

Proverbs 3:1-12

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[0 : 00] Let's pray for the Lord's help. Instead, he finds God's holy law, his joy and great delight.

Amen.

Well, I've chosen just to preach on two of those verses from Proverbs 3. Let me read those verses again, verses 9 and 10, and then I'll explain why. It says, Now, to be honest, a number of quite mundane reasons I wanted to preach on this.

Partly, we're about to start a new series in our youth group this term on money in the book of Proverbs. So I kind of wanted to refresh my own thinking on it. Partly, it's much easier for me, with clearly no vested interest, for me to talk about giving to you than it is for others.

Perhaps your elders here are bolder than I would be, but you know what I mean. But partly, this is just something which I've discovered in the Scriptures, to be a wonderful thing. To be a surprising testimony to just how generous and gracious God is.

[1 : 44] Honour the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce. Then your barns will be filled with plenty. And your vats will be bursting with wine.

A year or so ago, we kept hearing in the news about the cost of living crisis. I think we hear about that less in the news now, because it's become our new baseline. That prices are higher.

And petrol costs more. And food seems to drain the bank account. Now, if you're a child, you might not realise this, because your parents are the ones, rightly, who worry about it rather than you.

But children, your parents probably have, over the last few years, become armchair economists.

Worrying about money. Worrying about the shopping. Checking the smart meter.

I find smart meters a very alarming thing. You know how it tells you how much you've spent today on energy? Every time you look at it, you think, oh, can that really be the case? But the good news from the book of Proverbs, the good news from God's word, is that God's economics are not our economics.

[2 : 55] In fact, all economics, if you're studying that perhaps at A-level or something, or if you work in that field, all economics are wrong if they bracket out God and his providence and his care and his power.

Now, at a time where people are feeling the pinch, we may feel it's a time where we look at the balances and think, hang on, I need to tone down my giving to the Lord, giving to the church.

But I want to show us from Proverbs chapter 3, this is a time not to stop or reduce giving, but a time to carry on giving to the Lord. And here's why.

The book of Proverbs has lots of obvious lessons about money. So just hear these things and think to yourself, does this sound like an obvious teaching? Chapter 14, verse 23. In all toil there is profit, but mere talk tends only to poverty.

I don't think you need to be a Christian to know that that's true. Chapter 10, verse 4. A lazy hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.

[4 : 01] Chapter 13, verse 11. Wealth gained hastily will dwindle, but whoever gathers little by little will increase it.

Even chapter 11, verse 25. I think this is less obvious to the average person, but it still rings true. A generous man will prosper. He who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.

You can see how, you know, if you're supporting somebody when you're doing well, then you might be the kind of person who others support when you need to be refreshed. But chapter 3, verse 9 to 10 is not obvious.

It's not intuitive at all. If you were to say this to one of your neighbours or someone you know from school, they would say, that doesn't make sense at all. Honour the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce.

Then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine. I think when we think about giving to the poor or to the work of the church, we tend to be motivated by things like need.

[5 : 06] We say, there's a building that needs to be built. There's an appeal that needs to get that thing up to the very top of the thermometer on it. Then we can build the building. Or we need to employ this new post.

Or we've got to pay the bills to keep the lights on. There's a need. Or perhaps we feel motivated by guilt. We think, well, somebody probably ought to do this, because otherwise the minister's poor children will starve or something like that.

Or, just by bare duty. We know that God's word says something about giving. We don't really know why, but we're just going to go along with it anyway. Proverbs chapter 3 gives us a far more appealing and far more true and far more gracious motivation than that.

Honouring the Lord by giving to him, giving to him, that is giving to his work, brings blessing. The motivation is, I want to be blessed.

Both materially and spiritually. Or to put it in the pithiest way, the one who tithes thrives. Now, perhaps you're hearing that thinking, hang on a second.

[6 : 17] Hold your horses. The rest of the sermon, I'm just going to spend answering the many objections that you're probably already thinking of in your mind. And I've thought of at least 14. So, let's see how far we get.

They're quick. Don't worry. Here's the first one. You're just tricking me. This is just manipulation.

Both the verse itself and this sermon is just somebody self-interestedly saying, give me money.

Now, that is a cynical objection, but it is a real one. It has to be addressed because it does happen.

One, incidentally, if you're somebody who's here, who's not a Christian, one, I'm glad, delighted that you're here.

And two, I just want to make it really clear that you should not be giving to the church to the work of Jesus Christ, unless you consider that Jesus is your Lord and your great high priest.

