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Presentation Transcript
Lean Not on Your Own Understanding
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The title of this presentation is *Lean Not on Your Own Understanding*, taken from Proverbs 3:5, which says: **Proverbs 3:5** – *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.*

This is one of the hardest things to do. It's just natural for us to form opinions and then go forward based on what we see and observe and believe. God tells us we should trust in Him, and rely on His instruction, and then proceed. And He says this over and over in so many different ways it staggers the mind. He links it to trust in this Proverb. And in other scriptures, he links it to humility, faith, wisdom, royalty, all of which are bedrock characteristics that God wants to develop in us.

The first thing Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount, when He, first of all, taught the disciples how to be successful with God, was to be poor in spirit. In other words, rely not on our own understanding, because we're blind beggars when it comes to the things of God. How can we know anything about God except He reveal it to us? Only God can illuminate us on that topic. So, this is an important topic – not only for our spiritual development, but for the preservation and quality of our lives now. God has created some things into the universe that are not immediately apparent to people. And so, according to the way things work in the world, we need to rely on God to teach us how to do that.

So, today, not only are we going to consider the importance of leaning not on our own understanding – and here's the kicker now – but how to do it more effectively as well.

Let's start with this: What is a fool? Have you ever been called a fool by someone? It's an insult. And why is that? Well, primarily because we don't think we are fools. There was that famous study, some time ago now, where 95% of all college freshmen saw themselves in the top 95% of all college freshmen. We tend to overestimate our own abilities – at least, some of the time. So,

what percentage of time would that be? Would it be 95%? And it gets even worse when you think about what God knows. Let's look at this scripture: 1 Corinthians 2:14.

1 Corinthians 2:14 – *The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.* Just what we said earlier.

They think that Christians – the natural person, the unconverted person, who doesn't know God – thinks that things we think about are foolishness – that we're fools. We can be the smartest person in the world and still not understand how to live God's way. Only God can show us that. And when God tells us we're foolish, He's not insulting us. He's educating us about the state that we're in – physical and not spiritual – with no way to access spiritual knowledge on our own. And yet, it's so easy for us to go it alone without consulting God in our choices about life.

I learned something about myself years ago. I talk about this a lot in my presentations, because it illustrates an important point. But I started to wonder why I was able to quickly tackle some jobs, tasks and projects, and yet in found myself procrastinating on others. I was confused about what was the difference between them. And, as I focused on the issue, I realized I had procrastinated when I did not know to do. So, I would look at a project I had been avoiding, looking for the things in the project I did not know how to do, and one by one, we searched them until I did know what to do about them. And after that, instead of procrastinating, I found myself, most of the time, eager to get started.

I remember years ago I was building an off-road vehicle. I wanted to re-gear the differentials in it so my rig would have more power at low speed, but I kept procrastinating doing that. And, after I read up on it, I discovered that the process was not complicated, but required experience. At one point, I needed to mesh the new gears I was installing for the right amount of contact between them. One way to do that was to cover them with grease, turn them and look at the pattern in the grease on the gears to see if the gears were meshing properly. I realized that would be tricky because I was looking at a fuzzy picture in a manual that really did give me enough information. I couldn't see it clearly. Most auto shops are kind of dark, and you take a picture, and it looks dark too, so you can't see them very well in a lot of cases. So, you might ask, "What good was your research then?" Well, it helped me in that, in this case, I needed help. I didn't know that before. It got down to a very few things that I needed help with to do that project. So, I called a buddy who had done this before, and he came over and showed me how the grease pattern was supposed to look by doing it for me. Since those days, we've had much better help than the manuals we used to have available to us – with all that poor picture quality. We have YouTube today and a host of visual aides to help us research and learn. And we also have Google, where you can learn anything, except for the truth about politics, health matters and religion. And now, we're also on the verge of AI. And that's going to figure out what to do for us, and even find the research to get us on the way. So, there's never been a time in human history where learning what to do, on almost anything, was so readily available.

You would think that the habit of researching before proceeding would be a completely ingrained habit by now. And for many, it is, except for one area. Let's look at that area in scripture again:

1 Corinthians 2:14 – *The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.*

So, Google and AI won't help us understand what God has for us. Google can help us look up what God says about any given topic, but it won't help us understand it. Only God can do that. So, what does God call us if we don't check in with Him for help with spiritually related issues? Yeah, He calls us a fool – just like unconverted people call us fools, but for a different reason.

