

“The Principle of the Path”

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Kindle notes by Dave Kraft

Perhaps you’ve heard someone make the argument that experience is the best teacher. That may be true, but that’s only half the truth. Experience is often a brutal teacher. One gets to the place one wants to be the same way one got to the place one didn’t want to be—by putting one foot in front of the other and moving in a specific direction. I’ve talked to many individuals who want to discuss their problems. But they don’t really have problems. They have chosen to live in the wrong direction. They don’t need a solution. They need a new direction. At some point in his story, you think, he should have seen that coming!

He should have known where those decisions were going to take him. In other words, he should have been able to predict his current destination based on the path he was traveling. That brings us to the principle of the path. Here it is: Direction—not intention—determines our destination. Current direction will determine your destination. And like every principle, you can leverage this one to your advantage or ignore it to your disadvantage. Direction—not intentions, hopes, dreams, prayers, beliefs, intellect, or education—determines destination. Simply put you and I will win or lose in life by the paths we choose.

You don’t have problems to fix; you have directions that need to change. Like the naive young man in Proverbs, the paths they choose eventually bring them to a destination that is entirely different from the one they intended. You should have seen this coming. And what you couldn’t see coming you should have been prepared for. We should break the habit of drawing a circle around individual decisions and events and dismissing them as isolated occurrences. These are steps; steps that lead somewhere. Because life is connected, prudent people look as far down the road as possible when making decisions. “In light of my past experience, and my future hopes and dreams, what’s the wise thing to do?”

The primary difference between the prudent and the simple is not what they see but how they respond to what they see. The prudent see danger and take refuge. The simple see danger and keep going. Forgiveness and consequences are two different things. One does not override the other. The prudent see danger and take refuge. That is, they do something about it. As we stated earlier, they act on what they see. Prudent people know that it’s what you do that makes the difference, not what you see. Seeing danger and doing nothing doesn’t accomplish anything. The prudent don’t react to what they see in their current situations. They react to what they see on the horizon. You look a bit silly now because you are taking steps to avoid something later.

To the wise, later is now. So I continue to pray every day, “Lord, help us to see trouble coming long before it gets here, and give us the wisdom to know what to do and the courage to do it. Our problem stems from the fact that we are not on a truth quest. That is, we don’t wake up every morning with a burning desire to know what’s true, what’s right, what’s honorable. We are on a happiness quest. We want to be—as in feel—happy. And our quest for happiness often trumps our appreciation for and pursuit of what’s true. When happiness points in one direction while wisdom, truth, integrity, and common sense point in another, that’s when really smart people start doing really stupid things. That’s when the happiness quest becomes dangerous.

This is the underlying reason we intentionally choose paths that will not take us to where we ultimately want to go, regardless of our SAT scores. The problem with the happiness quest is that happy today does not necessarily equal happy tomorrow. Decisions and experiences that fill me with happiness today may very well fill me with regret tomorrow. The answer is, when we stand at the crossroads between prudent and happy, we lie to ourselves. We turn into dishonest salespeople. We begin selling ourselves on what we want to do rather than what we ought to do.

Self-deception is easy when emotions run high. And nothing runs them higher than love. Our problem is rarely a lack of information or insight. It’s not that we fail to see trouble brewing on the horizon. It’s a lack of honesty. We have a hard time leveling with ourselves. We deceive ourselves about why we choose the things we choose. But what this verses (Proverbs 3:5,6) actually asserts is that God will make the best path obvious. If we trust with all our hearts, refuse to lean into our limited understanding, and submit every aspect of our lives to him, the best path will become unmistakably clear.

Divine direction begins with unconditional submission. Not information. So, instead of sending us a matrix for decision making or a GPS, he’s asked us to trust him. To lean on him. To acknowledge his right to rule. And in exchange, he will make our paths clear. When Solomon opted for what made sense culturally, he leaned away from what made sense relationally. Submission—not talent, information, or insight—is the key to good decision making. In order to make the best decisions now, we need much more than information, common sense, or conventional wisdom.

We need God. We need to live with a posture of dependency. We need to acknowledge him in all our ways. Your decision-making environments are not emotionally neutral. One never accomplishes the will of God by breaking the law of God, violating the principles of God, or ignoring the wisdom of God. So I want to encourage you to apply these three questions to every option that comes your way:

1. Does this option violate God’s law?
2. Does this option violate a principle?
3. In light of the story I want to tell, what is the wise thing to do?

You would do well to stop and reflect upon where you got your life maps to begin with. Did you consciously choose them? Did you inherit them? Did you pick up a set of maps as a reaction to the way you were raised? Are you just moving with the herd?

Did you seek out advice from someone older and wiser? Whose maps are you borrowing from? Whose pattern are you following? Whose journey are you emulating? One of the most crucial decisions you will make is the decision regarding whose map you are going to follow. Successful people aren't successful because they knew everything they needed to know. They are successful because they were willing to apply the lessons they learned from others. Are there exceptions? Of course there are. But planning to be an exception is not much of a plan. Anyone who knows he doesn't know but won't go to those who do know has a problem. Success of all types is intoxicating. And intoxicated individuals are not the best decision makers. Asking doesn't mean you lack wisdom—it's evidence of wisdom. Successful people know what they don't know, and they are quick to go to people who do. What captures our attention influences our direction. Attention, direction, destination. That's the principle of the path in three words.

And as your attention goes, so goes your life. If attention determines direction, and we can choose what or who gets our attention, then that gives us a lot of leverage concerning our future. Whereas emotion fuels the things that grab our attention, intentionality fuels our decision to give certain things our attention. If you are like me, the problem is not a lack of understanding as much as it is a lack of application. We don't drift in good directions. We discipline and prioritize ourselves there. Attention determines direction, and direction determines destination. As your attention goes, so goes your life. So pay careful attention to what you are paying attention to. Pay attention to the things that are competing for your attention. Pause before devoting your attention to anything. And devote special attention to those things that deserve your attention.