

Connecting the Dots

Understanding Your World:

Proverbs 9:10

June 20, 2004

Little Nick came back from Sunday School having learned how Eve came from Adam's rib. That night Nick woke up in bed with a side ache, and his mother found him whimpering. "What's the matter, honey?" she asked. Nick answered, "I think I'm having a wife."

Nick shows us that it is one thing to know some facts, but it is quite another to understand what they mean. Two weeks ago we looked at the pivotal concern in grasping facts. Solomon's first proverb declares, "*Fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.*" You don't begin to grasp the facts until God is in the equation.

When I first used a computer, I didn't know its parts, functions or operation. Instruction, both verbal and written, and observation was necessary. In the same way, God's instruction is necessary for us to grasp the facts about ourselves and our world. "*Fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.*"

Solomon went even further. In Proverbs 9:10 he wrote:

Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Knowledge of the Holy One results in understanding.

It is one thing to identify the parts of a computer. It is another to use it for what it is designed. It is one thing to identify all the dots on a children's menu. It is another to connect them and identify the pattern for which they were printed. Grasping the facts is one thing. Connecting the dots is another. The first we call knowledge. The second is wisdom. Most people collect lots of facts, but the wise understand how those facts fit and what they mean.

For many years I knew the facts about the original sin of Adam and Eve. I knew the facts about the two trees. I knew there was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. I knew the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was forbidden. I knew the facts. I didn't, however, connect the dots. Why was knowledge of good and evil, moral knowledge, forbidden? I knew that when Adam and Eve took the fruit, their eyes were open and they felt shame. I didn't know what that has to do with us today. Only in the past few years have I connected more of the dots. I know now that since Adam and Eve's decision, all humanity became moral judges seeing life through a moral prism. Until that time, Adam and Eve focused on God's will. When Jesus lived, he focused on God's will rather than on what is right and wrong. He even rebuked a man who called him good teacher saying that only God is good.

When we focus on God's will, we depend on a relationship with God. When we focus on good and evil, we study a pattern of dots and attempt to connect actions with consequences. The problem is that we don't see all the dots and we don't know how they are all connected.

Do some of you remember the first diet sodas? We've known for a long time that obesity harms our bodies and shortens our lives. We could connect those dots. When diet sodas first developed, so many weight watchers were grateful. However, the diet ingredients were cyclamates and saccharin. Testing of these ingredients produced cancer in laboratory animals. What was thought to be good turned out to be harmful.

We live in a big, complex world that was created by an infinite God. We are oblivious to so many consequences of our actions that when we render moral judgments and even opinions about ourselves, we make a mess. We are not connecting all the dots. Critical facts are missing.

However, the problems with our judgment are not just the result of this world's complexity. Something evil interferes with our judgment so that we gravitate to views that

cripple and harm the people and world we love. God said that very thing through the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah wrote:

We are all infected and impure with sin. When we proudly display our righteous deeds, we find they are but filthy rags. (Isaiah 64:6, NLT)

I remember a young boy who started his first job at a drive-in restaurant. Told by the owner that he had been given the highest recommendation ever, he wanted to fulfill those expectations in the worst way. He was so anxious to do well. When the owner told him to mop the floor and that the water pail was through the doorway, the boy hurried to the task. He put his mop into the pail and discovered it was a grease bucket. Fear flashed through his body. He spotted the correct bucket nearby and thrust the mop into it. Now the mop, water and water bucket were greasy, except that he didn't realize how to fix the problem. Wringing the mop, he tried a small section of the floor. Changing water and even mops didn't help. Soon fellow workers were skating on the floors, pushing off counters and sliding to their work stations as the tiny film of grease was spread by his efforts. When the boy finally faced the owner, the owner shook his head and said that he had spent hours scrubbing the floor on his hands and knees to clean up the mess. Shame and embarrassment stung the young boy's skin. He could not explain himself to the owner or anyone else. As the boy witnessed the radical change in his boss's attitude, the teasing of coworkers and the laughter of family and friends, he began to believe that he was dumb and somehow defective. He had a lot of facts, but was missing some critical ones. He was not connecting all the dots.

The young boy's problem was not just inexperience with grease. His pride stoked the fires of fear in his soul so that he didn't think calmly or even ask for help. Your and my judgments are affected by fear and pride. Listen to King David in Psalm 36:

Sin whispers to the wicked, deep within their hearts. They have no fear of God to restrain them. In their blind conceit, they cannot see how wicked they really are. (Psalms 36:1-2, NLT)

It is difficult to connect dots when sin whispers to your heart. It is hard to accurately assess yourself when you're blind to the conceit that informs your thinking. Sin offers a kind of wisdom. Sin seeks to tutor us. James, the brother of our Lord Jesus, wrote:

If you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. (James 3:14-15, NIV)

The Bible speaks of a tempter who corrupts our desires, poisons our attitude and hinders our perspective. He offers us a peculiar understanding that dismisses and minimizes many consequences to our attitudes and actions.

The remedy is not merely the fear of God. People believe in many gods. Most are fashioned after ourselves. Most gods are summations of our ideals. There are more Jesus figures floating around in our culture today than Toms and Sues. People contend that Jesus would do this or Jesus would do that. In contrast, the Bible says, ***“Knowledge of the Holy One results in understanding.”*** The Bible says “knowledge” not “conjecture!”

When Solomon writes that fear of the Lord is the beginning of both knowledge and wisdom, the term “Lord” is not generic. “Lord” is a substitute, out of reverence for God’s name, for the Hebrew “Yahweh”. Most English Bibles honor the Hebrew tradition and substitute LORD in capital letters. Some offer the transliteration “Jehovah”. Literally, the Bible says that fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom. It is fear of this particular God who revealed himself and made a covenant with the Hebrews. Accordingly, it isn’t our notion of God that gives us wisdom. It is knowledge of the God who has revealed himself that brings perspective and understanding to individuals and entire societies.

Without God's revelation and word, we are lost and blind. However, God in covenant with the Jews offers us divine wisdom. God's word not only supplies crucial facts; it connects the dots. It gives us wisdom that is unaffected by our fears, pride, greed or lust. Fear of this covenant God means that you and I embrace the special relationship he offers us. We enter into a relationship where his word becomes our life. The amazing thing is that his word is not confined to the pages of the Bible. His Word visited us in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. His Word can dwell in our hearts and rule our affections, attitudes and actions.

It was the Word of God, Jesus in the Spirit, that made his home in the heart of that young boy and healed him from the self-loathing that resulted from mistakes in that restaurant and sins in his life. The boy blinded to his pride tried to live up to an unattainable, false image. In his fall he acquired an equally false image. Some may think that young boys mature out of those attitudes. On the contrary, I see grown men haunted by those gnawing notions and compensating for them. Some are driven to high achievements as they attempt to prove their worth... even to seeking the presidency of the United States. Some develop a fortress of conceit fending off every critique. Extremely defensiveness, they become difficult to live and work with. Others lower their goals in life and seek safety free from risk. They shut down and live almost apologetically.

Entire societies become paralyzed by failures and accept destructive attitudes and actions that cripple their potential and thwart their purpose. In such a complex world and with such evil forces at work, it is the fear of Yahweh, trust in his word and work, that brings light and healing. It is Jesus that fully expresses what God says to this world. It is his word and belief in him that brings life to an individual and life to all nations. So hear this call of God:

Now then, you kings, act wisely! Be warned, you rulers of the earth! Serve the LORD with reverent fear, and rejoice with trembling. Submit to God's royal son. (Psalms 2:10-12, NLT)