous power in *what* we say and *how* we say it. Our words can lift others up; but if we are thoughtless, our words can hurt or cause discouragement. It takes *good sense* to know when to “bite your tongue”—to *think* before you speak. And it takes wisdom to know *what words* to use. So study Proverbs—and ask God for the wisdom you need!

7

“Having a good name is more important than being wealthy, and having the respect of others is better than tons of silver and gold!”

You own this!

A handshake. That’s all it took. Just a simple, honest handshake. “Don’t you need to get something in writing?” I asked. Dad shot me a look that said, *Mind your business, boy.* After the particulars of the deal were worked out, he later told me: “I’ve known Mr. Parker for over thirty years. His word is all I need.”

Like most of my generation, I was raised believing in the old saying that “a man’s *word* is his bond” (a legal document that essentially holds one to his word). Back then, things were bought and sold and deals were made on no more than a handshake. Because a man’s *word* was everything. A man’s reputation, *his name*, rested on his word. And if you didn’t keep your word, if you couldn’t be trusted—then *that’s* how you were known in the community.

A person’s name doesn’t just identify them—*it is them.* There is so much attached to a person’s *name*, good and bad—and it all adds up to one thing: *reputation.* So your *reputation* is virtually synonymous with your *name.* It’s how you’re thought of, it’s how you’re talked about, it’s how you’re remembered.

It's how you're *known*. Think about this: "Even children *make themselves known* by their conduct, by whether their actions are good and right" (Proverbs 20:11). So as a young person on the verge of adulthood, how much *more* would your conduct determine your reputation—your name, *how you're known*?

Solomon wrote, "Having a *good name* is more important than being wealthy, and having the *respect* of others is better than tons of silver and gold!" (Proverbs 22:1). Of course, there's nothing wrong with having a good name *and* being a bit wealthy. But this proverb is primarily drawing a contrast between those who conduct themselves with *integrity* and those money-grubbers who lie and cheat to get rich. It's the difference between honesty and deceitfulness, between *keeping your word* and being unreliable.

Here's a related proverb: "A man of integrity conducts himself with confidence, but one who *deals crookedly* with others will surely be exposed" (Proverbs 10:9)—and his reputation ruined!

Sure, having money is great. And who doesn't want to be popular, or thought of as cool? And it would be awesome to ace that history test next week too, right?

But at what cost? If it involves deceit, is it really worth it? If it takes advantage of someone, will it make you happy? Is it worth your integrity—*your name*?

Integrity: it's all about you!

Okay, so what is this quality called "integrity"? If you said *honesty*, you'd be right—but it's actually so much more. It has to do with a person's *character*, his or her sense of *knowing* and *living by* what is good and right.

Integrity can be described by several qualities, all of which are related. But here's a simple way to look at it. First, it *is* honesty.

But honesty is more than just telling the truth. It means never using any kind of *deception*. It means being genuine, authentic—not being a phony. Like you’re an open book. After all, being *straightforward* is universally respected. Solomon said that “kings admire honesty, and they value one who speaks the truth” (Proverbs 16:13).

And remember, it takes time to build a reputation as one who is honest, who always tells the truth. But it only takes one lie to ruin everything. Then “your name is *mud*” (another old saying).

Second, integrity includes *dependability*. You’re someone who can always be counted on—to show up when and where you *said* you would, and to actually do what you *said* you’d do. Solomon wrote, “Counting on someone who is *unreliable*—especially when you really need them—is like dealing with a bad tooth or a lame foot!” (Proverbs 25:19). This includes being *consistent* in everything you do—rather than being wishy-washy and waffly (see James 1:8).

Third, integrity means having a clear set of *convictions*—a moral commitment to doing what is *fair* and *right*. You not only have a genuine sense of right and wrong, you *stand up for* and *defend* what is right. Solomon weighs in here too: “The moral integrity of the upright will always guide them, but the dishonesty of wrongdoers will lead them to ruin” (Proverbs 11:3).

Fourth, integrity involves *manners*. Yes, you read that right—*manners*. Why? Because *packaging* matters, *presentation* matters. You might have all the honesty, dependability, and moral conviction in the world—but if you’re rude and disrespectful, your integrity is out the window. If you dress inappropriately, if you demonstrate immaturity in your conversation, or if you can’t tear yourself away from your phone long enough to respectfully look a grownup in the eye—then where’s your integrity?

Integrity calls for kindness, modesty, politeness—*respect for others*, especially those who are your elders (see Leviticus 19:32).

(And by the way, learn how to properly shake hands. It says a lot about you.)

Ultimately, you might say that “integrity” is the sum total of *who you are* (or maybe aren’t). That’s why it goes hand-in-hand with your *reputation*—your *name*. It’s all you.

Let’s get this done!

When you *say* you’ll do something, do people *know* it’s “as good as done”? That’s the way it should be. Unfortunately, many today seem unconcerned about backing up their word. We’ve all been there: Something comes up and suddenly you realize it’s not going to be *convenient* to follow through on a commitment. You start crawling. You rationalize it away: “Things happen; it’s no big deal.”

But it *is* a big deal. Your *name* is on the line. And good intentions don’t count; it’s what you *do* that counts. So here are a few pointers:

- 1) Be careful what you promise; learn to think twice before committing yourself.

- 2) When you can’t commit to something, say so. It’s okay to say *no* when you need to.

- 3) When you do commit, follow through. Get it done.

- 4) If you just cannot honor your word, admit it. Don’t make excuses. Apologize and find out how you can *make things right*.

Think about the consequences of *losing your credibility*—of developing a reputation of being unreliable, of earning a “bad name.” It’s something that can take many years to turn around.

Now it’s up to you... Always keep your word—because *it’s the only thing you really own!*

8

*“Just look at the ant, you slacker!
Look at how hard they work—and wise up!”*

Play hard, work harder!

Many young people today are finding it difficult to land a job. A big reason is that employers are gun-shy about hiring teens and young adults. Why? Employers are finding that much of today’s younger generation—teens and 20-somethings—has a self-centered “what’s-good-for-me” approach to work. And that’s not good for business.

Speaking to prospective employees, one recruiter said, “It’s not about *you*.... The world of business doesn’t operate on what’s convenient for you and what fits into your schedule or your particular expectation. That [‘me first’] philosophy is why there is no such thing as service anymore and why mediocrity is becoming the norm.” *

Looks like young people have an uphill climb. So when it comes to work, how can *you* rise to the challenge and separate yourself from the pack? Maybe Solomon can help. But first, let’s look at how things got this way.

Every generation of parents wants the best for their kids. Nothing wrong with that. The generation that went through World

War II had to work hard for everything. Their survival depended on it. And they naturally wanted their kids—the so-called Baby Boomers—to have a better, *easier* life. And they did. Boomers benefited from the extraordinary prosperity that followed the war—yet they never had to “earn their way” like their parents did.

This trend continued with the next generation: *less was required* and more was taken for granted. Fast-forward to today: The present generation of teens and 20-somethings has, overall, *never been taught* the value of hard work. They’re not particularly lazy, they just don’t appreciate the benefits of hard work. They tend to be focused on personal convenience—on what’s good for them, on the next big thing.

An inevitable consequence of this mindset is the failure to develop a sense of personal responsibility—which leads to poor work habits. One employer put it like this: “I don’t care what generation you belong to, there’s this thing called a *work ethic*—making a commitment and doing what you say you’ll do. Being responsible and accountable is not about whether it’s convenient for you.” *

According to research, too many young workers think only in terms of what their job can do for *them*, not what they can do for their employer. They have no fundamental interest in the success of their employer. And to them, work doesn’t lead to personal satisfaction or a sense of accomplishment—it’s just something you do to get a paycheck and go enjoy the weekend.

Nothing works like work

The feeling of *satisfaction* that comes from a “job well done”—like a finished project, done to the best of one’s ability—is one of life’s special gifts. God knew this when He instructed Adam and Eve to “dress and keep” their home, the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15). In

the Hebrew, the phrase is literally “work and maintain.” They were to *work* the garden, maintaining its beauty and productivity. God gave man six days each week to do whatever *work* needed to be done, followed by a day of rest, the Sabbath. There is tremendous *wisdom* in this design.

In fact, when you really think about it, God “created” work as a *blessing* for man. After all, without work, what else would we do? We would never learn to be productive—never learn how to plan, design, create, or solve problems. We would never experience personal growth and development, or know the joy of accomplishment. Indeed, a carefree existence would deny us any sense of self-worth, and idleness and indifference would eventually destroy us.

Having never learned the value of work, too many of today’s young people are missing out on this great blessing. Too many have never experienced that special feeling of satisfaction that comes from personally seeing a difficult job through to the end—where the reward is not about money, but about the joy and pride of success.

A part of the problem is that young people have grown up with an unhealthy dose of *entertainment*—video games, television, movies—which is now made much worse by the Internet and social media. Rather than learning a skill, playing sports, or becoming involved in other productive activities, many spend absurd amounts of time sitting in front of some sort of screen. And this emphasis on mindless entertainment *does* lead to laziness and apathy.

Solomon wrote, “If you work your land you’ll have plenty to eat, but *mindless pursuits* only show a lack of good sense” (Proverbs 12:11). One translation says, “but one who chases fantasies lacks judgment.” Obviously, most of us do not “work the land” today. But the idea here is that we are to *work*—to be productive. We are to avoid wasting time on interests with little or no real value. And what could be more mindless than being glued to a screen all day!

Make your “stock” go up in value

Every company is willing to invest time and effort in training and improving its employees—as long as those employees are productive. So as an employee, think of yourself as an *investment*: you want your “stock” to go *up* in the eyes of your boss. You want to become so *valuable* that he or she would never let you go!

One of the best ways to do this is to learn to show *initiative*. Never have the attitude that says, “That’s not *my* job.” When you see something that needs to be done, don’t wait to be told to do it—just get it done.