Because I think that's what giving to the Lord is. It's testifying, not with our lips, but with our bank statement, that Jesus is my Lord. Proverbs is a book that's written by King Solomon.

[7 : 18] In other words, it's not written by the people who benefit from the first fruits and the tithes. Chapter 31 of 2 Chronicles, it's one of the kings, another king like King Solomon, King Hezekiah, who leads the people in doing just this, in bringing in the full tithe and first fruits into the priests and the Levites.

Now, King Hezekiah, presumably, was the richest man in the entire country. He didn't stand to benefit at all from giving money to the priests and Levites. And yet he led the people in doing it. Proverbs is not, these words are not the words of somebody self-interested. Solomon himself stood to gain nothing by giving the first fruits of all his many lands and wealth.

Except that he did. Because we all have a vested interest in these verses, if they're true. All of us. If it is true that the Lord fills the barns of those who honour the Lord with their wealth, then we have a vested interest in this.

Second objection. This is clearly not always true. Now, Proverbs recognises this. In fact, the very nature of a proverb is it's saying something general, rather than something kind of ironclad, universal law.

[8 : 37] Proverbs recognises it in places like chapter 28, verse 6, where it says, Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity, than a rich man who is crooked in his ways.

Throughout the whole book of Proverbs, it's plain that it's possible to be rich and wicked. But it's possible, perhaps even common, to be poor and righteous.

So it's clearly not always true, yes. And Proverbs recognises that. Even in this very reading that we heard, chapter 3, verse 11 and 12, My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline, or be weary of his reproof.

For the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights. Even in those verses, we see that God brings hardship, as discipline, on the children whom he loves.

Now, that hardship must include, or at least possibly include, some financial hardship and difficulty. God brings those things, as he brings all trials on us, as an opportunity to learn to trust him, to learn to rely on him, and to walk in his ways.

[9 : 48] So yes, this is clearly not always true. It generally is true, though. We tend to read Proverbs and say, yeah, I recognise there are some exceptions to this, and move to, well, it's just all random.

Whether people end up happy or sad, rich or poor, righteous or foolish, that's just random. It's up to you. You have to pull yourself up by your bootstraps.

You have to be the one who gets lucky. But those things deny the lordship of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, who sits enthroned, ruling over everything, all of the powerful angels and authorities, all of the powerful governments and financial institutions, and all of us, he has not stepped back from our individual financial affairs.

He knows what's going on in your work and in your bank account. He not only knows, but he cares. He not only cares, but to some significant and important degree, he controls it.

Third objection. Isn't this just in the Old Testament? Well, yes, Proverbs is in the Old Testament, so on one sense, yes, that's true. And not just in that sense.

[11 : 08] Not just that it's in this book rather than in the book of Matthew or in James. Because in verse 9, it refers specifically to the first fruits of all your produce.

Now, the law of Israel stated that before the people could eat a single thing from the lands and fields that they had, they first had to bring the first and the best produce from their lands to God. They brought not only the first fruits, but a tithe, that is a tenth, of all that their land produced and brought it to the Levites and the priests. Now, at least to some extent, that's therefore connected with the promise of the land, right?

The reason they had those fields in the first place was because God had given them, their specific tribe, their specific family, this specific field. And yet, this idea that there is a cycle of blessing is not one that's limited to the Old Testament.

Proverbs, I think, if you think about the whole book, it's an instruction from a father to his son. And in a way, it's an expansion of the fifth of the Ten Commandments. Honor your father and mother, this is the first commandment with a promise, that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.

[12 : 30] Proverbs is about that. It's a father saying, if you heed my instructions, you will be wise and you will be blessed. You will have long life. Length of days, verse 2. You will have blessings.

Honor the Lord with your wealth. But that quotation of the fifth commandment I just gave you is not from the Old Testament. I've quoted it from Ephesians chapter 6, verse 2 and 3.

Honor your father and your mother. This is the first commandment with a promise, that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land. The instructions of Proverbs are not just for them, they're for us.

They're for Christians living in the New Testament too. Besides that, there's a clear parallel given in 1 Corinthians 9 between giving to support the Levites and the temple and giving to support the church and its ministers.

You can see that in 1 Corinthians 9, 13 and 14 where it says, do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings.

[13 : 36] In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel. More than that, there's clearly some obligation to continue to give according to our means.