Think about it. The real ballgame is not money, or power, or popularity, or office, or ordination, or anything, but one thing. And that is eternal life with God. That's the only thing that really matters. Because that is the goal that God has set for us and what He offers us – something that everybody has built into them to want – eternal life. And the one being who knows everything about that – including what we need to gain that victory – is God. And He also knows all about us – what's good for us and what's bad. He knows what each of us responds to. He knows what we need and what we don't. He's way past Google! AI may become smarter than we are, but it will never approach the power of God's mind.

Isn't it way past foolish to avoid consulting God about how to live our lives? I've heard it said – and have said it before also – that leaning not on our own understanding is one of the great spiritual paradoxes. But really it isn't actually. It makes perfect sense. It's only a paradox if we don't get it.

Now, when we finally become humble enough – poor enough in spirit – to realize we need God to guide us through life, then we're trying to rely on God. And we run into a disturbing reality when we do that. You know that expression, "You can do it the hard way or the easy way?" Well, maybe there isn't any easy way with this. Finding out what God wants us to do is often *not* easy, even when we are humble enough to ask Him.

Before a person gets married, is it wise to ask God for His guidance? I mean, He knows all of it, so He would know if we're compatible or not, wouldn't He? Before we buy property, is it wise to ask God for wisdom about how to go about doing that, or, if we *should* do it or not? Should we ask God to bless the purchase? Before going into business with someone, is it wise to ask God for guidance? I mean, He would know the outcome better than we would. Before deciding what to believe about God, it would only make sense to ask Him to explain Himself to us. More people have poured more concrete around their ideas about God than just about any other subject. And yet, the only we can get information about Him is through what He tells us. Whether we should buy that new car or truck...should ask God to protect us in the purchase? You can buy a nice-looking vehicle, but what if the transmission is ready to fall out on the

ground? You can't tell that by looking at it. So, can we ask God for guidance there – if it would be a wise thing to do? While we're raising our children, we should ask God to help us raise them according to *His* way, instead of from our baggage-laden, distorted inclinations and personalities. If I had done more of that, I would have been a lot better parent. I know that.

Now, to know what God wants us to do comes mostly out of a very thick book, written in many languages by people of many different cultures and customs over thousands of years. Consequently, it is not easy to understand what the Bible means about what it says. And sometimes, what God wants doesn't come across clearly in the translation from ancient language to our modern language. So, to understand the Bible, as it's written, takes a lot of work. And even then, while we're trying with all our might to be led by God – if we are – it often seems that all the examples and explanations given don't quite fit our situations. Have you ever run into that? And that forces us to guess, sometimes, what God wants us to do.

So, is that fair? He tells us that we're fools if we don't go to Him for help. And then, when we ask for it, He only answers our questions about what to do with some vague comments, quite often. So, after all His assertions about following Him, sometimes He says to us, after we've asked, "Well, why don't you try it and see what happens?" It makes us wonder if God isn't deliberately making it hard on us. Bingo! That's what's happening! God has the ability to be completely clear about anything, and yet, quite often, it's difficult for us to try to get a handle on what He's saying. He's built that into the creation – access to all sorts of physical knowledge, but without spiritual understanding, and then covering that over with a blanket of randomness. He *wants* us to struggle to learn. Because we have to struggle, that means He wants us to struggle to learn. He's not making it easy on us. And why is that? Well, there are lots of reasons for that. And, amazingly, they're all good for us. Making things hard tests and builds our faith. And making a choice, and living with the consequences, helps us to understand how He works, and how the world works, and how we work.

Have you ever tried to get it right and made a big mistake in spite of your efforts, suffered a consequence, and then later saw that you learned something that changed your life in a good way from it? When Elaine and I moved to Nevada a few years ago, we moved out of an area where housing prices had never kept up with the prices in other areas. And we also had lived in a house that, when we moved there, was more or less our dream home. And when we sold our house and moved out, we could not afford to buy an equivalent home where we were going, because prices were much higher there. Then we hired a realtor and we looked at a couple houses that were slightly out of our price range. They were out of our price range. We couldn't afford them. And they were shacks. The thought of living in them made me cringe. You would too. I'm not exaggerating. We wound up buying a huge house, though, at a ridiculously low price. We called it a miracle, because it was the only thing we could afford – much better than the shacks we looked at. But we didn't like this home. But we were forced by desperation into it. The low price came because the house was in need of a lot of work and because it was laid out in a weird way – unappealing to us and most others. I never liked the way the house was laid out. For example, the

front door was at the back of the house. Can you imagine that? All you could see from the street was a big three-car garage. And I wondered why God put us in that weird house, right up until we sold it for a huge profit – but after we fixed it up – and were able to rent the house that we wanted for much less money than we thought. Oh! That’s what He was doing! Now we know why I had to buy a house I didn’t like.