And make an effort to *look* for things to do. As one recruiter put it, employers everywhere are complaining that younger workers haven’t learned to “look around and see what should be done next. Instead, they ask *What’s my job?* and go about figuring the fastest way to complete that task. Then they consider themselves done.” *

What does Proverbs have to say about *showing initiative*—about being *self-motivated*? “Just look at the ant, you slacker! Look at how hard they work—and wise up! Ants have no supervisor, no boss—yet they store up food all through the summer. So how long are you going to just lie there, lazybones? When are you going to get out of bed? You’re always saying, ‘Just a little more sleep, just let me get some more rest.’ Don’t you know you’ll end up as poor as a vagabond and as hungry as someone driven to stealing?” (Proverbs 6:6-11).

Being a self-starter is a matter of believing that employees are *obligated to give their very best*. It means taking responsibility and seeing to it that things get done. You don’t want to be this guy: “Like vinegar sets your teeth on edge and smoke burns your eyes, a lazy worker is an annoyance to his employer!” (Proverbs 10:26).

Lazy people find all kinds of *excuses* as to why something

didn't get done—or can't be done. Solomon wrote, "Everything a sluggard tries to do is hampered by 'thorns'! But if you're an honest worker, you'll find a way to get the job done" (Proverbs 15:19). It's true. Lazy workers find all kinds of obstacles and difficulties that keep them from being productive. But diligent workers find a way to succeed. They're problem solvers, not problems *themselves*.

A matter of character

In his letter to the Colossian church, Paul shows the importance of always doing one's *best*—at *anything*. As we'll see, it all boils down to a matter of personal character.

Paul's instructions concerned a servant's loyalty to his or her master or owner. But the principle here applies equally to employees and employers, so I'll paraphrase the passage accordingly: "Employees, do your job as instructed—not just when the boss is watching, as if you're trying to gain special favor. But always work hard, being honest, because of your respect for God. And in every task, *put your heart into it* as if you're actually working for the Lord—because you know your true reward will come from Him. Ultimately, you *are* working for Christ" (Colossians 3:22-24).

Everything you do should be done with 100 percent effort. Anything less—any level of compromising or settling for just "so-so"—and you diminish your character. Doing anything halfheartedly will cause you to become more and more *accepting of mediocrity*. Over time you'll forget what it's like to strive for excellence, for quality. You will ruin that vital part of your character that demands honesty and integrity—and make no mistake, it will adversely affect *every* area of your life!

In the end, you'll become a loafer who just wants to get through the workday!

Working hard—and liking it—isn't something that comes naturally. It's a learned habit, something ideally taught from a young age. But it's never too late to develop a go-getter attitude. You start by realizing *why* a solid work ethic is so important: It's not just about making money or being successful—it's about *you* as a person, about your name or reputation, your character. Even your relationship with God.

At this point you're probably still sorting out career choices. But one thing is for sure, becoming a hard worker will benefit you in *any* profession you might choose. Solomon said it best: "A man who is diligent and excels in his work will find employment among the esteemed—and he will never have to resort to working for trivial men" (Proverbs 22:29). Indeed, being an industrious and reliable worker can *take you places* you never dreamed of.

So start now—determine to put your whole heart into *everything* you do!

Now it's up to you... Laziness is an inside job—but so is becoming a go-getter. It really is your choice. Just remember, "Lazy people want this and want that, yet they really have nothing to show for themselves. But those who work hard will have everything they need!" (Proverbs 13:4).

* Andrea Kay, *Gannett*: "Self-centered Work Ethic Hinders Young Employees"

9

“Keep your heart with all diligence—because life itself flows from the heart!”

Matters of the heart

Jenny carefully placed the heart-shaped locket back into her jewelry box. No way was she going to wear it on *this* hiking trip—she might lose it like she once lost a bracelet on a similar outing. After all, the locket was her most prized possession, a gift her grandmother gave her just before she passed away.

As Jenny closed the box she recalled the engraving inside the locket: *Keep your heart safe!* Her grandmother told her the words were taken from Proverbs 4:23, which reads: “Keep your heart with all diligence—because life itself flows from the heart!”

What does this passage mean? Are we to take good care of our hearts—because one’s “life blood” really does flow from the heart, right? Sure, this could be one way to look at it. But Solomon was thinking bigger—*way bigger*.

Throughout the Bible, *heart* is often used to refer to the *mind*—to one’s innermost thoughts, one’s attitude, one’s *conscience*. Even today we use phrases like, “Follow your heart” or “Do what your heart tells you.” So here’s what Solomon was really

saying: “Protect your *mind* with all diligence, at all costs—because the mind *affects everything* in life.”

The Book of Proverbs was originally written in the Hebrew language. The Hebrew word translated *diligence* actually means *above all else*. In other words, protecting your *mind* should be your *highest priority*—guard your “heart” *above all else!*

Why? Because your mind—*how* you think and *what* you think—shapes every area of your life. This is why Solomon said “life itself flows from the heart.” In other words, your whole life is a reflection of your “heart”—your mind and thoughts and outlook. In a very real sense, you *are* what you believe and think!

Garbage in, garbage out

Proverbs has a lot to say about the *mind*. For example: “If you have no control over your mind, you’re like a city with broken walls—*anything* can get in!” (Proverbs 25:28). In ancient times, a city’s walls were meant to keep the bad guys out. But without walls, or with broken-down walls, anybody or anything could get *into* the city.

Is your mind like that?

Keeping your heart safe means guarding what goes *into* your mind. You need walls, and you have to be an alert gatekeeper. Do you just watch whatever comes on TV? Do you watch movies without first checking to see if they might be immoral in some way? Do you listen to whatever music is popular? Do you hang out with just anyone—with negative people who put bad ideas into your head? What do you look at and read on the Internet?

If we do not *intentionally decide* what we will and will not allow into our minds—if our walls are broken down—then we *are* being invaded by attitudes and ideas that will harm us. Over time,

our minds—*our hearts*—will be shaped by such influences. And *every area* of our lives will be affected. In Matthew 12:35, Jesus taught that good things come from the “treasure” of a good heart—a heart or mind that has been carefully guarded. But He also said that evil things come from the “treasure” of a corrupt heart—a heart or mind that has been neglected and left unguarded.

Remember this: what goes in *will* come out! What kind of “treasure” do *you* have?

Here’s a little “science lesson” to help you understand how our minds work. If you take a pile of dirt and pour a cup of water over it, what will happen? The water will run down the sides, making little ruts or channels. This is called erosion.

Pour another cup of water. What happens? A few more ruts, right? *Keep pouring*. Notice that after a while you’re not getting any new ruts. The water just keeps following the same old ruts or pathways—taking the path of least resistance—making them deeper and deeper.

Your mind works in much the same way: *reoccurring* thoughts and attitudes make “mental ruts”—actual neurological pathways. This is usually a good thing. It’s how we learn, remember stuff, and develop skills—like playing a piano or shooting hoops.

But it’s also how bad habits—even *addictions*—are formed. With the first occurrence, not much happens. But if you *repeat* the same thoughts, feelings, or attitudes—especially when they are accompanied by pleasurable emotions, actions, or sensations—the neuro-ruts get deeper. *And deeper*. Before you know it, your mind gets stuck—your thoughts go in only one direction, following the same well-worn path. And those “thought patterns” always lead to actions.

Typically it all starts with *compromise*. Deep down you know you shouldn’t have certain thoughts, feelings, or attitudes—but you allow it anyway. You think, “Just this once—it’ll be okay.”

But it might not be okay. Compromise is dangerous because what often seems so innocent in the beginning rarely stays that way. What seems like “no big deal” becomes a *big* deal. Each time you compromise it becomes *easier and easier* to choose the wrong path. The neuro-ruts get deeper. Temptation becomes irresistible. Your conscience starts to get *numb*. And in time it feels like the wrong path—now perhaps an addiction—has begun to *choose you*.

Solomon understood this process: “Your sins will *take you captive*, and you’ll be *bound* by the cords of your wrongdoing!” (Proverbs 5:22). And it all starts with not *guarding your heart*.

A matter of conscience

Not guarding your mind will directly influence the way you think. Eventually, it can even silence that “little voice” inside your head—you know, the one that *nags* you when you do something stupid. It’s called your *conscience*. It’s like a *radar*, warning you that you’re headed for trouble—and it works hand-in-hand with your heart.

When the bad neuro-ruts get deep enough, your conscience can grow silent. That “little voice” gets quiet. Stupid doesn’t seem to bother you much anymore.

But you never want that to happen, especially as a teenager!

When a person really tries to live a godly life—doing what is good and right—their conscience is *clear*. They have no real regrets. Their conscience can then *guide them*—because they listen to it: “The moral integrity of the upright will always guide them, but the dishonesty of wrongdoers will lead them to ruin” (Proverbs 11:3). Integrity means having strong moral convictions—that “treasure” of a good heart Jesus mentioned. A good, clear conscience—*one that still works*—is a wonderful thing. On the other hand, those who continue in wrongdoing—who have *dulled their conscience* so that

it no longer works—are headed for destruction.

An important passage dealing with the conscience is found in Romans 14. Here, the apostle Paul is encouraging Christians to avoid *offending* one another over personal preferences concerning food (verses 20-21). It seems that those who were vegetarians looked down on those who ate meat, and vice versa—thus the offences.

In verse 22, he writes, “Your personal views in this matter are between you and God, and it’s great if what you choose to eat doesn’t cause you to feel guilty.” Paul is saying that *some* dietary choices are personal and aren’t necessarily a matter of right and wrong—just don’t look down on those who may disagree.

In verse 23, he gets to the issue of *conscience*: “But if what you eat *goes against your conscience*, you have done wrong—because you are not eating according to your beliefs and convictions. Indeed, any time you go against your convictions, you sin.”