That's what 2 Corinthians 8 says. Now here's the thing, wouldn't it be strange, wouldn't it be just unlike the God that we know if he'd left us with the obligation to give according to proportion to your means but taken away the blessing?

The New Covenant is not a downgrade from the old. It's an upgrade in every way. And that includes in this way. Objection number 4.

Doesn't Jesus warn against riches? Yes, he does. In fact, Jesus has more to say about riches and the danger of riches than almost anything else.

He speaks a great deal as well about self-righteousness but it seems that for Jesus in his great wisdom riches and self-righteousness come hand in hand. So yes, Jesus warns against riches but so does the book of Proverbs.

[14 : 43] Chapter 30 says, Give me neither poverty nor riches but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, Who is the Lord?

Or I may become poor and steal and so dishonour the name of my God. So great is God's blessing both in the Old Covenant and the New.

So great is his blessing that the chiefest temptation for us is that we turn around having received the things he's given us and say, I did this by my own hand.

I did this. I worked hard. I pulled myself up. And the Lord says, No, I gave you everything. I gave you the bootstraps and the hands to pull them up and I gave you much more besides.

So yes, it is a great danger and I don't want to underplay that danger. If you heard that verse, Then your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats will be bursting with wine. Does that remind you of any stories that Jesus told?

[15:44] For the children, we have a book of the man who built the barns and they got bigger and bigger. But in the end, the man died after he built the biggest barn of all, Luke chapter 12.

And what did God say to him? You fool. You fool. You, the opposite of Proverbs. Not the wise man, but the fool building your barns bigger and bigger.

That's why it says in verse 9, honour the Lord with your wealth. The man in the parable honoured his wealth with his wealth.

He wanted his wealth to grow yet more and more. He honoured his pleasure with his wealth. He wanted to eat and drink and be merry. It's honour the Lord, not honour yourself, not honour your wealth, not honour mammon, but honour the Lord with your wealth.

We are to seek wisdom first. We are to seek understanding for, chapter 3, verse 14, the gain from wisdom is better than gain from silver and her profit is better than gold.

[16:56] Get wisdom. Seek wisdom. Which is, of course, the same thing as to say, get Christ. Christ. Seek Christ.

Now again, who else says that? Seek something first. Jesus himself, in Matthew 6, says, seek first the kingdom and righteousness. But that's not where that verse finishes, is it?

Jesus goes on, seek first the kingdom and righteousness and all these material things will be added to you. So yes, Jesus warns against riches, just like Proverbs.

Number five. We will get quicker, don't worry. Number five. Isn't this the prosperity gospel? Perhaps one night you've been flicking through the channels and you get to some late night allegedly Christian channel and you see somebody saying, donate to me, donate now, send in via this text message and I will buy a private jet which will help me to spread the gospel and God will also double your money and you'll see that I pledge to you.

That's what the prosperity gospel is. People openly appealing to greed and desperation saying that the gospel is a means to wealth. But Proverbs 3 isn't the prosperity gospel like that.

[18:20] I hope that what I'm saying today is not capable of being heard like that. Proverbs 3 is true so long as we don't make God's generosity a license for loving money.

So long as we don't neuter Jesus' teaching that the good life, the wise life, the happy life is denying yourself, taking up your cross and following me.

That the good life means losing your life. That the good life means leaving behind houses and fields and family. So long as those things are not neutered.

This is not the prosperity gospel. It's just the way that our generous God has set up his gracious, grace-filled world. A sixth objection.

Isn't this just works righteousness? It sounds like you're saying you've got to do these good things, give some money, do some religious stuff and then God will bless you. Absolutely not.

[19:21] Or at least if you read it wrong and misinterpret it, it is. But that's not how God has ever operated. Everything we have, every breath, is by God's grace only.

The fact that we profess Jesus Christ and follow him if you do, the fact that we do that is by God's grace only. We've received his gift of righteousness by faith only.

And yet that faith which he's given to us is not all that he's given to us. He's given us his Holy Spirit precisely so that we can walk in his commands.

Precisely so that we can live the happiest, wisest way which is to walk in his commands. the wisdom which comes from the fear of the Lord, the good works which come from faith are done by God's grace.

It's God's grace which produces in us good works. It's God's work in your heart which produces wisdom and a wisdom which is not just in the head but which works out in every area of your life.

[20 : 31] Now again, just step back from that. That's how generous God is. He gives you the grace. You receive his gift of extraordinary and perfect righteousness by faith.

