

The Gospel in Proverbs

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Proverbs 16:1-9 RSV

The plans of the mind belong to man,
but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.
All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes,
but the LORD weighs the spirit.
Commit your work to the LORD,
and your plans will be established.
The LORD has made everything for its purpose,
even the wicked for the day of trouble.
Every one who is arrogant is an abomination to the LORD;
be assured, he will not go unpunished.
By loyalty and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for,
and by the fear of the LORD a man avoids evil.
When a man's ways please the LORD,
he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.
Better is a little with righteousness
than great revenues with injustice.
A man's mind plans his way,
but the LORD directs his steps.

Romans 1:16-2:3 RSV

For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them.

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who do such things. Do you suppose, O man, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God?

In our daily Bible reading, my wife and I recently finished reading through the Book of Proverbs. It occurred to me that the message of Proverbs might be a helpful sermon topic, because in my experience it's unusual to hear a sermon based on Proverbs. Almost the only time we hear one is on Mothers Day, coming up in a few weeks, when we often read Proverbs, chapter 31 (31:10-31). That's the famous passage

about the virtuous wife that begins with a question, “A good wife who can find?” Now, that probably makes a lot of women feel a little nervous. After all, Proverbs’ description of the “good wife,” or good woman (the words in Hebrew and many languages are the same), seems to set an unrealistically high standard. And most women probably feel there’s no way they could ever measure up to that standard. I’m not going to go into Proverbs 31 now, but we’ll come back to that thought at the end of this discussion.

Why is it not usual to preach on Proverbs? Because, unlike other parts of the Bible, much of the Book of Proverbs doesn’t have a connected sequence of thought. It mounts few developed arguments, like Paul’s and the other epistles. It contains no historical narratives, like Genesis, Kings, or the Acts of the Apostles. It presents no prophecies of things to come, like Isaiah. It relates no stories or parables, like Jesus in the Gospels. It lacks the colorful word-pictures of Ezekiel or the Revelation to John. It offers no hymns of praise or prayers, as in the Psalms.

Instead, what we encounter in Proverbs is a collection of maxims or sayings about life. Often these sayings are strung together with little apparent connection in their subject matter. One gets the impression that Proverbs is a somewhat haphazard collection of maxims, put together in no particular order. Most of this collection is attributed to King Solomon, or at least to the scribes of Solomon’s court, and some authorities believe the collection was made for the guidance of young men entering government service in Israel. But other collections are included, as well; some of these sayings were compiled by scribes under King Hezekiah (see 25:1), and the book concludes with another collection attributed to the mother of someone called Lemuel, King of Massa, about whom we otherwise know nothing.

Still, even though Proverbs appears to be a random collection of wise sayings, we can see a pattern or plan behind it. For Proverbs is a book that highlights certain *contrasts* in human life and behavior, such as these:

- Discretion and restraint are contrasted with thoughtlessness and impulsiveness.
- Industry is contrasted with laziness.
- Honesty is contrasted with devious behavior.
- Justice is contrasted with injustice.
- Generosity is contrasted with stinginess.

In laying out these contrasts, Proverbs covers a wide range of topics: family life, sexual relations, dealings with neighbors, the responsibilities of rulers and people in authority, how to live prosperously and successfully. Oddly enough, for a biblical book, Proverbs doesn’t have much to say specifically about the Lord. Out of 915 verses only 85 explicitly refer the Lord, or about nine percent. Perhaps this reticence in speaking about the Lord should teach us something: serving the Lord, and living the righteous, life doesn’t mean just always talking about God. It means deliberately attempting to live by the principles set forth in the Word of God. In fact, throughout Proverbs the Lord and his ways are always in the background, and sometimes they come to the foreground. Indeed, Proverbs 9:10 states the basic premise of the collection: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.”

As we proceed, I’d like to frame this discussion of Proverbs under four points:

1. The basic contrast in the Proverbs
2. The relationship of actions to consequences
3. How that relationship fits into the covenant between the Lord and his people
4. Where we find the gospel in Book of Proverbs

To begin with, as I mentioned, Proverbs is a book of contrasts, and *the basic contrast is that between wisdom and folly*. So let’s ask, first of all, What is folly, or foolishness? Who is the fool that Proverbs has in mind? The Bible has a clear answer to this question, in Psalm 14:1-4:

The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”

They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds,
there is none that does good.

The Lord looks down from heaven upon the children of men,
to see if there are any that act wisely,

that seek after God.
They have all gone astray, they are all alike corrupt;
there is none that does good,
no, not one.
Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers
who eat up my people as they eat bread,
and do not call upon the Lord?

Those who are fools, who have no knowledge, are fools *because they don't take God into account*. The fool doesn't have to be an atheist; he doesn't have to say, "God doesn't exist." He simply has to say, "God doesn't care what I do; I don't have to pay attention to him." That's the fool Proverbs talks about, and Proverbs gives us some good descriptions of this kind of person. We'll cite only a few.