This statement—“any time you go against your convictions, you sin”—reflects a profound principle dealing with one’s conscience. And it involves every aspect of your life!

Here’s what it means: If you even *suspect* that a particular behavior might be contrary to God’s way of life, you must avoid that behavior. Your conscience has already alerted you that it *might* be wrong—*might* be outside of your set of beliefs.

But you’re not sure—it *might* be okay.

And guess what? It might *be* okay. But the fact that you have *doubts* means you must not do it. If you choose the behavior anyway, you will have *dulled* your conscience. Whether the behavior itself is right or wrong, *ignoring your conscience* is always bad. Here, the *sin* lies in the fact that you have knowingly gone against your convictions—thus *blunting your conscience*. In the back of your mind you *knew it could be wrong*. There was uncertainty, doubt,

conflict—but you did it anyway. This is how *compromising* with sin begins. But God wants us to do just the opposite—to take even the *possibility* of sin seriously!

The New Testament talks about having one’s conscience “seared with a hot iron” (I Timothy 4:2). Sounds really scary, huh? When you cook a steak, you quickly *sear* (or lightly burn) the outside. This forms a *callous* that seals the meat so the juices are held inside. The idea behind this verse is that a *seared* conscience is one that has become *calloused, hardened*—one that may be beyond feeling remorse or guilt. Very dangerous.

How do people get this way? By continuing in a wrong way of life so long that their conscience no longer works. They become numb to guilt. Nothing really bothers them anymore. The neuro-ruts have become so deep they can’t think any other way.

And it all starts with not being diligent to protect the *heart*—the mind. It’s your most prized possession. Are you beginning to see why Solomon was so emphatic? “*Guard your heart above all else—because everything in life flows from the heart!*”

Now it’s up to you... Proverbs 14:30 says, “A sound heart”—*a healthy mind and conscience*—“is the life of the body!” So above all else, *keep your heart safe!*

10

“The sparrow comes by fluttering his wings and the swallow comes by flying. Likewise, misfortune will not come without a cause.”

“Meant to be”—really?

Megan had been so excited about the new job prospect. The interview went well, she thought, and the manager seemed to be really impressed with her experience. But then the letter came saying she didn’t get the job. “There will be other opportunities,” her mom said, trying to console her. “Maybe it just wasn’t *meant to be*.”

Kim was in the seventh grade when her parents divorced. She now lives with her mom and rarely sees her dad. As one can imagine, her world has been turned upside down. The youth pastor at Kim’s church has taken every opportunity to encourage her. “We don’t understand all that happens in life,” he said. “But *there’s a reason for everything*.”

John and Maggie had been engaged for almost a year. Everyone said it was going to be “a marriage made in heaven”—that they were *meant* for each other. But when John expressed an interest in taking a high-level position in another country, Maggie began to have doubts. Soon the wedding was postponed, then finally cancelled. What happened to “*meant to be*”?

These three short stories reflect a common mindset shared by many people, especially Christians. In a nutshell, it’s the idea that we are not really in *control* of our lives. Rather, it is assumed that *God* is in control of everything—that whatever happens, good or bad, was simply *meant to be*. For many, it’s become all too easy to rationalize bad news (or even a tragedy) by saying, “Well, *there’s a reason for everything*” or “*Everything happens for a reason.*”

The danger in this kind of thinking is that it denies personal responsibility. When we say something was *meant to be*, we’re saying it was *planned by God*. The outcome was already a “done deal.” We really had no role to play—except to just go along for the ride. If this approach is true—where things that happen in our lives are *meant to be*—then our choices really don’t matter. Consequences are predetermined. We’re simply pawns in a big cosmic game and can’t be held responsible for anything—good or bad.

If we explain misfortune by saying, “*Everything happens for a reason,*” we’re saying God actually caused the adversity and only He knows the reason for it. Again, this puts all the blame on God and removes any responsibility *we* might have had in *causing* the misfortune.

But is this really the way God looks at events and circumstances in our lives?

Cause and effect

Solomon wrote, “The sparrow comes by fluttering his wings and the swallow comes by flying. Likewise, misfortune will not come without a *cause*” (Proverbs 26:2). In other words, birds don’t just appear out of nowhere. They fly in, using their wings. Likewise, bad things don’t just happen. They don’t appear out of nowhere. They have a *cause*.

It's called the law of "*cause and effect*." It's all around you, and you can't escape it. In fact, if we carefully examine our lives we can see that, most of the time, *cause and effect* are clearly at work. Practically everything that happens in our lives results from *choices* we make—that's the *cause*. And every cause has an *effect*—a consequence—good or bad.

This is similar to Paul's warning to the Christians of Galatia. "Don't be fooled about this, because God will not be mocked! Whatever you sow, that's what you'll reap!" (Galatians 6:7). If you plant turnips, you'll get turnips. It's a no-brainer. So don't be expecting corn. If you make certain *bad choices* in life, don't expect everything to be a bed of roses. Bad things don't just happen—and they weren't *meant to be*. They have a *cause*. And it's the same with good things. Good things don't just happen—they too have a *cause*.

But be warned! The law of *cause and effect* typically works slowly and deliberately, especially when it comes to *sin* and *wrongdoing*. Consequences are seldom immediate. And young people in particular are slow to "connect the dots" between their bad choices and the results—between the *sowing* and the *reaping*. Often, by the time you realize what's going on, real damage has been done. But as Numbers 32:23 says, "Be assured that your sins will find you out!" It may take time, but your wrongdoing *will* bring consequences. So keep this old saying in mind: "Sin grinds slowly, but it always grinds true!"

Understanding this "living law" of *cause and effect* can help you make better decisions. When you're faced with an important choice, ask yourself: "If I do A, what will happen? What will the effect be? If I do B, what will happen? What will the consequences be?" Some call this "playing the movie forward"—where you try to imagine the *outcome* for each possible choice or course of action.

You might be thinking, "What about accidents—things beyond our control?" True, not everything is within our control, and

“time and chance” are real factors (see Ecclesiastes 9:11). But think about this: Suppose your dog runs out into the street and gets run over. You can say, *It was meant to be*. Blame God. You can say, *Everything happens for a reason*. Again, blame God. Or you can just chalk it up to “time and chance.” It’s nobody’s fault.

But the fact is, there’s really no such thing as an “accident.” Instead, the law of *cause* and *effect* is always at work. There’s a reason—a *cause*—why your dog got run over. Maybe the driver was going too fast or wasn’t watching. Or maybe you should have been more responsible and not have allowed the dog (which didn’t know better) to go into the street.

But what about God? Doesn’t He care?

So where is God in all of this? Surely *some things* are “meant to be”—right? *Absolutely! But only if you . . .* (hold that thought!).

Imagine if every time you fell down you didn’t get bruised or scraped. No pain at all. Pretty soon, you’d stop being careful—and you’d get all clumsy because you know falling down is no big deal. But that pain is supposed to be a *consequence* to help you learn to be more careful.

Now apply this to life in general. If there were never any consequences for your bad choices, what would happen to you? What would happen if God always “erased” the consequences of your bad choices? I think you know. You’d never *learn* to make *good* choices!

Remember the verse above—*God is not mocked*. He stands by His own rules. And it’s a rule—*causes have effects*. Period.

But doesn’t God care? Of course He does! That’s why He warns us to *choose carefully*. Remember this verse from an earlier chapter? “I have set before you life and death, good and evil—*now*

choose! Yes, *choose life*, so you may live!” (Deuteronomy 30:19). How do you “choose life”? By choosing to *follow God’s way* of life as outlined in the Bible.

God wants to bless you and help you in countless ways. Look at this awesome promise: “The eyes of God search throughout the land for those whose hearts are loyal to Him—and He will show Himself strong for their sake!” (II Chronicles 16:9). Does this apply to teens too? Absolutely! *But only if* you are making a real effort to have a relationship with God and seriously trying to follow Him.

Then you can say that something was or wasn’t *meant to be*—because God is involved in your life and will at times intervene to make things work out in your favor. Still, the law of *cause* and *effect* is always at work—and *choices* always have consequences. But if you are close to God, He will help you make *good* choices. And every now and then, when you mess up, He will even “erase” a consequence or two.

But more importantly, He wants to teach you how to make good and right choices—so that you *avoid* negative consequences. He wants you to learn to use the law of *cause* and *effect* to your advantage—to help you achieve good things in life.

Now it’s up to you... The next time something happens that you’re not too happy about, don’t settle for a “meant to be” approach. Instead, try to identify the *cause* that led to the particular outcome. Focus on causes—on doing what’s *right*—and get the effects you want!

“Fearing the Lord brings strong confidence.”

Looking for young lions

Let’s be honest: the teen years can be pretty *tough*. It seems like there’s something *new* coming at you from every direction. There’s high school with all of its pressures, summer jobs, making new friends, *zits*, dating, getting your driver’s license. Then there’s college and the prospect of living away from home—the list goes on. And to top it all off, you’re expected to begin handling yourself *like an adult*.

The fact is, you’re moving into the real world pretty fast. And that means you’re going to come up against some tough issues, even some conflicts and confrontations. And it’s going to be up to *you* to deal with the problems and difficult situations life throws your way. No, mom and dad can’t do this for you. Of course, you should always turn to your parents for advice. But in the end, you have to learn to stand on your *own* two feet.

Yeah. Definitely scary.

So what you need is an extra-big dose of *confidence*, even boldness. And you know what, the Bible says you can have just that—*boldness*. But as you’ll see, it isn’t free—it will *cost* you something.

As a young king, Solomon boldly faced the challenges of leading his people. But where did he get such confidence? After years of living God's way, he noted that "fearing the Lord brings strong *confidence*" (Proverbs 14:26). He also wrote that "the righteous are as *bold* as young lions" (Proverbs 28:1).

Not just anybody—the *righteous*.