He gives you his Holy Spirit so that you can walk in his commandments and then he rewards you for walking in his commandments. Not just in this life but in the life to come. Let's not sell short the generosity of God.

God is full of grace at every step in the chain along that. And the grace which will bear fruit in eternity is a grace which we can as yet barely imagine.

So those are kind of I suppose theological objections. The next few are quicker and they're more practical objections. So the seventh objection. I'm worried that if I do this I'm just doing it to get rich. I'm worried about my motivations. Well I want to say to that that God has actually set up this precisely to prevent that. In other words if you do have a tendency to love money you don't have to be rich to love money.

[21 : 36] You can be desperately poor and still love money. If you do have a tendency and a temptation to love money and you give to the Lord first I don't think you can do both of those things for long.

God has set up honouring the Lord with your wealth precisely to put to death the sin of covetousness. It's designed to purify our motivations because we have to say I love you first. I honour you more than anything. I need you Lord more than I need anything. It's anything. Not even money not even bread not even my livelihood.

An eighth objection. If I did this I wouldn't have enough to live on. Now I want to be really sensitive to this because I do think there are real circumstances where people might say I wish I could honour the Lord with my wealth but I truly don't have any wealth.

All my wealth is someone else's wealth. I don't have a penny to live on. Think of those many slaves in the New Testament who were converted to follow Jesus Christ. But they didn't really have any possessions.

[22 : 44] They were slaves. They didn't earn any money week to week for the most part. But remember Jesus' story in Luke 21 well not a story but something he saw and pointed out to his disciples he saw a widow going to the temple treasury and putting in just two small copper coins and said and these words ought to echo in our hearts he said having seen people pouring in their gold coins he said I tell you she has put in more than all these.

God's economics are not our economics. and he says honour the Lord with your wealth and first put that first. My mum is involved with Christians against poverty she helps out with that a little bit and she says I was talking to her about this a few months ago she was surprised that one of the first things when they're trying to get somebody out of a horrendous situation with debt one of the first things they do to put into their budget is giving.

It's a recognition a pretty bold recognition on the part of an organisation that's trying to fight poverty that God's economics are not our economics that God owns the cattle on a thousand hills that God has an infinite supply of life and money he has enough he has enough for himself he has enough to overflow to every creature in the world he has enough for you.

A ninth objection I will do this but I need to pay off my debt I need to pay off my project first again I want to be sensitive to that that might be the right thing to do and in some ways Christians against poverty is trying to sort out people in that situation but notice what it says in verse 9 honour the Lord with your wealth and with the first fruits of all your produce however we work out our giving in practice we ought to be trying to say in some way with it Lord you're the first person before I put a morsel in my mouth I'm honouring you with it I'm testifying that you gave it I'm professing that you have provided for me a great high priest Jesus and I belong to him that's the first thing we do with our money so I want to if that's the case of saying I can't give now because I'm still paying off my student debt or I need to pay for this conservatory or something I want to gently ask how or who or what is your highest and first priority in life tenth objection somebody who says look I'm doing this I am giving but I'm just getting poorer now this may happen over the long term because the Lord in his sovereign power disciplines people just how he wants to but I want to say that if Proverbs is true generally true then it probably won't that somebody who gives generously to the Lord who honours the Lord with their wealth probably won't be getting poorer and poorer over the long term because God's economics are not our economics perhaps you're someone like me who looks at graphs and reads things in the paper and thinks the economy is going down the pan and it seemingly has no bottom do you think that that can outrun God I don't there are a lot of things though that are better

than wealth in Proverbs if you say I'm giving and I'm getting poorer look at all the other blessings God may have poured on you Proverbs says that peace a peaceable house a good wife that wisdom itself are better than wealth if you're giving and gaining those things you are giving and gaining in blessing an eleventh objection sorry we're getting through them an eleventh objection how do I actually calculate this and I don't think this is a just a theoretical objection because I from my own personal experience there is an extraordinary barrier from hearing something about what God says about giving to going home and having a conversation about it to actually firing up the old bank app and then you realise you've lost that little calculator thing you need and then you forget about it because of the children and then six months later you haven't actually done it and then you think well

