

“What is the Best Advice You Have Ever Been Given?”

Proverbs 4: 10-15

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Recently, I was watching a talk show on CNN hosted by Steve Scully. He was interviewing Governor Jim Gilmore of Virginia and asked him, “What is the best advice you have ever been given?” I don’t even remember Governor Gilmore’s answer, because I started thinking about how I would answer that question.

Before I answer that question for you, let me tell you how healthy I think it is to learn from others. I have a philosophy that everybody I meet can teach me something and I try to let him or her. I think one of the most admirable traits a person can have is to be teachable.

I think scripture supports this, especially in the book of Proverbs. It is saturated with the words “listen” and “pay attention.” It reminds me of a modern proverb I heard some time ago, “Anyone can learn from his own mistakes. Wise is the person who can learn from the mistakes of others.”

Having said this, what is the best advice I have ever been given? As you would expect, I cannot narrow it down to one. Let me share three with you.

“Be yourself.” I received this advice at the age of eighteen soon after announcing my call to the ministry. It came from Bob Martin, a minister who is a friend of my family and was our pastor when I was a child. He had moved from our little town but was back for a visit. He heard of my call to the ministry and had only one piece of advice for me when he saw me. “Be yourself,” he said, “be as normal and natural as you can around people. Don’t try to live up to everybody’s expectations of you. Just be yourself.”

I wish I could tell you that I have always done that for the last thirty-three years, but I can’t. I have a bit of a “child-pleasing” personality and like to meet others’ expectations. At times, I have subdued my opinions or pursued someone else’s agenda because I thought that was what I was supposed to do as a Baptist preacher. Everytime I have done so, though, I have had a knot in my stomach or lump in my throat. I knew immediately that I was not heeding my former pastor’s advice.

Last month, I read Parker Palmer’s book, Let Your Life Speak. He tells a story that spoke to me as few have. In it, Rabbi Zusya says, “In the coming world, they will not ask me, ‘Why were you not Moses?’ Instead, they will ask, ‘Why were you not Zusya?’ ”

Palmer goes on to say that it is possible to live a life other than your own. You can live a life based upon others’ expectations. Doing so, however, will lead to failure and great damage. Listen to your heart. Look at what is needed in this world and what skills you have to offer. If you try to do something noble that has nothing to do with who you are, you may look good to others and yourself for a while, but you will become frustrated as you exceed your limits and abilities.

All of us are created in God’s image and each of us is unique. This means if we are not genuine and authentic, a portion of God’s image that the world needs to see and know may never be revealed. Be yourself. It is the best gift you can give yourself and others.

Work hard. This advice came from United States Senator John Sherman Cooper. He was a member of my previous church, First Baptist of Somerset, Kentucky.

Senator Cooper was a remarkable man. He was involved in national politics for over forty years. In addition to being one of Kentucky's Senators for over twenty years, he helped form the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as an assistant to Secretary of State Dean Acheson, was Ambassador to India, served on the Warren Commission that investigated the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, was the first Ambassador to East Germany and was a delegate to the United Nations. He died in February, 1991, and I helped to conduct his funeral at Arlington Cemetery in Washington, D.C.

During the last ten years of his life, Senator Cooper and I corresponded frequently. When he visited Somerset, he would occasionally drop by my office and talk. One day as we were chatting, I asked what advice he would give to a young preacher. He looked at me and said, "Work hard. Time goes so quickly. When you get old, you will not ask 'What did I do, but what could I have done?'"

I have been trying to heed his advice. Like you, I want to make a difference in this world. I know that will only come with hard work and lots of it.

I recall a prayer of a lady in her church that has meant a lot to me down through the years. She concluded that prayer by saying, "And Lord, let me come into heaven dragging tired!" That's become my prayer, too.

You can be your worst enemy or your best friend. My friend, Mr. Ward Correll, gave this advice to me. Actually, I had a hard time selecting merely one piece of advice from him because I have written about two pages of proverbs he has shared with me over the years.

Mr. Correll is a businessman and grass roots philosopher. Outside of family, he has taught me more about life than anyone. This advice is one of his best, though.

It is true that I can be my worst enemy or best friend. I can discipline myself to have a positive attitude, eat right, exercise, rest, choose good friends, develop a close relationship with God, avoid temptation, read good books, live by the Golden Rule, eat chocolate in moderation and wear my seat belt or I can throw discipline out the window. The choice is mine and so are the consequences. It's up to me.

It is sad when someone who has made poor choices wants to find someone to blame. Their search usually takes them everywhere except a mirror.

A Christian counselor taught me years ago that no one makes me do anything. Others may influence and even persuade me, but the final decision comes down to one person and we know who that is. So, if you want good things to happen, make wise choices. This is not a guarantee that good will always occur, but it is a sure bet that bad will follow unwise choices.

If I can be my worst enemy or best friend, why would I choose the former? With God's help, I don't have to.

What's the best advice you have been given? Have you taken it to heart and heeded it? Have you written it down so you can pass it along to others?

Who is trying to give you good advice now that you are ignoring? You might want to reconsider. Remember what Solomon wrote, "**Hold on to instruction, do not let it go; guard it well, for it is your life**" Proverbs 4:13.