Back in the Introduction we talked about this *fear* of God—how it's not trepidation or anxiety, but a *deep respect* for God and His way of life. Fearing God means keeping Him front and center in our lives and not treating Him like a pocket-God. And what does "being righteous" look like? Deuteronomy 6:25 tells us: "If we are careful to follow God's teachings, just as He has instructed us, *it will be credited to us as righteousness.*" So righteousness comes by being in a genuine relationship with God—a relationship built on seeking Him and *living* according to His teachings. And that means *doing* what is good and right as defined by the Bible.

But why does living *righteously* bring boldness? When you're "right with God" and you're honestly putting Him first, you'll have a clear conscience—and *nothing should make you afraid*. David wrote, "The Lord is my guide and my deliverer—why should I fear anyone? He is the strength of my life—why should anyone make me afraid?" (Psalms 27:1). With God on your side, you can *boldly* face any difficulty or challenge knowing that the outcome is in His capable hands.

Easier said than done, right? But with time—and if you put your *whole heart* into your relationship with God—you can have that kind of confidence.

Solomon had that kind of confidence. But he also had a great role model—his father, David. And David had an *extra-big* dose of confidence!

Facing down giants

Every teenager wants to be *fearless*—wants to stare-down difficulties without so much as blinking. David did. But *how*—what was David’s secret?

The scene is set in I Samuel 17. The army of Israel, under the leadership of King Saul, was squared off against the mighty Philistines, and the situation looked pretty bleak. In fact, the Israelites faced a *huge* problem: An impressive Philistine warrior named Goliath—who was nearly seven feet tall and weighed in at around 300 pounds—was taunting Saul and the Israelite army. Goliath wanted to go one-on-one with Saul’s best soldier, winner take all.

The taunting went on for forty days, yet Saul had no takers. Why? Well, Goliath *was* terrifying. But even Saul—who was actually quite a warrior himself—had *lost all confidence* (you’ll see why in a moment). So it’s no wonder that his whole army was paralyzed with fear.

Enter David, an unimpressive teenage shepherd. David was visiting the battlefield to bring food to his older brothers when he heard Goliath loudly defying the God of Israel. David was no soldier, but he immediately volunteered to go up against Goliath. You see, unlike Saul, David was *filled with confidence*.

What made the difference? Why was David, *a mere teen*, so bold? Read on.

When Goliath saw David, he mocked him and cursed him. But David answered, “Today God will deliver you into my hand. I will strike you down and take your head!... Then everyone will know that there really is a God in Israel. And Israel’s army will see that God doesn’t need swords or spears to bring deliverance—for *the battle is the Lord’s*, and He will give you, Goliath, into our hands!”

David came against Goliath with only a sling and a few stones—and the first shot quickly found its deadly mark on the giant’s forehead. David was highly skilled with the sling, but he knew *God* would give him the victory—just as He had done when David found it necessary to protect his family’s sheep from wild beasts. *David knew God would fight his battles.*

You see, David was called a “man after God’s own heart” (Acts 13:22)—because he put *pleasing God* above all else. And *that* was the secret to David’s confidence. He knew he was in a right relationship with God—knew he was genuinely following God’s way of life. A guilty conscience makes one timid, doubtful, fearful. But David’s conscience was clear—and it gave him exceptional *boldness*.

David was a young lion. Bold. Fearless. *Righteous*.

But what about Saul? He was no second-rate warrior, and he was also quite tall—so why was *he* so afraid of Goliath? Seems that Saul had let his relationship with God fall by the wayside. In fact, he had been openly *disobedient* toward God, and that disobedience *separated* him from God. *Saul knew God was no longer with him*. Doubt and guilt dominated his mind, and that grew into *debilitating fear*—fear that soon spread to his army.

David saw that the men of Israel were afraid, that they had lost their faith in God. He saw that the God of Israel was being mocked. So, out of love and respect for both God and his nation, David reacted—with boldness. And David had complete confidence that God would give him the victory over Goliath.

David’s confidence was not in himself, *it was in God*. He knew that he had an ongoing, genuine relationship with God. And that meant *his* battles became *God’s* battles.

God will fight for you!

When the moment came, David ran straight at Goliath with total confidence. And you can face your giants the same way. Your battles can become *God's* battles. God will even make your enemies be at peace with you—if your ways *please Him* (Proverbs 16:7).

As mentioned earlier, this boldness will cost you. The price is the *time* and heartfelt *effort* it takes to truly make God the center of your life. This is the key—a real, ongoing relationship with God. And remember, God will *not* be a pocket-God!

If you're willing to *put God first* in your life and trust Him, He will fight for you just like he fought for David. God wants us to set aside our doubt and fear and boldly face our giants, knowing He is right at our side. If we are close to Him, if we obey Him and put our confidence in Him, there will be no place for doubt and fear. And Goliaths will fall!

Now it's up to you... Proverbs 10:9 says, "He who walks with integrity walks with *confidence*." So be close to God. Be in the *right*, then stand your ground. Meet what's in front of you without wavering or having doubt. And let *God* give you the victory.

12

“Those with good sense will listen to others and learn; and those with discernment will look for good advice.”

You got this—right?

Most teenagers tackle life with a sort of “*I got this*” approach. And while that’s not bad, it’s not always so good. Having confidence and believing in yourself is great—if you really *do* know what you’re doing. But what teenager wants to admit that he or she really *doesn’t* have their act together? What teenager wants to admit that they *need help*—especially the help of a grownup?

It’s just human nature, and adults can be just as bad. When we’re dead sure about what we’re doing, we get bullheaded. “*I got this.*” But then we run into trouble, and suddenly we’re “all ears.” We want help, advice, input, direction, tech support—whatever you want to call it.

Proverbs typically uses the word *counsel*. And from Solomon’s perspective, getting some good counsel is the *first* thing you want to do—not the last. You no doubt have “guidance counselors” at school, so you should be familiar with the idea of getting qualified advice *before* you make important decisions. Solomon wrote, “Without counsel you’re more likely to fail; but plenty of good advice guarantees success” (Proverbs 11:14). He adds this: “Plans go

awry without good counsel, but accomplishment comes with lots of good advice” (Proverbs 15:22).

Learning to lean on the wisdom and experience of others is all part of growing up. So why pretend to be a “know it all”? You’ll only end up learning things the hard way. The easy way is to ask for help. “Those with good sense will listen to others and learn; and those with discernment will *look for good advice*” (Proverbs 1:5).

Some call it *mentoring*. A mentor is someone you look to regularly for advice, direction, guidance. It’s like they’re “on call” just for you. Sorry, but your peers don’t usually make good mentors, because they too are still trying to figure out those crazy teen years. But a friend with unusually *good sense*—absolutely: “Good advice from a discerning friend is like the sweetness of expensive ointment and the aroma of exotic incense” (Proverbs 27:9).

Still, a mentor should probably be an adult—someone with experience, godly wisdom, and the ability to relate well to young people. *Someone with outstanding judgment*. But you don’t want just one—you really need a *network* of mentors.

Good mentors can be found among your teachers at school. And you’ll definitely want to include your church pastor or other church leaders. An older brother or sister could also make a great mentor—as would a grandparent, or any trusted friend of the family.

But first and foremost, it should be your *parents*.

The best mentors—your parents

You’re likely thinking, “*My parents? Really?*” Yes, really. No one knows you better, and no one loves you more. Granted, they’re not perfect. But if you’ll give them a chance, you just might discover a source of wisdom you never knew was there.

As little kids, we look up to our parents. We practically give

them superhero status—they can do anything, and they *know everything*. But as time goes on, we begin to realize they're not so perfect after all. And as teenagers, we may think they're pretty clueless—and even come to despise everything they say. But trust me, you will eventually come to see that they were mostly right all along—and that they always had the best of intentions. And when they're gone, you will sorely miss their advice.

Look how things have changed for your parents. When you were little, they were clearly in charge. But now that you're a teen, things are different. Yes, they're still in charge, but they have moved from being *boss* to being *counselor*, from being in control to giving advice. Think about how hard this is for them.

The single *smartest* thing you can do for yourself is to listen to them—*really listen*. They probably know you better than you know yourself. And no one cares more about you.

Solomon essentially wrote the Book of Proverbs for *his* teenagers. So as you read it, think of it as coming from *your* parents. For example, he wrote: “Son, listen carefully to my advice, and never forget what your mother has taught you. Let our counsel be like a crown of favor upon your head, like golden chains adorning your neck....

“Diligently follow my instructions and remember your mother's teachings. Keep them uppermost in your heart and mind—if necessary, tie them around your neck as a reminder! They will lead you as you come and go, and even protect you while you sleep. And as each new day begins, they will softly speak to you. Indeed, our instructions are like a lamp for your path and our teachings are there to give you light. Even our correction is for your good—to keep you in the right way of life!” (Proverbs 1:8-9; 6:20-23).

A young person with good sense listens to his or her parents, measuring their advice against the teachings of the Bible. This is all

part of keeping the Fifth Commandment: “Show honor to your father and mother—so that you may enjoy a long life in the land God has given to us” (Exodus 20:12). Solomon adds this: “Children with good sense make their parents happy, but foolish children hold them in contempt” (Proverbs:15:20).

Honoring your parents includes leaning on their wisdom. But many teenagers say, “You don’t know how hard it is for me to talk to my parents!” We *do* know, because we’ve been there. We also know it’s worth the effort. Your mom and dad might not be the easiest parents to talk to, but please don’t let it be because *you* failed to give it your best effort. You need to work hard to establish good lines of communication with them. Try asking their opinion or thoughts on something. Not only will you be surprised at the value of their input, but they’ll be blown away that you actually asked!