[27 : 01] I don't even know how to calculate what I should give to the Lord what does in proportion to my wealth actually mean now our verses don't address this directly although when they brought the first fruits in ancient Israel they also brought a tenth of the year's profit or increase now again they must have some years not been able to bring very much because the plague of locusts had eaten their crops or an extremely strong and heavy tax burden had cut down what that meant but whatever else first fruits implies it certainly implies that we review these things regularly that we honour the Lord with our wealth by checking our wealth by checking our giving and saying yep I'm reviewing this to honour the Lord I'm reviewing this in gratitude to him I think I'm increasingly convinced that the tenth principle the tenth of all your increase applies and is a gracious and freeing thing for Christians as well

I'll happily talk to anyone about that afterwards but I think here's the real bottom line something that Jesus said with the measure you use it will be measured to you that you reap what you sow again people do not believe these things because they're a deep principle hidden in the world which Jesus has revealed to us Jesus himself who gave up everything and then received eternal life with the measure you use it will be measured to you so yes you do have to calculate and you do have to do something about it and you do have to find that little calculator don't sweat it too much but yes you should I'm happy to speak about that more a twelfth objection some people would say look I'd like to do this but my wife or my husband or my parents they won't stand for it they just don't think we should be doing this perhaps you're married to someone who's not a Christian perhaps your parents have different views on this to you now again

I've got a great deal of sympathy for that not for personal reasons I should say but I do understand that that's a real burden to bear I would suggest that if you're in that situation that would be a great thing to raise with one of the elders of this church and to talk to them about it but here's what I will say about it you may have to go to your husband or wife or parents and apologise I personally would have to apologise to as Jenny and I have spoken about this in the past to say look I've been stingy in the past towards the Lord because I've been scared and I thought well I've got to keep the money back for myself because I dare not give it away we don't have enough I'm sorry because I've dishonoured the Lord in doing that and here's what I want to do differently 13th I'm not sure who I should give to well Galatians chapter 6 verse 6 says let the one who has taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches I think if you don't consider your own church's ministry the kind of obvious port of call for giving then that's probably a bit of a red flag about something but you are genuinely free to give you're free to give not under compulsion

God loves a cheerful giver 14th do you know this isn't actually really an objection perhaps you're somebody who hears these things from Proverbs chapter 3 and says do you know I've been doing this for the last 50 years or 70 years or 15 years and now I think about my life and realise that I've prospered far more than I can really explain that God has given me more than I really deserved I was never that good at my job I never really made much progress I didn't really check my pensions and my savings that carefully and I never realised there was a connection if that is you can I encourage you to do two things first give thanks to the Lord praise him recognise that his grace is from grace to grace that it's overflowing and abounding but secondly share your story of God's kindness with others to encourage them in the walk there will be young people here young being a kind of relative term who just can't believe this they look at the economy they grumble about boomers they think I'm never going to own a house because of something to do with fiat currency or something encourage those people and say look God's economics are not our economics hear my story

I was talking to a guy back in our church about this who'd worked in a low level job in the charitable sector for all of his life was talking about these verses and said do you know I think that's what God has done to me and now I realise how generous and gracious God has been to me and I said to him well look tell other people who are here too that God really is gracious and kind I read an amazing stat it's from 2012 but I assume it's even more true now that the over 60s are more than six times more generous to charity including to churches than the under 30s and ten years prior to that it was just three times more six times more the over 60s their proportional generosity to the young young people need to hear your encouragement in this they need to hear God's encouragement from chapter 3 verse 9 that to some meaningful extent giving to the Lord honouring him with our wealth is a no brainer on every level promised not just for this life but for the life to come and more fundamentally they need to hear we need to hear every one of us needs to hear that God's economics are not our economics

[32 : 55] God is not stingy if you're a Christian just shake your head and think is God stingy he who did not spare up his own son but gave him for us all is he stingy God who created every single atom in the universe is he underfunded is he wanting or lacking for anything it's Satan who wants us not to be blessed either spiritually or materially God is infinitely rich and prodigally generous he did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all now God just wants us to prove that we know that and he wants the proof to be in our bank statement and here's the crazy thing sooner or later it'll be in your bank statement in both columns in and out now just imagine that multiplied and compounded across hundreds of people and across the generations

I always think there's a kind of chicken and egg thing when we talk about and pray for revival on the one hand when revival comes people consecrate themselves to God and that notably includes their wallets on the other hand revival comes when people humble themselves and consecrate themselves to God including their wallets imagine that is that not what we long for in this area of London across our whole land and across the whole world well it begins with people among other things who honour the Lord with their wealth and with the first fruits of all their produce and their barns are filled with plenty and their vats will be bursting with wine imagine that well let's pray that we won't have to just imagine it let's pray a