Proverbs 18:2 says, "A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion." We all know people who can't stop telling you what they think long enough to listen to what you think. How many times have you had a discussion with someone, and you came a way knowing everything they thought about the matter while realizing that they probably hadn't heard a word you had to say - if, indeed, you were able to get a word in edgewise? The fool is the person who is so convinced he is right that he never listens to anyone else. If this person would really take God into account, he would understand the he (or she) is *not* God and therefore might not have the whole truth.

So the fool is the person who never learns from his mistakes. Proverbs 26:11 says, "Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool that repeats his folly." Perhaps vomit isn't a strong enough word here. You've all watched a dog as he "goes to the bathroom" and then turns around and smells what he's just done. (To be fair, cats do it too.) The fool is like that. Because he doesn't take the word of God into account, whatever he thinks and does must be right, so he just goes back to it again and again. The fool's behavior reminds me of Einstein's famous definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. (Not to be partisan about it, but do we see this kind of insane foolishness in some of our government policies today?)

Wisdom is, of course, the opposite attitude: the wise person realizes that his off-the-cuff opinions are not always the final answer to a question. The wise person looks to an authority greater than himself. He takes God and his ways into account in the conduct of life. We'll have more to say later on about what wisdom really is, according to Proverbs.

Secondly, let's look at how Proverbs views *the relationship of act and consequence*. It's a basic principle of the kingdom of God that certain actions lead to certain outcomes. As the apostle Paul warns, "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap" (Galatians 6:7). In fact, the Creator has structured the entire universe in such a way that actions have consequences. If he hadn't done so, nothing would work - nothing would even be here. Proverbs gives voice to this truth. Let's look at some examples.

Take the promise of Proverbs 3:5-8:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.
Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD,
and turn away from evil.
It will be healing to your flesh
and refreshment to your bones.

According to Proverbs, both direction in life and physical health result from acting wisely: paying attention to God and his way of ordering the world. Proverbs even promises a prosperous life for those who take God into account. Proverbs 13:13 states, "He who despises the word brings destruction on himself, but he who respects the commandment will be rewarded." Proverbs 22:4 adds, "The reward for humility and fear of the LORD is riches and honor and life." Or take Proverbs 11:24: "One man gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want."

But how do these promises work out in “real life?” They work because life is like the cruise control on your car. It’s an informational loop; set the cruise at a certain speed, and then fewer engine RPMs tell the accelerator to put on more gas; more gas tells the engine to speed up; increased RPMs tell the accelerator to let off, and so on. The car runs at a constant speed because information is constantly going around the loop. When we give to others and to the work of God, we put ourselves into a feedback loop that eventually brings benefits back to us. Refusing to share what we have takes us out of that cybernetic loop and results in poverty. Clutching what we have with a closed fist prevents us from grasping the blessings the Lord wants to give us. Actions have consequences.

The relation of act and consequence underlies not only Proverbs’ promises but also its warnings. Again, a few examples. Proverbs 19:19 cautions, “A man of great wrath will pay the penalty; for if you deliver him, you will only have to do it again.” An angry person will do foolish things. This can be especially true of a person who has had enough to drink to wipe out the normal inhibitions against angry behavior or, say, reckless driving. Or consider the person who’s feeling angry and put down about his poor finances, so he goes out and spends money he doesn’t have to make himself feel better. If you bail out people like this, you’ll just have to do it again, time after time. You’ve become what they call an “enabler.” The person’s behavior won’t change until you stop picking up the pieces after them, and they have to deal with the consequences of their decisions.

Proverbs has another famous warning that is often misunderstood, Proverbs 22:6: “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” This is a mistranslation. The English word *should* suggests that the proverb is saying, “Train up a child in the way he ought to go.” But the Hebrew says, literally, “Nurse a child according to the mouth of his way.” In other words, if you let a child grow up the way he wants to go - making the rules for himself - when he’s grown up it won’t be possible to change him. This is not advice for successful parenting, it’s a warning about poor parenting, because Proverbs reminds us, a few verses further, “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him” (22:15).

These examples illustrate how Proverbs brings out the relationship between act and consequence. That is one of the principles of God’s kingdom. It corresponds, in part, to Newton’s third law of motion: “For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.” Giving results in receiving. Bailing out an alcoholic results in more alcoholic behavior. Letting a child do what he wants to do, because you think that’s a loving approach, results in selfish behavior later on. Being humble before the Lord results in being exalted by him; as James says, “Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you” (James 4:10). Jesus said, “But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, go up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For every one who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:10-11).