We just can’t figure God out. We just have to struggle along and go with Him. “Hide and watch,” He tells us. He didn’t say it in those words, that’s in essence what He said. “Stand still.” He knows what He’s doing, even when we don’t. So, that’s important for us to understand – that the difficulty in following what God wants and understanding His will us specifically, is hard. And that’s good for us.

Also, besides God making it difficult for us, there’s another issue that clouds the process. And that is, even after we’ve asked God what we should do, there’s that thing, you know – what *we* want to do – sort of like Tevye in *The Fiddler on the Roof*. I don’t know if you remember that musical. Tevye was a poor dairy man in Russia. He was Jewish. And he sings this song, *If I Were a Rich Man*. He’s tired of being poor. He’s getting older. He has a big family. And he’s struggling to make a living. He knows the biblical admonition about coveting money. So, he says, in this song, in an effort to ease into what he really wants – at one point – he asks God if He would perhaps bless him with a small fortune.

So, what *we* want – should we buy that new car? Oh, yeah! Should we take that round-the-world cruise? Well, let’s go! Should we quit our job because we don’t like the boss? We would love to deprive him of our glorious presence, wouldn’t we? Then he’d be sorry. Should we eat that doughnut, or how about a bag of them? The things we want to do sometimes, in our own minds, they overshadow what God wants. Sometimes, those are the reasons we can’t hear Him talking to us. So, Jeremiah 17:9 says:

Jeremiah 17:9 – *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?*

So, if we go around making decisions based on our heart, things are not going to turn out well for us. The example of a new car: Is it a blessing from God? Or, is it a way to express our narcissism? Or, is it a financial error that’s going to harm us later. Why do I want to do it?

I knew a man once who had a Chevy Belair with over half a million miles on it. Now, these days, it’s not uncommon to hear of such high mileages – maybe not that high, but certainly a couple hundred thousand – but back then, Chevy was cranking out some real junk and they had strong competition from Ford. Both of them were bested in the junk category by Chrysler. Oops! There’s a personal opinion of mine that sneaked in there. Maybe you might not have an opinion on my opinion, if you didn’t live during the sixties. But it had an original engine, transmission, upholstery and paint. With still have a million miles on it, it looked great! Everything else had been replaced, but it was still going strong. And I asked him if he had an explanation for why his

car had run so long. Other than regular oil changes, he said, “When I bought the car, we were hard-pressed financially. I told God that if He would give me a new dependable car, I would use it to help the church. So, I have been to lots of basketball and volleyball tournaments, hauling kids in my car. I’ve taken many people to church who were way out of my way. I think God heard my request and saw my promise fulfilled, and I haven’t had a car payment in so long I don’t even remember what a car payment was like.”

So, God says in Psalms 51:10:

Psalms 51:10 – *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.*

So, if we want to be blessed by God, we have to do things for the right reasons. And when we do that, then God *is* going to take care of us.

Sometimes, seeking God’s will exercised our honesty and builds one of the characteristics we must have to become eternal. So, thank you, God!

As I was preparing this presentation, I had a section called *Strategies*. And as I looked at the various strategies I wanted to mention, I saw that they were all just different ways of listening to God. Duh! If we want to know what God has to say, we need to *listen* to Him.

Now, historically, most of us have been taught to talk to God – prayer – but not so much about how to listen. And, if we ask God to show us who we should marry, for example, He knows our intention is to follow His will – at least, that’s what we’re hoping. So, that’s good, isn’t it, if we do that. But it’s not until we stop talking and start listening that we have any chance of getting an answer, because God is polite. He tends not to interrupt. If we do all the talking, we’re not going to learn much from it.

So, how do you listen to God? Now, I didn’t put “listen to the radio” here – because that’s how I first started listening to God – was listening to the radio. I heard a radio program where they discussed God in a way that I’d never heard before. I’m still in tune with that station, by the way.

So, one obvious one is to study the Bible for answers to our questions. Now, I heard about a man once who prayed to have a fancy car. And because he’d read the book of Proverbs, he didn’t go into debt for it. Instead, he saved his money and he bought it for cash. And he probably congratulated himself for saving up, because it did save him a lot of money. He didn’t have to pay any interest. He just had to wait. But he didn’t have long to enjoy his fancy car. Because, in order to save the money to buy his dream car, he shorted his family on the necessities that they needed. And he put himself ahead of his family. His children and wife saw this and they disrespected him for it. He did not follow the example of Christ in sacrificial love. You know, the shallowest reading of the book of Proverbs would have steered him away from that poor choice. I’m sure he did read the book of Proverbs, and he did learn from it not to go into debt for

something, but his reading of Proverbs – probably many times – was good, but he still couldn't hear God talking to him, because he wasn't listening. He was leaning more on his own desires and understanding. He *wanted* that car. So, he didn't hear the parts about taking care of your family.

