

“Proverbial Wisdom”

Rule of thumb: It is unwise to preach from a single verse of Scripture, because verses need to be preached in context connected to other verses. This is a general exegetical procedure when preparing a sermon. However, there is one exception which applies to the Book of Proverbs. Proverbs consists of a collection of short, pithy sayings, proverbial guidance for life. Most proverbs are meant to stand alone ... to proclaim their truth on their own, regardless of context. One biblical commentary notes that “Proverbs are self-contained units of thought, usually showing a stereotypical form ... sayings that are generalizations from human experience.” The writer says that proverbs help to create order and reliability in an often unreliable world. Proverbs are often directed at the problem of “cultural ambiguity” ... in other words, how to live in a confusing world. There is some evidence that the Book of Proverbs arose during a time of social dislocation and moral dissolution in Israel in which there was corruption and moral weakening ... which is to say that the Book of Proverbs was written during a period in Israel’s history much like our own today. In a nutshell, today’s lesson says that a good reputation or good favor is better than wealth ... that the way of wisdom (a good reputation) is contrasted with the way of foolishness (lust after riches). Hear now the Word of God:

(READ THE LESSON)

Proverbs ... short, one-sentence wisdom from everyday experience. For example: Proverbs 22:6 --- “*Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.*” “*The mouth of a loose woman is a deep pit*” (22:14). And today: “*A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold*” (22:1). Frankly, I’ve never cared much for this sort of thing. If you are nice to people, they’ll be nice to you; cleanliness is next to Godliness; always wear clean underwear; better to give than receive. The book of Proverbs is something like being on a long road trip with your mother.

Proverbs: sometimes petty, moralistic, often trite, though sometimes true. Have you every noticed that “orientation” meetings (to whatever) are full of proverbial wisdom; as common as kudzu and as difficult to resist. Old people, like me, love to dispense proverbial wisdom to young people. It makes us feel needed. It gives the impression that the accumulation of years actually teaches you something. I’m sure that some of you, at times, have good-naturedly endured my sermons thinking to yourself, “So this is what it’s going to be like when I become 60 and older!” Oh yea! Even lately, proverbial wisdom has been enjoying phenomenal growth. Look at the favorite section of the local bookstore and you’ll see several editions of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, *The Book of Virtues*, *Everything I Needed to Know I learned in Kindergarten* --- proverbs for modern people who are too busy to think about anything in much depth (I can say this because I’ve bought and read these books).

Why these proverbs now? Historically, proverbs begin to sprout precisely during those times when culture is in chaos, when things come unglued and old virtues are questioned, when people begin to wander and don’t know which way to turn. Proverbs are the product of a society that loves its young enough to show them the way, to point to the path, to tell you what we have learned. Proverbs are affirmations that life has some answers; that you don’t have to reinvent the wheel, morally speaking, in each generation. Proverbs point the way. William Bennett’s bestseller, *The Book of Virtues*, is a rather phenomenal display of proverbial wisdom. Bennett says, “We have to offer instruction to all our young people in the area in which we have, as a society, reached a consensus: namely, on the importance of good character.” The word *character* comes from the Greek meaning “engraving tool,” those engraved traits of personality which distinguish one person from another.

Proverbs: what goes around comes around. Parents lecture children; workers dispense wisdom to new employees; old colleagues to young professionals; old residences to new residences; old married couples to newly wed. I remember one my father use to tell me all the time when I wanted to stay up and play: “Early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.” Really? Maybe ... maybe not. The lower and middle classes of our society work long hours; often have two jobs. What is their gain from their toil? Proverbs, it seems, render a predictable, dependable, if-you-do-this-you-always-get-that type of world. But is that the way the world works? Lets try today’s proverb from verse one: *A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold*” (v.1) Do you buy that?

When you start out your life, you make certain choices, trying to decide which path to take and which to avoid, choose a good name or choose a good bank account. It's better to have a good reputation than to have riches. Is that the wisdom of the world? Ask Jack Abramoff! If we were to form two lines this morning, one line lead to riches, the other to a good name, which line do you think would be longer? Or switch the word "riches" with the word "power ... one line leads to power and the other a good name, which do you think would be longer? I ask you then of today's proverb, "Choose a good name rather than great riches: ... is this the wisdom of the world, or an assault on the wisdom of the world?"

There are proverbs that simply assert what is believed to be conventional wisdom like, "A woman's place is in the home." Then there are proverbs that *assault* this conventional wisdom like, "A woman's place is in the house, and the senate." It is interesting that such subversive wisdom that invites rebellion appears most often on T-shirts. You may have seen some of them while on vacation or at the beach:

- "Everyone needs to believe in something. I believe I'll have another beer."
- "Experience is what you get when you didn't get what you wanted."
- "The only difference between this place and the Titanic is that they had a band."
- "The one who has the most toys when he dies wins."

Do you think anyone would wear a T-shirt that read "A good name is a better choice than great riches?"

Jesus tells us proverbs ... like you may gain the whole world and still lose your soul. Proverbs frame choices ... like gaining everything at the expense of your soul! Not all paths taken in life are equal. A good name is better than riches, or power, or all that the world has to offer. From my observation, it is not that difficult to find riches. You can accumulate a rather large pile with only modest intellectual or moral resources – consider Daniel Snyder. But I also have observed that people have proven the truth of this proverb by saying things like, "She can be counted on, through thick and thin," or "He doesn't have much, but he has a lot of integrity." "She manages to do much good for others without telling anyone about it."

These are some everyday affirmations of the character of a good name. Ever listen to funeral eulogies? I seldom hear people say, he owns this, she bought that, he collected this; she's worth that much; his total assets are. At funerals, there is a real effort made to detail the quality of a person's character, and some require a lot of effort ... believe me, I know!!

For today's proverbial lesson to ring true, I think each of us have to ask ourselves, what do we want people to remember and say about us when we die? What truly is important to you? Your name ... your character, or your portfolio? Another commentator has written about this biblical book: "The first nine chapters of Proverbs refer to two ways: the way of life and the way of death. Two groups of people travel these ways: the wise and the foolish. The wise person, utilizing proverbs as an ethical resource, steers along paths of behavior that leads to personal and social order ... Fools, those who are wise in their own eyes, disdain instruction, rely on their own ingenuity, and become hopelessly lost among winding footpaths."

Today's lesson from proverbs is an assault on worldly wisdom. For we are instructed to seek a reputation, a good name, develop a good character for favoring other people rather than acquiring wealth ... for the simple reason that God is the Creator of all people, both the haves and the have-nots. The lesson encourages us to favor meeting the needs of those who are the have-nots in our world. We are to favor the needy over attaining wealth, because God favors the poor and afflicted. We are blessed for the sole purpose of blessing those who have less than we do. By living unselfishly, by living from the inside out and not the outside in ... our faith is affirmed.

This goes for being a church as well. Our resources have been given to us to give to others who have far less. A church exists because there is more power and strength in numbers, and as such, we are to spend ourselves on the less fortunate on God's behalf. Remember ... regarding the issue of faith ... it is not the fear of God's punishment or the desire to be rewarded with good that should prompt our care, our compassion, and our favor toward the have-nots. Rather, the truly faithful person ... genuinely faithful church ... is one whose love for God is so full that it overflows with love toward her or his fellow human beings ... no matter what their status and condition. Sometimes proverbial wisdom is not only trite, mundane, or commonplace ... sometimes it is true. A good name really is to be chosen rather than great riches. **Amen.**