The ultimate mentor

Obviously, if your parents really aren’t up to the task, then you’ll need to find another trusted adult as your primary mentor. But keep *this* in mind: We should look at Solomon’s instructions to his children as actually being *from God to us*. Remember what we learned from Proverbs 3:5-6—“Don’t think you’ve got it all figured out! Look to God instead, *relying on Him in everything*. Include Him in every part of your life—then He will show you the way.”

When you involve God in every part of your life, you get the ultimate mentor. And the Book of Proverbs—written especially for young people—is some of God’s best mentoring!

Now it’s up to you... “A thoughtless person insists that his way is right, but those with *good sense* look first for sound advice” (Proverbs 12:15). So, you got this—*right?*

13

“Blessings from God bring prosperity—with no added sorrow!”

Fun today—fun tomorrow!

Susie almost pulled it off. She had led her parents to believe she was at the movies with her best friend, but she actually went to a party with some much older teens and young adults. Sure, there was some drinking—but the music was great, and Susie was having a blast. Until somebody called the police...

Every teenager wants to have fun—and lots of it. It might be a hobby, playing or watching sports, camping, fishing, going shopping, surfing the Internet, going to parties—you name it. And there’s absolutely nothing wrong with doing the things you enjoy.

But not everything that’s fun is *good* for you, and not everything that’s fun is *right* in God’s eyes. Like premarital sex, looking at pornography, or experimenting with drugs or alcohol. Like bullying somebody or spreading gossip about people you don’t like. Like cheating on a test or lying to your parents to get what you want. I’m sure you can add to this list.

Granted, such things might be “fun” for the moment, but *sin*—which is living contrary to God’s way of life as defined in the

Bible—always has consequences. *Always.*

For Susie, her relationship with her parents would never be the same. It would take her years to regain their trust. And look at the damage she'd done to her reputation at school.

So what's fun today might *not* be fun tomorrow—not once the regret sets in. And it definitely won't be fun if somebody gets hurt. And the truth is, somebody *always* gets hurt, at least emotionally and spiritually.

God's idea of fun

Let's get this straight: God is not against you having fun. He invented fun! But He wants you to have fun *His* way. So how does God define fun? It's simple. It's anything that's fun today—and *still fun tomorrow*. In other words, even the *memory* of it brings enjoyment. Why? Because it's the kind of fun that has no penalty. *There are no regrets—no guilt, no sorrow.*

Solomon wrote, “Blessings from God bring prosperity—with *no added sorrow!*” (Proverbs 10:22). The idea here is that when something comes *from God*, there is no downside. We can apply this to having fun. If the things we do for fun are *within God's laws*, we can be sure there will be no consequences—no regrets. They're like blessings from God—they make us happy today, *with no sorrow tomorrow.*

Susie thought getting away with something forbidden would be fun. She never thought about consequences or getting caught. It's just part of “human nature.” Observing this human tendency, Solomon once noted that “stolen water is delightful, and pilfered bread eaten secretly is especially delicious” (Proverbs 9:17). Of course, Solomon wasn't really talking about bread and water—he was figuratively referring to illicit sex done in secret. But the principle

could be applied to any forbidden thing one might choose to do—*thinking no one sees*.

Except nothing is really done in secret. God sees *everything*. Remember Proverbs 5:21? “Everything you do is right before the eyes of God, for He ponders all of our paths.”

And what will God do? Well, that depends on how much correction one really needs. Sometimes the *consequences* of our mistakes are enough to set us back on the right path. But at other times, God may need to take corrective steps (Proverbs 3:11-12).

Just remember, the *law* of “sowing and reaping” is always at work. So if you’re having the wrong kind of “fun,” you’re going to reap some not-so-fun consequences. *It’s automatic*.

And don’t even try to claim you “didn’t know better”—because your *conscience* will give you away. Solomon wrote about this too: “If you say, ‘Look, I didn’t know!’—doesn’t He who searches your heart know better? Won’t He who watches over your life see through your deception? And will He not repay you according to your works?” (Proverbs 24:12).

Just something to think about the next time you want to have a little *fun!*

No regrets, please!

Regrets fall into two categories—the things we regret *not doing* and the things we regret *doing*. It all boils down to the *choices* we make. And sadly, most of the time there is no way to go back and make a different choice.

Hanging out with the wrong crowd, experimenting with drugs or alcohol, getting involved in premarital sex—these are all serious issues that young people everywhere face. And you have to make *choices* on these issues. You also have to make decisions on

everyday things like driving too fast, bullying someone, cheating on exams, not giving your boss an honest day's work, or watching stuff on TV that you know is wrong.

The simple fact is, living contrary to God's way of life comes with *inescapable consequences*. Yes, God will forgive you. But some consequences can still follow you throughout life.

This is particularly true in areas such as sex and drug abuse. Addiction to drugs can lead to a lifelong struggle. Hanging around with the wrong crowd might get you a criminal record. And experimenting with sex can lead to an unwanted pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease—and will definitely compromise your future marriage.

Complicating all of this is the fact that the “reap-what-you-sow” law sometimes *appears* to have been suspended. You do something you know is wrong, but nothing happens. You “got away with it.” In fact, this may actually seem rather routine—and you may come to think of yourself as “untouchable.”

This is because the law of *cause* and *effect* typically works slowly and deliberately, especially when it comes to sin and wrongdoing. Consequences are seldom immediate. And young people in particular are slow to “connect the dots” between their bad choices and the results—between the *sowing* and the *reaping*.

Sometimes the consequences of sin are immediately tangible, changing your daily life. But sometimes you dig yourself into a deep, dark hole—and then start to realize what's happening. By that time, unfortunately, the consequences are drastic enough to fundamentally affect the rest of your life.

The consequences of sin are never really minimal. At the very least, you've dulled your conscience and hindered your relationship with God (see Isaiah 59:2). Obedience to God strengthens your relationship with Him, and brings His blessings and favor. But

disobedience creates a sense of distance and loss, grief and regret. *Always.*

If you find yourself dealing with such regrets, remember that God is loving and merciful—and He is more than willing to forgive you and help you regain your relationship with Him. But you have to put Him *first*, and genuinely seek Him with all your heart!

Have fun!

We all look back and see things we wish we'd done differently. It's part of being human. We make mistakes, so we have regrets. But God wants us to learn from our mistakes and become determined to make wise choices—including *how we have fun.*

God doesn't want anyone to suffer regret from wrong or poor choices. He wants us to live life to the full—and *to have fun.* Remember Deuteronomy 30:19? God says He sets before us “life and death, good and evil”—and commands us to *choose life.* That's why He gave us guidelines in the Bible that describe a *way of life* that produces happiness and peace of mind.

Contrary to what most people think, God's laws and instructions are there to protect us, not prevent us from having a good time. They teach us how to live—and how to have fun *without regrets!*

Now it's up to you... The choices you make today as a teenager will determine the kind of adult you become. *So have fun!* But remember, what some teens think is fun might not be fun tomorrow. Always ask, “Will this *still* be fun when I look back on it?”

14

“Those who show compassion to the poor or needy are happy!”

Nothing—and everything!

WIIFM. No, that’s not the call letters to a popular FM radio station. But you’re a teenager, so you already know that it actually stands for “What’s In It For Me?”—a popular expression sometimes texted, tweeted, or spoken by teens and young adults.

While the “What’s In It For Me?” catchphrase may have started innocently enough, it unfortunately represents a growing trend in today’s culture—*narcissism*. (It’s okay if you need to stop reading and go look that up.) In fact, psychologists are now warning that there is an epidemic of narcissistic thinking in America—a *pre-occupation with the self*. Need evidence? Look no further than the phenomenon of Facebook: the compulsive status updates, the endless posting of *selfies*, the obsession with how many people you can “friend.”

But this “all about me” attitude isn’t really new. It’s been around since Adam, and it’s now central to “human nature.” At its basic level it can best be explained as a *get* way of life—one that focuses on the *self*—as opposed to a *give* way of life that focuses on others. And for most of us, it’s a struggle to learn to truly *give*—of

our time, our energy, our resources—with absolutely nothing expected in return.

Beware of the evil eye

The “What’s In It For Me?” mindset suggests that a person *might* be willing to donate some of their time or resources to help someone or some cause—but *only* if there’s something in it for *them*. The Bible describes such a person as one who has an *evil eye*. (This is not to be confused with the look your *dad* gives you when you get into trouble.) The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, a rather graphic language. In Hebrew, having an *evil eye* is figurative for being stingy, greedy—focusing on the self. Apparently, the association is that when one has a lack of compassion for his or her neighbor, he or she is looking on that person with an “evil eye.”

Through Moses, God instructed the people of Israel to be generous to those in need. “If there are any poor among you in the land that God has given to you, you must not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them—but you must *open your hand wide* and give according to their needs. Be careful ... that you do not allow *your eye to be evil against your brother*, so that you give him nothing, and it becomes a sin to you” (Deuteronomy 15:7-9). Jesus also warned about having an “evil eye” (Mark 7:22), and Solomon noted that those who are focused on getting rich typically “have an evil eye” (Proverbs 28:22).

In fact, Solomon had a lot to say about the *give way*—about helping others. He wrote, “Don’t hold back from doing good for those in need when you have the ability to help. Don’t say, ‘I’ll help you another time!’—when you can do it today” (Proverbs 3:27-28). He also shows that you can never *out-give* God. It’s all part of the principle of “cause and effect” that we looked at earlier. Here’s how

Solomon describes it: “There are those who give freely to others, yet they prosper; and there are those who are stingy and hold back, but it only leads to poverty. Indeed, those who are generous will be blessed, and those who water will themselves be watered” (Proverbs 11:24-25). Here’s another: “Having compassion on the poor is actually giving to God—and *He* will repay you” (Proverbs 19:17).

God sees *everything*—and He blesses accordingly. You willingly give, help, serve—you are blessed. But if you have an *evil eye*, you will ultimately be cursed.