Okay, so that's one way to listen to God – to study the Bible for answers. Even though we said that's hard, if we're willing to put in the work, God, going to have honor for that. If we honor Him, He's going to honor us. That's a promise. So, that example I just told you about – the man who had the Chevy – that's a good example. And the example I just gave you about this man – that's a bad example. And Jesus tells us many, many stories in the Bible about people, some of whom God did want, and others who did not. So, He also pointed out people to His disciples who were setting good and bad examples for them. The good ones would be like, "Be like this little child," or He pointed out the widow who gave everything she had as her offering. So, watching the people around us, then, gives us an opportunity...they're all potential learning opportunities for us – even the bad ones. Personally, I think I learned how to be a minister from the brethren in my congregation past. I've seen some godliness lived out right before my eyes, demonstrating godly characteristics I did not have but needed. And God talks to us through our interactions with people who are trying to live godly. And He also shows us what not to do through the bad ones. We often don't have what we see in others, because we have been going on our own understanding about how to proceed, and ignoring the good examples He's been running by us all the time.

So, the next time God floats a good example by us, it's good to recognize it and try to get in sync with it – leaning on God and thank Him for the good example – instead of letting us blindly follow our own way. Well, He will let us do that, but He's going to send us signals. So, we need to be ready to hear them.

I mentioned *standing still* – is the third one then. Let's say you catch yourself judging someone you know in your congregation. You disrespect them because they're just like you. They have all the same problems you have and you don't want to face your problems, so you judge them. You might disrespect them, in this case, because they're judgmental. And you realize, at some point, that you are the pot that calls the kettle black. And you've tried and tried to quit judging this person, but it seems like you just can't do it. Ever been there? Okay, here's what to do. If we will sit down by ourselves and promise God that we will do what ever it takes to quit judging others – *what ever it takes* – and then sit quietly with that promise, we will receive an answer. And we will *not* like it. But it came from the only One who truly knows us, and what we need to do. God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son live in us and so they know what we need to do. Okay?

Here's the fourth one: We go to church, or we listen to services online, and, if we've been in the church any time at all, maybe we've heard fifty-two sermons in a year, and, if we've been in the church ten years, maybe we've heard 520. Some of us even take notes on those sermons. And yet, most of the time, nothing that's mentioned sticks with us for very long.

We were watching *The Chosen* the other day – Elaine and I were – reruns. It’s been quite a while since Season 3 was finished. Season 4 is not yet with us. We were watching the rerun of Season 3, Episode 1, I think. This is where Andrew gets to visit John the Baptist in prison. Do you remember that episode? Well, when Andrew gets there, John asks Andrew what Jesus talked about in the Sermon on the Mount. And Andrew starts telling him various things he heard. And then John stops him and asks, “What was in that sermon that was just for you?” So, John believed that if a thousand people all listened to the same sermon, God is going to provide something meaningful for *each one*. And, if that’s true, and we listen to a sermon without getting anything notable from it, that probably means that we missed it. Or, maybe it would be better to stop trying to write down everything we hear in a sermon and start looking for the one thing that God has provided especially for us, and then write that down and take it home and put it into practice. But don’t feel bad, God *never* stops communicating with us. He doesn’t give up. If we didn’t get it that time, it’ll come around again. Andrew knew Jesus talked to him in that sermon about his anxiety. And Matthew knew – hearing the same sermon that Andrew heard – got something completely different from it – he knew that Jesus was talking to him about setting things right with people he had hurt. So, there’s that same sermon with something different for two different people. And the implication is that everybody got something out of it for them.

So, when was the last time God pointed something out to you personally in a sermon. If you can’t remember the last time, you missed a lot of stuff! So, that’s the fourth thing I wanted to mention. It’s not about how entertaining the sermon speaker is, or how bright he is, or how gifted he is. It’s about what God’s doing with that communication to help each person hearing it. If He loves us all, He has the capacity to do that.

When I give these sermons – not so much anymore, because I’m not pastoring a church – but when I used to pastor churches, I would give sermons and people would come up to me, and they would say, “You were talking about me in that sermon, weren’t you? You shouldn’t be doing that.” And I would be thunderstruck, because they were the last person on my mind I was thinking about. I was talking about human nature and the way we *all* act. I never used people as bad examples or good ones. If I used somebody as a good example, I would usually call their names.

So, God has something for each one of us in every sermon. And we need to listen for it. To wrap this up now, Paul tells us in Romans that, if we want to live with God forever, we need to set our minds on the things of God.