

"Happiness Is . . ."
Proverbs 29:18

INTRODUCTION

Proverbs 29:18 is probably the most misinterpreted verse in the entire Bible. Robert Schuller, Tony Campolo, and Jesse Jackson are just three of the many people that I've read or heard misinterpret it. Most Christians interpret it to be about goal setting. They take it to mean that if we don't set goals or have aspirations and aims in our life, we'll languish where we are and never grow.

But that isn't what it's about and I mean at all. What it's about is God's revealed word and the consequences of keeping and not keeping it. It teaches us that happiness is keeping God's word and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

"WHERE THERE IS NO VISION"

Let's start with the Hebrew word that the KJV and my NASB translate "vision." That word is a technical term in the Old Testament that refers to the revelation that the prophets received from God. Simply put, it refers to God's revealed word, which for us is the 66 books of the Bible.

Now look at the opening line of the verse and the condition or state it describes, "*Where there is no vision.*" The wise man is talking about people rejecting God's revealed word. That means, as a practical matter, that they regard the Bible as man's word not God's. And because it is man's word, it is no more authoritative and truthful than any other writing or book is. Consequently, they don't believe in or live by it.

That does accurately describe our current culture. It is a culture in which there is no vision. Several years ago, the Barna Research Group conducted a survey that asked people to agree or disagree with the following statement: "*The Bible is the written word of God, and is totally accurate in all that it teaches.*" 42% of Americans disagreed. Of the remaining 58% who agreed, half of those think that it isn't binding on us, that we can obey or disobey it as we please.

The bottom line is that 70% of Americans think that the Bible isn't

God's authoritative word that is absolutely binding on us. 70% think it isn't something that we have to believe in and live by and so they don't. They think and live unBiblically.

That's why apologist Francis Schaeffer called our culture what he called it and I mentioned this last week. It is a "*post-Christian culture*." But I would say it differently for our purposes today. We live in a post-Biblical culture. The majority of people in it reject God's revealed word, the Bible.

"THE PEOPLE ARE UNRESTRAINED"

But notice the inevitable consequence of that. 29:18 says that "*the people are unrestrained*." The Hebrew word translated "*unrestrained*" is also used in Exodus 32:25. The Israelites were having a drunken orgy around the golden calf. Verse 25 describes their behavior this way, "*the people were out of control*." So those are the two translations of the Hebrew word, "*unrestrained*" and "*out of control*." The message then is this. Those who don't believe in and live by the Bible are unrestrained. They're out of control.

Proverbs 28:4 reveals a related consequence. It says, "*Those who forsake the law praise the wicked*." The term "*the law*" in 28:4 is synonymous with the word "*vision*" in 29:18. When people forsake God's revealed word, the Bible, they think that bad people are good and that good people are bad.

Proverbs 28:4 and 29:18 together teach us this. People who reject God's revealed word think and act against reality. They think and act as if what is good is bad and what is bad is good. As if what is profound is stupid and what is stupid is profound. As if what is admirable is shameful and what is shameful is admirable. As if what is significant is trivial and what is trivial is significant. As if what is normal is strange and what is strange is normal and so on. They're out of touch with reality in other words.

What I've just said accurately describes our current culture.

Examples abound.

Take vulgarity, for instance. To be vulgar means to be noisy and crude and to lack reason, contemplation, and any sense of the transcendent. According to the Bible and good sense, vulgarity is a bad thing. But to our popular culture, it's a good thing.

In his book The Triumph of Vulgarity, Robert Pattison points out that vulgarity is one of the philosophical underpinnings of popular culture. It is something that the masses and the intellectual elite in America actually value and pursue. Vulgarity characterizes both the content and the form of our cultural pursuits.

Rap music is a notable example of this. Rap is vulgar in both its content and form. Its creators and performers, in fact, admit that what's it's intended to be. Even if you change the content by making the words themselves inoffensive, the form itself is still vulgar. The form itself, no matter what the words are, diminishes our sensibilities.

Or take bodily functions. The surest way to get laughs from people is to mention or demonstrate bodily functions. That's why television shows and especially movies today so frequently do just that. It's crudeness for the sake of crudeness and is historically a sign of decadence and decay.

Vulgarity is just one example of what the wise man teaches in 28:4 and 29:18. Those who reject God's revealed word are unrestrained. They think and live against reality.

"KEEPS THE LAW"

So, don't reject God's revealed word. As the wise man exhorts us in 29:18, keep it instead. Knowing that the Bible is authoritative and true, think and act Biblically. That is our call. Think and act Biblically.

Thinking and acting Biblically is something that we do by deliberate choice. We don't just go with the flow of the culture like most people do. We evaluate and respond to things according to what the Bible says instead. We interpret and live our life by it.