It all boils down to *compassion* or *indifference*—on whether we *care* about the needs of others. Today, it seems like people are growing weary of looking out for their neighbors. The sufferings of those around us—friends, coworkers, or even family members—seem to cause us little concern. Indeed, the Bible warns that as we approach the time of Jesus’ return, people will be primarily “lovers of themselves” (see II Timothy 3:1-4). This goes against one of the two great laws: love toward God, and *love toward neighbor* (Mark 12:31).

What’s really in it for you?

We’ve seen what Solomon had to say about a *giving* attitude, and Jesus taught that there is a “greater blessing in giving than in getting” (Acts 20:35). But what does this really mean? Is it a promise of material blessings—or something of far greater value? When you *do* give and help others, what’s in it for you—*really*?

Nothing. And *everything*!

In the physical, material sense, you expect *nothing* in return. That’s the way it should be (see Luke 14:12-14). But in the spiritual sense—*everything*! According to Solomon, there’s an *immediate* benefit to giving. “Being kind and helpful to others will actually

nourish your own wellbeing, but being unkind will surely harm your health” (Proverbs 11:17). He also wrote: “Those who have compassion on the poor and needy are *happy*” (Proverbs 14:21).

No doubt about it. Practicing the *give way* helps you feel good about yourself—but not in a vain “look-what-I-did” kind of way. And when we give to others, God will always make up the difference—plus some. *Really*—you can’t out-give God.

But there’s an even greater blessing for those who gladly practice the *give way* of life. Jesus spoke of this in Matthew 6. “Don’t store up worldly treasures. They only get eaten by moths or rust away—or they get stolen. But store up treasures in heaven—treasures that can never be destroyed or stolen. Because wherever your treasure is—on earth or in heaven—that’s where your heart will be” (verses 19-21).

Focusing on worldly treasures—physical, material things—only makes us self-centered. Real treasure—the kind that comes from *giving* and *servicing others*—pleases God and shows Him where our heart really is. And He won’t forget it, either.

Our treasures speak loudly of who and what we are, and being a *giving* person will produce treasures that will last *forever*.

Now it’s up to you... As a teenager, you have loads of energy and enthusiasm. Put that to work serving and helping others. And remember, practicing the *give way* will pay off *now*—and *forever*.

15

“Doing what is good and right is more acceptable to the Lord than performing animal sacrifices.”

Paper—or plastic?

No one likes *imitation* whipped cream on their strawberry shortcake. It’s just not right. You want the real thing—made from real milk from real cows. And who really wants one of those *faux* leather jackets? Just fork out the money for the real thing.

It’s the same with people. You want to be around people who are genuine, *authentic*—not someone who *pretends* to be something they’re not. Especially when it comes to religion. If someone claims to be a Christian, you expect them to *live* like one. Right?

But *what exactly* makes a person a real Christian? Do you know? Can you tell the difference between someone who actually *lives* God’s way and someone who only claims to?

This is a tough one, for sure. And we have to be careful here so we don’t get into judging people—because that’s God’s job. But we are to *discern* between right and wrong. And as Jesus said, we are to recognize things *for what they truly are*—“know them by their fruits” (see Matthew 7:15-20). We want to avoid being judgmental, but we don’t want to go through life with *blinders* on.

(Okay, a little help here: In the old days, blinders were worn by horses or mules to keep them from seeing to the side or rear—so they wouldn't get distracted and veer off course. A person who figuratively “wears blinders” has a *poor grasp on reality*.)

Back in ancient Israel, religion was largely based on outward expression. It was typically “form *without* substance”—meaning rituals were performed and customs were observed (*form*) with little concern for what was really going on in a person's heart and mind (*substance*). The people looked and sounded religious (*form*), regardless of how they actually lived (*substance*).

Solomon could see this—and he knew what God *really* wanted: “Doing what is *good* and *right* is more acceptable to the Lord than performing animal sacrifices” (Proverbs 21:3). Solomon was saying that God wants a *real* relationship with us—one that is based on our commitment to His *way of life* as outlined in the Bible. Not a relationship built on outward rituals. Not one based on “lip service.” Not one that fits in with “Christian” pop culture.

Wanted: form with substance

Sadly, a lot of what goes by the name *Christian* isn't really Christian. In fact, it's all too easy to *look* like a Christian without actually *living* like a Christian. It's easy to *say* all the right things and be involved in all the right programs. But does *that* really make someone a Christian?

A Christian is one who *follows* Christ—imitates how He lived. And Jesus warned that there would be those who would claim to follow Him, but were actually phonies. He said, “Just because you *say* I am your Lord—calling out, ‘Lord, Lord’—does not mean you will enter the kingdom of heaven. But those who actually *do* the things God desires, *they* will enter the kingdom” (Matthew 7:21).

This is similar to Jesus' statement in Luke 6:46—"Why do you call me 'Lord' but ignore what I have taught you?"

Jesus clearly debunked religious "lip service." So saying Christian-sounding things will get you nowhere. But *doing* what God says—that's what matters. Jesus went on to say that even those who perform seemingly wonderful works in His name may still fall short—if they are *living contrary* to God's instructions (Matthew 7:22-23).

Following God is all about living according to His teachings, His standards. It's the things you *do* when no one's watching. It's the things you *do* when you really don't want to—because you know it's right. It's choosing to *not* be a part of this world, even when it hurts—because your hope is in God's coming kingdom.

The apostle John describes what it's like to be *disconnected* from this world: "Those who belong to this world, this society, fit right in—because the world naturally loves its own. But you are *not of this world*, this culture—because I have called you to *be separate* from this world. And this is why the world—this society—looks down on you!" (John 15:19).

Does this describe the Christians you know? Or do they seem to just "fit right in"?

If you're actually trying to *imitate Jesus*, you'll have little in common with this society, with popular culture. And this will be reflected in almost *everything you do*—the way you talk, dress, and drive; the kind of music and movies you enjoy; what you look at on the Internet. It will involve the way you relate to others (especially your parents!), the way you handle your finances, how well you do your job or schoolwork—and *so much more*. And your moral standards will be absolutely *unlike* those of this society. *And so the world won't like you!*

A lot of research about churchgoers has been conducted over

the past few years by organizations such as the Barna Group—and they’ve turned up some alarming facts about modern Christianity. The bottom line is that, when it comes to morality, there is virtually *no difference* between professing Christians and non-Christians. In other words, so-called Christians today are statistically *just as likely* as non-Christians to have sex outside of marriage, overuse alcohol, take illegal drugs, view Internet pornography, lie on job applications, cheat on exams, etc. Moreover, abortion and divorce rates are almost the same for Christians as for non-Christians.

This means that many churchgoers—while they *look* and *sound* like Christians—still *belong* to this world, this society. But the differences *should be* like night and day!

The fact is, too many “Christians” fit in nicely with popular culture. They don’t want to stand out as different—they want to fit in and be accepted. But what happened to the idea of being *separate* from this world—of not being “conformed” to *modern culture* (see Romans 12:2)?

Get real!

When I was kid, you brought groceries home in *paper* bags. We saved the bags for packing lunches, picking peas, arts and crafts projects, making costumes, you name it. Then came *plastic*—and for a while they would ask you at the checkout, “Paper or plastic?”

Paper was useful, practical—*the real thing*. Plastic, not so much. Religion’s the same way. It’s either real—or it’s just plastic.

Unfortunately, many churchgoers today are sort of *plastic*. They show up every weekend, their hardly-used Bibles in hand, and catch up on the latest with their friends. They *say* all the right things—claiming that Jesus is their *Lord*, even praising His name. They get involved in the latest fundraiser or outreach project. They

sound like a Christian, and they *look* like a Christian. But when they leave church, they *blend* right back in with the rest of the world.

You see, unless you actually *do* the things Jesus taught—unless you truly *live* your life according to the Bible—you’re fooling yourself. You’ve got the *form*, but come up short on *substance*.

David also wrote about *real religion*. Talking to God, he said: “You’re not really interested in animal sacrifices—or I would bring one. You’re not delighted by burnt offerings at all!” Then, speaking to *us*, he added: “The sacrifice God really wants is a *broken spirit* and a *yielded heart*—that’s what He will accept!” (Psalms 51:16-17).

A *broken spirit* and a *yielded heart*. These words describe someone who is determined to put God first, to obey Him in every way possible, to genuinely follow the Bible.

Long before David and Solomon, the prophet Samuel wrote: “Does God delight in burn offerings and sacrifices as much as He delights in obedience to His instructions? No—*obedience is better* than animal sacrifices, and *listening to God is better* than burning the fat of rams!” (I Samuel 15:22). The apostle James put it like this: “Genuine religion that is honest before God is looking after orphans and widows in their time of need—and keeping yourself from being corrupted by this society” (James 1:27).

These men all had the same radical idea: Real religion before God is based on *living in accordance* with the plain teachings of the Bible. It’s not what you say, it’s not who you know, it’s not where you go to church—or even if you go to church. *It’s what you do*.

So what will it be for you? Paper—or *plastic*?

Now it’s up to you... Spotting *phony* religion isn’t so hard. Just ignore what people say, and watch what they actually *do*. And while you’re at it, take a good, long look in the mirror...

And finally...

“Without a sense of purpose, people just end up doing whatever!”

Don't finish this book!

Congratulations—you've made it to the end of the book. Only four more pages! By now you're beginning to understand this thing called *wisdom*. And hopefully you're starting to see how the principles found in the Book of Proverbs can help you in every area of your life.

So where to now? That's up to you. My advice is, don't "finish" this book. Read it again. Study it. Keep it handy. Don't put it on a shelf, walk away, and think you've "got wisdom." Because it doesn't work that way. Remember, wisdom doesn't come by just reading a book—any book. It has to be *developed*.

So do this: Begin *applying* what you've learned from this book. *Good sense* comes by putting godly principles into *action*. It comes by *practice*. Even Jesus had to *grow* in wisdom (Luke 2:52).

