

PROVERBS

“Where did my character run off to?”

I was a van driver this past summer for a ministry to youth in Tulsa Oklahoma. Every afternoon I would walk into the office to get the key for the van. However, since the van I drove was often used by others, the key typically would not be put back in its place. I would often say something like, “Where did the key run off to?” But of course keys don’t run off by themselves—people lose keys. If someone neglected the key, it was nowhere to be found. Only when it was habitually returned to its proper place could it be found when it was needed.

When something is neglected, it is overlooked and forgotten. You can probably think of some things you used to be able to do that have long since been neglected and “departed” from you. If I attempted to play violin pieces formerly committed to memory, only a few squeaky notes would be remembered. Recently I heard an older man say, “Once an athlete, always an athlete,” but I’m not convinced. Aging athletes who have neglected to train have had much of their skill “depart” from them.

Now, in the case of violin playing and athletic endeavors, does the skill actually “depart”? You could say so, but only in the same way that you say, “Where did the keys run off to?” The imagery of “departing” that we find in Proverbs 3:3 is that of *anthropomorphism*—a poetic technique that attributes human characteristics

to something inanimate. This technique adds vividness to the truth of the proverb. In the same way, you could say that the *neglect* on your part looks like *departing* on the part of what you neglected.

Solomon admonishes his son not to neglect two important character qualities: mercy and truth. In this case, these are synonyms for kindness and faithfulness. These qualities are urged to be pursued diligently, by intentionally keeping them before his thoughts. Solomon says to “bind them around your neck” and “write them on the tablet of your heart.” These are actions that allude to the keeping of the law. Deuteronomy 11:18-22 speaks of the habitual remembering of the law in order to keep it. God said, “You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes” (11:18). The verses following this command for Israel to preserve God’s law in their hearts and souls describe the rich reward of God’s favor and blessing for doing so. This is the principle of Proverbs 3:3-4 with regard to kindness and faithfulness, and the promise given is that of favor before God and man. Character does not “run off”. It is preserved and improved by habitually remembering its importance, diligently practicing its qualities, and eagerly anticipating its reward.



LOOK CLOSELY

observation

Proverbs 3:3-4

³Let not mercy and truth forsake you; Bind them around your neck, Write them on the tablet of your heart, ⁴And so find favor and high esteem In the sight of God and man.

Mark the words “mercy” and “truth” in v 3.

Mark all the actions given in v 3.

Mark the locations for binding and writing in v 3.

Mark the phrases “find favor” and “high esteem” in v 4.

Identification Key

Develop your own key for identifying the various words and phrases in the text provided. Use different colored pencils, circles, boxes, underlining, etc., but be consistent from week-to-week.



THINK CAREFULLY

interpretation

Mercy and **truth** refer to God’s character which is reflected in those who are faithful to obey God. Here **mercy** carries the general idea of loyalty which is demonstrated in loving-kindness. When it is used of God it refers to His loyal love which endures forever for His covenant people, Israel.

The Hebrew word for **truth** refers to certainty. When used of man, it has the idea of truthfulness or faithfulness. Those who have character that is faithful and loyal are those who seek to do what is good.

The word **forsake** here means to abandon or depart from something. The prohibition is against allowing mercy and truth to abandon one’s life.

Mercy and truth are to be bound around the *neck*. The word **bind** refers to tying or lashing one thing to another. The idea here is that the character qualities of mercy and truth are to be qualities that are visible. Binding them around the neck indicates the permanent demonstration of this character in one’s life.

The admonition, to “**write them on the tablet of your heart,**” indicates the internal place where mercy and truth are developed. The verb **write**, means to record or list. But the tablet upon which mercy and truth are to be written is not an external tablet, it is an internal one—the tablet of one’s heart.

The word **favor** means to be gracious or show favor toward.

The phrase **high esteem** is to be understood as good understanding. Before God, all are perfectly understood, but the idea is that God values or esteems highly what He understands about the person possessing His character.

Describe how a character quality can 'forsake' a person.

How might a person keep these character qualities from forsaking him?

How can someone 'bind' and 'write' the qualities of mercy and truth in their life?

The imagery in this passage is similar to Deuteronomy 6:4-9. Read this passage and describe how these two qualities might be a summary of God's law.

Read Proverbs 14:22. In what ways does this verse shed light on our passage?

Read Psalm 100:5; 106:1; 107:1; 118:1-4, 29. What aspect of God's mercy (loving-kindness) stand out to you in these passages?

What light might this shed on God's desire for His people?

Solomon says that the character of mercy and truth will be rewarded with "favor and high esteem in the sight of God and man." Describe why this would be a desirable reward?

In your own words, write a brief summary of what Solomon is seeking to communicate to his son.



RESPOND WISELY

application

What stood out most to you about this passage?

How can you keep the inner qualities that constitute good character visible in your life?

List some ways in which this might affect your relationships with others.

How can a young person seek to develop the character qualities of mercy (loving-kindness) and truth (faithfulness)?

How might a parent help their children develop these character qualities?

Discuss with your family or another believer the importance of mercy (loving-kindness) and truth (faithfulness) in the life of a Christian?