Doing that is a simple two-step process. First, we study and learn what the Bible says about the issues of our life. And second, we act consistently with what we learn. That's all there is to it.

Take fashion for instance and the way that we dress.

Popular culture exerts more pressure in this context than almost any other, especially on women and girls. The guiding principle of cultural fashion is sexuality. "Dress the part," the culture says, and by that means as a seductive person would dress. Dress revealingly so that people look and see.

But women, your call as Christians is to keep God's word. It's to think and act Biblically. So, the first thing that you do is to study and learn what the Bible says about how to dress. You learn what it says in 1 Timothy 2:9-10 and 1 Peter 3:3-4. You learn that the guiding principle of Biblical fashion isn't sexuality but godliness. "Dress the part," the Bible says, and by that means as a godly person would dress. Dress "modestly" and "discreetly" and I'm actually quoting those passages. They teach us that a woman's dress is the mirror of her soul. Well, having learned what the Bible says, the second thing that you do is act consistently with that. You actually dress as a godly person would dress.

Do you see what you're doing here? You aren't just going with the flow of the culture like most people do. You aren't dressing how it dictates. You're dressing how the Bible dictates.

Anyway, that illustrates what it means to keep God's revealed word. We don't just go with the flow of the culture like most people do. We think and act Biblically by deliberate choice instead. We study and learn what the Bible says about the issues of our life. We then go out and act consistently with what we've learned. We interpret and live our life by the Bible.

"HAPPY IS HE"

Now, notice what the consequence of doing that is in 29:18. The wise man says, "*Happy is he who keeps the law.*"

Secular people simply do not grasp that. A man once commented to me that it must be very difficult to be a Christian. I asked him why he said that. He replied that trying to keep all of the Bible's rules and regulations must be a real burden.

But it isn't. On the contrary, happy is he or she who keeps the law. Happy is he or she who obeys God's commandments in the Bible. There's a reason for that and it's the nature of those commandments. There are two things about them that we need to know and to explain to secular people.

First, the Bible's commandments are pictures of reality. They reflect the way things are in our universe spiritually, psychologically, relationally, financially, microbiologically, and so on.

It is a psychological fact, for instance, that to touch people's property is to touch them. That's why when people are burglarized, they themselves feel violated. God gives many commandments about other people's property in the Bible – Exodus 20:15; 22:10-15; Deuteronomy 22:1-4 and so on. Those commandments reflect that basic psychological fact. To touch people property is to touch them.

There's a second thing about God's commandments that we need to know and explain. They are pictures of God Himself. They reflect the way that He is. They reflect His qualities and traits.

For example, there are certain things that God cannot do. Titus 1:2 reveals one of those. He cannot lie. There's a reason for that and that reason is His nature. God is holy and righteous and because He is, He cannot speak or act dishonestly. God gives commandments in the Bible about truth telling. He prohibits lying, perjury, and deceit of any kind. Well, those commandments, as you can see, aren't arbitrary. They're a reflection of God's own qualities or traits.

So that is the nature of God's commandments. First, they're pictures of reality. They reflect the way things are in our universe. Second, they're pictures of God Himself. They reflect the way that He is.

Thus, those who keep them are living consistently with the way

things are. And because they're living consistently with the way things are, they're happy. They are in fact the happiest of all.

A psychiatrist named David Larson wrote a fascinating article for *Christianity Today* magazine. Larson studied the empirical data from all of the studies available about spirituality and psychological health. He then shared his findings in the article. He found that spirituality enhances people's mental, emotional, and relational health. More specifically, people who know God and keep His word are healthier and happier individuals than those who don't. They're the happiest of all.

Observation and our own personal experience with God's commandments confirm this don't they? About eight years ago, for instance, I learned a Biblical command in Matthew 6 that I've shared with you. Play to an audience of One not many. I've learned to do that and I have a whole lot less tension and stress in my life now than I did then. That command is a picture of reality and of God Himself and let me tell you - I'm a much happier person now because I'm keeping it.

CONCLUSION

That reminds me in closing of something Jesus said in Luke 11:27-28. In verse 27, a woman cried out to Jesus, "*Happy is the womb that bore you and the breasts at which you nursed.*" She was saying that being the mother of Messiah was the happiest of all experiences. But Jesus disagreed. "*On the contrary, happy are those who hear the word of God and observe it.*" I just love that message. Keeping God's revealed word brings greater happiness and joy than being the mother of Messiah.

Years ago, the *Peanuts* cartoon had a running story line called *Happiness is . . .* It would be something different each time. Happiness is the smell of puppy's breath, the last day of school, a mother's hug and so on. But none of those things is what happiness ultimately is. Ultimately, happiness is keeping God's word.