The Bible shows that when God gives you something, He expects you to *use* it. And when you *act* on what God gives you, He gives you more. It's like you get to go to the next level. But if you don't act on what you're given, you'll soon lose what you have. This is especially true of understanding and wisdom. Use it and grow it, or lose it.

Hopefully this book has shown you how important it is to

have an overall sense of *direction* for your life. There's an old saying that goes something like this: "The best way to predict the future is to *plan* the future." Easier said than done, right? But you can't afford to just "let life happen"—you have to try, with God's help, to give your life some direction.

Solomon says it like this: "Without a sense of purpose, people just end up doing whatever!" (Proverbs 29:18). If you have no plan or purpose for your life, you'll end up going with the flow, going along with the crowd, letting life just "happen." You'll do whatever is convenient, popular, entertaining. And one day you'll look back and begin to realize you wasted a lot of time and energy pursuing... *whatever*.

So what *is* your overall purpose in life? What *direction* do you want to go? And I'm not talking about choosing a college or setting career goals. I'm not talking about finding the perfect job, getting married, and starting a family. Those are all big things, for sure. I'm talking about something *way bigger*—your life, the kind of person you want to become, your ultimate future in God's kingdom.

Isn't that worth some thought?

Here's a profound bit of insight: You will always move in the *direction* of your *currently dominant* thoughts. Read that again: You will always move in the direction of your *strongest, most recent* thoughts. What do you think this means?

You know how you'll hear a song and for days it seems stuck in your head? It's a little like that, but on a much, much deeper level. The things that *fill your mind* will stick with you. They'll influence the way you think. *They'll influence your actions*. Over time they'll shape your character, even define you as a person.

What *do* you fill your mind with? Granted, you have a lot of school work—but besides that? You fill in the blanks here—just be honest. But understand this: Real wisdom—the kind of extraordinary

good sense that will bring you a life of genuine happiness—cannot be developed by reading comic books, watching sitcoms, or surfing the Web. It won't come by keeping up with whatever's trending, spending huge amounts of time on social media, or even from hanging out with your friends on Saturday night.

Wisdom can only come from a genuine relationship with God. So that means you're going to have to start by asking things like, *What does God want from me? What does it mean to live by God's standards? How do I go about developing a real relationship with God?*

You'll have to rethink your priorities—because you'll need to *spend time* seeking God by actually reading the Bible. *Seriously*. Does that idea scare you? It shouldn't. What *should* scare you is that you have this amazing access to God's thoughts—the Bible—but have pretty much ignored it.

Remember, you'll only move in the direction of your *dominant* thoughts. What if at least *some* of your dominant thoughts were shaped by reading the Bible? What kind of changes might that bring to your life?

Just read the book, okay?

David, Solomon's father, wrote: "How can young people keep their lives clean and wholesome? By *living according to what God says!*"

"To make this actually happen, you'll need to put your *whole heart* into pursuing God. Only then will you never stray from His way. You must *fill your mind* with His teachings—so that you might not sin against Him!" (based on Psalms 119:9-11).

This was Solomon's secret. This is the *only* way to get to know God, the only way to real wisdom: *pursue God* and *fill your mind* with His teachings. Remember—*dominant* thoughts.

Proverbs obviously has a lot more to say about developing *good sense*. In fact, the whole Bible is loaded with lessons for teenagers on how to live God's way. Its treasures are just waiting to be mined—by you.

But for now, for young people, *Proverbs* is the best place to start. So don't "finish" Proverbs either—read it again and again, using a modern, easy-to-read translation. And take the time to really *think* about what you're reading.

Because like no other book, Proverbs was written especially with *you* in mind.

Bible passages used

Below are the key Bible passages used in this book. If you will review them often—and *think about what you're reading*—these verses can have a profound effect on your life!

Introduction: Sorry, there's no app for this...

“Wisdom begins with properly *fearing God*, and extraordinary insight comes from *understanding what is holy*” (Proverbs 9:10).

“A righteous man focuses on wisdom, and speaks only of what is good and right. *God's teachings fill his mind*—so he never strays from the right path” (Psalms 37:30-31).

“Listen to these teachings—*live by them!* Do what is good and right in God's sight—so that *your life will go well*, and your children's lives after you!” (Deuteronomy 12:28).

Chapter 1: Eyes on the road!

“Take time to ponder the path of your feet, then all your ways will be well established” (Proverbs 4:26).

“There is an open, wide road that most people follow, but it only leads to ruin. Only a few find and follow the narrow road that leads to life” (Matthew 7:13-14).

“Take the time to really examine yourselves—to see if you're still living according to the faith you profess. Test yourselves to be sure!” (II Corinthians 13:5).

“Everything you do is right before the eyes of God, for He ponders all of our paths” (Proverbs 5:21).

“Those with *good sense* carefully consider their path” (Proverbs 14:15).

Chapter 2: Who’s fighting for you?

“The warhorse is well prepared for the day of battle, but *victory rests with the Lord*” (Proverbs 21:31).

“Trust in God with all your heart, and don’t rely on your own understanding. In everything you do, *include Him* and He will show you the way” (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Chapter 3: Don’t jump that fence!

“There is a way of living that *seems so right* to almost everyone, but that way really leads only to trouble—and possibly even death” (Proverbs 14:12).

“There is an open, wide road that most people follow, but it only leads to ruin. Only a few find and follow the narrow road that leads to life” (Matthew 7:13-14).

“There is one lawgiver” (James 4:12).

“Woe to those who say that something *good* is actually evil, or that something *evil* is really good—who call light *darkness* and darkness *light*, or say that something *bitter* is sweet and that something *sweet* is bitter!” (Isaiah 5:20).

“I have *set before you* life and death, good and evil—*now choose!* Yes, *choose life*—so that you may live!” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

“*Choose* today whom you will serve!” (Joshua 24:15).

Chapter 4: Playing for an audience of one

“Trust in God with all your heart, and don’t rely on your own understanding. In everything you do, *include Him* and He will show you the way” (Proverbs 3:5-6).

“My son, don’t forget my teachings, but live by my instructions—then you will have a long and peaceful life. Don’t forget kindness or neglect faithfulness; bind them like a necklace around your neck and write them on the tablet of your heart. For then you’ll have favor and a good name in the sight of both God and man” (Proverbs 3:1-4).

“When your life pleases God, He will make even your enemies be at peace with you” (Proverbs 16:7).

Chapter 5: Friend me—please!

“Even with lots of friends, you may still find yourself forsaken. But a *true friend* is more faithful than even a brother” (Proverbs 18:24).

“Just as iron sharpens iron, a thoughtful person will *sharpen* his or her friends” (Proverbs 27:17).

“Honest correction is better than veiled friendship, and the wounds of a friend are indeed faithful” (Proverbs 27:5-6).

“If you hang out with those who have *good sense*, you’ll grow in wisdom. But foolish friends will only get you into trouble!” (Proverbs 13:20).

“Don’t kid yourself! Bad company will only ruin your good habits!” (I Corinthians 15:33).

“Don’t become *unequally yoked* with those who do not believe as you do. Can one who is upright really benefit from fellowship with a wrongdoer? After all, what does light have in common with darkness? And what harmony can there be between Jesus and the devil? Really now—what can a believer possibly have in common with an unbeliever?” (II Corinthians 6:14-15).

“Don’t neglect your friends, and remember those who have befriended your parents” (Proverbs 27:10).

“A real friend always cares” (Proverbs 17:17).

“The friend who ignores an offence shows love, but the one who gossips about it will surely ruin the friendship!” (Proverbs 17:9).

“A blabbermouth tells secrets, but a faithful friend always keeps personal things confidential” (Proverbs 11:13).

“Good advice from a discerning friend is like the sweetness of expensive ointment and the aroma of exotic incense” (Proverbs 27:9).

“Anxiety can weigh a person down, but a kind word from a friend will cheer him up!” (Proverbs 12:25).

Chapter 6: Sweet, golden apples!

“Some people’s words pierce like a knife, but those with *good sense* bring health and healing with their words” (Proverbs 12:18).

“Kind, gentle words are refreshing, but harsh words only crush the spirit” (Proverbs 15:4).

“When someone continually runs their mouth, something bad always slips out. But the one who controls his tongue shows *good sense*” (Proverbs 10:19).

“A gentle answer will calm another’s anger, but harsh words will only stir it up!” (Proverbs 15:1).

“Fools are quick to express their anger, but those with *good sense* overlook insults” (Proverbs 12:16).

“A busybody will betray another’s confidence, but a trustworthy friend will keep things secret” (Proverbs 11:13).

“Argue your case privately with your neighbor, and don’t go blabbing about it to others. If you do, you’ll be shamefully exposed and your reputation ruined!” (Proverbs 25:9-10).

“If there’s no wood, a fire will go out. Likewise, if people refuse to gossip, a rumor will quickly fade away” (Proverbs 26:20).

“The righteous person *carefully weighs his answers*, but the ungodly person’s mouth pours forth hurtful words” (Proverbs 15:28).

“Have you ever met someone who doesn’t hesitate to speak his mind? There’s more hope for a fool than for him!” (Proverbs 29:20).

“Anxiety can weigh a person down, but a kind word from a friend will cheer him up” (Proverbs 12:25).

“There is joy in giving an appropriate reply, and a well-timed comment is most delightful” (Proverbs 15:23).

“The *right words* spoken at the *right time* are like sweet, golden apples on a plate of silver!” (Proverbs 25:11).

Chapter 7: You own this!

“Even children make themselves known by their conduct, by whether their actions are good and right” (Proverbs 20:11).

“Having a *good name* is more important than being wealthy, and having the *respect* of others is better than tons of silver and gold!” (Proverbs 22:1).

“A man of integrity conducts himself with confidence, but one who deals crookedly will surely be exposed” (Proverbs 10:9).

“Kings admire honesty, and they value one who speaks the truth” (Proverbs 16:13).

“Counting on someone who is unreliable—especially when you really need them—is like dealing with a bad tooth or a lame foot!” (Proverbs 25:19).

“The moral integrity of the upright will always guide them, but the dishonesty of wrongdoers will lead them to ruin” (Proverbs 11:3).

Chapter 8: Play hard, work harder!

“If you work your land you’ll have plenty to eat, but *mindless pursuits* only show a lack of good sense” (Proverbs 12:11).

“Just look at the ant, you slacker! Look at how hard they work—and wise up! Ants have no supervisor, no boss—yet they store up food all through the summer. So how long are you going to just lie there, lazybones? When are you going to get out of bed? You’re always saying, ‘Just a little more sleep, just let me get some more rest.’ Don’t you know you’ll end up as poor as a vagabond and as hungry as someone driven to stealing?” (Proverbs 6:6-11).

“Like vinegar sets your teeth on edge and smoke burns your eyes, a lazy worker is an annoyance to his employer!” (Proverbs 10:26).

“Everything a sluggard tries to do is hampered by ‘thorns’! But if you’re an honest worker, you’ll find a way to get the job done” (Proverbs 15:19).

“Employees, do your job as instructed—not just when the boss is watching, as if you’re trying to gain special favor. But always work hard, being honest, because of your respect for God. And in every task, *put your heart into it* as if you’re actually working for the Lord—because you know your true reward will come from Him. Ultimately, you *are* working for Christ” (Colossians 3:22-24).

“A man who is diligent and excels in his work will find employment among the esteemed—and he will never have to resort to working for trivial men” (Proverbs 22:29).

“Lazy people want this and want that, yet they really have nothing to show for themselves. But those who work hard will have everything they need!” (Proverbs 13:4).

Chapter 9: Matters of the heart

“Keep your heart with all diligence—because life itself flows from the heart!” (Proverbs 4:23).

“If you have no control over your mind, you’re like a city with broken walls—anything can get in!” (Proverbs 25:28).

“Your sins will take you captive, and you’ll be bound by the cords of your wrongdoing!” (Proverbs 5:22).

“The moral integrity of the upright will always guide them, but the dishonesty of wrongdoers will lead them to ruin” (Proverbs 11:3).

“Any time you go against your convictions, you sin!” (Romans 14:23).

“A sound heart is the life of the body!” (Proverbs 14:30).

Chapter 10: “Meant to be” —really?

“The sparrow comes by fluttering his wings and the swallow comes by flying. Likewise, misfortune will not come without a *cause*” (Proverbs 26:2).

“Don’t be fooled about this, because God will not be mocked! Whatever you sow, *that’s* what you’ll reap!” (Galatians 6:7).

“Be assured that your sins will find you out!” (Numbers 32:23).

“I have set before you life and death, good and evil—*now choose!* Yes, *choose life*, so you may live!” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

“The eyes of God search throughout the land for those whose hearts are loyal to Him—and He will show Himself strong for their sake!” (II Chronicles 16:9).

Chapter 11: Looking for young lions

“Fearing the Lord brings strong confidence” (Proverbs 14:26).

“The righteous are as bold as young lions” (Proverbs 28:1).

“If we are careful to follow God’s teachings, just as He has instructed us, *it will be credited to us as righteousness*” (Deuteronomy 6:25).

“The Lord is my guide and my deliverer—why should I fear anyone? He is the strength of my life—why should anyone make me afraid?” (Psalms 27:1).

“God will even make your enemies be at peace with you—if your ways please Him” (Proverbs 16:7).

“A man of integrity conducts himself with confidence, but one who deals crookedly with others will surely be exposed” (Proverbs 10:9).

Chapter 12: You got this—right?

“Without counsel you’re more likely to fail; but plenty of good advice guarantees success” (Proverbs 11:14).

“Plans go awry without good counsel, but accomplishment comes with lots of good advice” (Proverbs 15:22).

“Those with *good sense* will listen to others and learn; and those with discernment will look for good advice” (Proverbs 1:5).

“Good advice from a discerning friend is like the sweetness of expensive ointment and the aroma of exotic incense” (Proverbs 27:9).

“Son, listen carefully to my advice, and never forget what your mother has taught you. Let our counsel be like a crown of favor upon your head, like golden chains adorning your neck.... Diligently follow my instructions and remember your mother’s teachings. Keep them uppermost in your heart and mind—if necessary, tie them around your neck as a reminder! They will lead you as you come and go, and even protect you while you sleep. And as each new day begins, they will softly speak to you. Indeed, our instructions are like a lamp for your path and our teachings are there to give you light. Even our correction is for your good—to keep you in the right way of life!” (Proverbs 1:8-9; 6:20-23).

“Show honor to your father and mother—so that you may enjoy a long life in the land God has given to us” (Exodus 20:12).

“Children with *good sense* make their parents happy, but foolish children hold them in contempt” (Proverbs:15:20).

“A thoughtless person insists that his way is right, but those with *good sense* look first for sound advice” (Proverbs 12:15).

Chapter 13: Fun today—fun tomorrow!

“Blessings from God bring prosperity—with no added sorrow!” (Proverbs 10:22).

“Stolen water is delightful, and pilfered bread eaten secretly is especially delicious” (Proverbs 9:17).

“Everything you do is right before the eyes of God, for He ponders all of our paths” (Proverbs 5:21).

“If you say, ‘Look, I didn’t know!’—doesn’t He who searches your heart know better? Won’t He who watches over your life see through your deception? And will He not repay you according to your works?” (Proverbs 24:12).

Chapter 14: Nothing—and everything!

“If there are any poor among you in the land that God has given to you, you must not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them—but you must *open your hand wide* and give according to their needs. Be careful ... that you do not allow your eye to be evil against your brother, so that you give him nothing, and it becomes a sin to you” (Deuteronomy 15:7-9).

“Those determined to get rich typically have an evil eye” (Proverbs 28:22).

“Don’t hold back from doing good for those in need when you have the ability to help. Don’t say, ‘I’ll help you another time!’—when you can do it today” (Proverbs 3:27-28).

“There are those who give freely to others, yet they prosper; and there are those who are stingy and hold back, but it only leads to poverty. Indeed, those who are generous will be blessed, and those who water will themselves be watered” (Proverbs 11:24-25).

“Having compassion on the poor is actually giving to God—and He will repay you” (Proverbs 19:17).

“There is greater blessing in *giving* than in *getting*” (Acts 20:35).

“Being kind and helpful to others will actually nourish your own wellbeing, but being unkind will surely harm your health” (Proverbs 11:17).

“Those who have compassion on the poor and needy are happy” (Proverbs 14:21).

“Don’t store up worldly treasures. They only get eaten by moths or rust away—or they get stolen. But store up treasures in heaven—treasures that can never be destroyed or stolen. Because wherever your treasure is—on earth or in heaven—that’s where your heart will be” (Matthew 6:19-21).

Chapter 15: Paper—or plastic?

“You will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:20).

“Doing what is *good* and *right* is more acceptable to the Lord than performing animal sacrifices” (Proverbs 21:3).

“Just because you *say* I am your Lord—calling out, ‘Lord, Lord’—does not mean you will enter the kingdom of heaven. But

those who actually *do* the things God desires, *they* will enter the kingdom” (Matthew 7:21).

“Why do you call me ‘Lord’ but ignore what I have taught you?” (Luke 6:46).

“Those who belong to this world, this society, fit right in—because the world naturally loves its own. But you are *not of this world*, this culture—because I have called you to *be separate* from this world. And this is why the world—this society—looks down on you!” (John 15:19).

“Do not be conformed to this world” (Romans 12:2).

“You’re not really interested in animal sacrifices—or I would bring one. You’re not delighted by burnt offerings at all! The sacrifice God really wants is a *broken spirit* and a *yielded heart*—that’s what He will accept!” (Psalms 51:16-17).

“Does God delight in burn offerings and sacrifices as much as He delights in obedience to His instructions? No—*obedience is better* than animal sacrifices, and *listening to God is better* than burning the fat of rams!” (I Samuel 15:22).

“*Genuine religion* that is honest before God is looking after orphans and widows in their time of need—and keeping yourself from being corrupted by this society” (James 1:27).

And finally... Don't finish this book!

“Without a sense of purpose, people just end up doing whatever!” (Proverbs 29:18).

“How can young people keep their lives clean and wholesome? By *living according to what God says!* To make this actually

happen, you'll need to put your *whole heart* into pursuing God. Only then will you never stray from His way. You must *fill your mind* with His teachings—so that you might not sin against Him!” (Psalms 119:9-11).

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This just might interest you . . .

York Publishing has several additional books or booklets that many teens find interesting and helpful. For example, if you're dealing in school with the subject of evolution, we have three booklets that can help: First, ***God or no god?*** is a booklet you can use to absolutely prove that God exists. A second one, ***How Credible is the Bible?***, will help you prove that the Bible is truly the Word of God. Another booklet, ***Geology, Catastrophism and the Scriptures***, explains how science fails to properly interpret the origin of the earth's geological features. Plus, it shows what *really* happened to the dinosaurs!

For younger readers, ***God's Bible Pathway for Children*** is a wonderful booklet for parents to use in teaching their young children about God and His ways.

For young people ready to really dig into Jesus' life and teachings, a good *harmony* is an indispensable tool. (A harmony takes all of the stories and events found in the four Gospels and organizes them in chronological order while providing a side-by-side comparison of each Gospel account.) ***A Harmony of the Gospels in Modern English—The Life of Jesus Christ*** provides an easy-to-understand, step-by-step account of Jesus' life. It's easy to read, so it's perfect for teens.

These materials are absolutely *free!* You'll find them and much more at **www.churchathome.org**. Also visit our flagship site, **www.truthofgod.org**.

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