Thirdly, the contrast between wisdom and foolishness, and the connection between actions and their consequences, aren’t just general truisms about life. They’re built into *the structure of the covenant between God and his people*. The framework of the covenant is this: “I will be your God, and you shall be my people.” This framework appears throughout Scripture and recurs even at the very end of the Bible, in Revelation 22:3.

A covenant is a relationship of mutual obligation between the partners. (If you turn to the back of your hymnal, you’ll find this church’s covenant, in which all members engage to support one another in living the Christian life.) In a marriage covenant the man and woman accept obligations of fidelity toward each other. The same is true in the biblical covenant; there is a role that’s appropriate to God and a role that’s appropriate to his people. If we try to reverse the roles we break the relationship. God’s role is to establish the framework for life, ours is to conform to that framework. If we step outside that framework and try to make the rules ourselves, the result is calamity. As Proverbs 14:12 states, “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.” Proverbs 21:30 warns, “No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel, can avail against the Lord.” When we make God into our personal errand boy and try to “call the shots,” we’ve transgressed — that is, we’ve stepped out of the covenant with the Creator of a universe of hundreds of billions of galaxies.

Wise actions in harmony with God's Word have good, beneficial results. Unwise or foolish actions in disregard of God's Word have harmful consequences. And that principle is built into the structure of the covenant between God and his people. To explain this can get a bit complicated, but I'll try to make it as simple as possible. In the covenant between the Lord and Israel, the Lord is in the position of a "great King," and the people are in the position of his servant kings - like an Emperor who has a set of smaller kingdoms in his domain. And the Emperor is making a treaty with these lesser kings. God's covenant with those who belong to him is, in fact, a sort of treaty.

There's a structure to this treaty. (1) First the Emperor tells you who he is, and what he has done for his partners: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt." (2) Second, the Emperor tells his treaty partners what their obligations are: "You shall have no other gods beside me," and so on. But there are other parts of the structure: (3) The treaty includes sanctions, or mechanisms for enforcement. That is, if you keep the treaty obligations, good things will happen to you; the Lord will defend you and prosper you. But if you violate the treaty, and disregard the Emperor's commandments, some very bad things will happen to you. This comes out in Scripture especially near the end of Deuteronomy, in chapters 27-28, where Moses lays out the blessings that follow from obedience and the curses that follow from turning away from the ways of the Lord. That's where we see Proverbs' emphasis on the relation between actions and their consequences.

Finally, where do we meet the gospel in the Book of Proverbs? Let's go back to that passage from Romans 1, where Paul says:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth (1:16-18).

It's clear that for Paul the gospel, or good news, involves a life of righteousness based on the teachings of the Word of God. And he lays out the consequences that follow when people disregard the evidence, from the very universe itself, that God is real and has a purpose for human life. The wise person is saved, or delivered, through faithfulness to the Word, while those who are foolish, who suppress God's truth like the fool in Proverbs, pay the price for their disobedience.

Billy Graham was perhaps the most prominent preacher of the gospel of salvation in Christ for half a century. I once read that he would meditate daily from the Book of Proverbs. He must have seen the gospel in that book. The gospel in Proverbs is "good news." It's good news to learn that *there is a right way to live*, a way that pleases God. And, following his commandments as his covenant people, we can live that successful and prosperous life.

We understand that only through membership in Christ can we come to God. Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life." In Jesus we become members of God's new creation and are able to enjoy the blessing he gave to humankind: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion . . ." (Genesis 1:28). Proverbs describes what it's like to live in that blessing, in "the fear of the Lord" which is the source of wisdom. It describes, by contrast, the sorry course of a life lived in ignorance and disregard of that wisdom. The good news is that in the strength of the risen Christ we're able to live by that wisdom; as Paul writes, "He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30).

So let's come back to that concluding chapter 31 in Proverbs, the passage about the virtuous wife. There's a reason why it's at the end of the book. Proverbs starts with a long admonition to seek wisdom. That admonition culminates in chapter 8, where wisdom is personified as the "master builder" in God's creation. Here's how it goes:

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of old.
Ages ago I was set up, at the first,
before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth;

before he had made the earth with its fields,
or the first of the dust of the world.
When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master workman;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the sons of men (8:22-31).

Does this not remind you of what John says in chapter 1 of his Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (John 1:1-3, 14). The Son of God, the Word of God, the Wisdom the Book of Proverbs celebrates, are one and the same: Jesus Christ.

What, then, about the “virtuous woman” of Proverbs 31? In Hebrew, nouns have either masculine or feminine gender; wisdom (*hochmah*) is feminine. So when we come to the end of the book and read about the virtuous woman, who is Proverbs really talking about? Perhaps there’s a double meaning here: Proverbs is not just describing the admirable, diligent, prosperous wife so admired by her husband, a seemingly unattainable example to be held up to women on Mother’s Day. Proverbs is describing God’s divine wisdom, the Word of God who is Jesus Christ. And it is this wisdom the righteous person is to espouse and celebrate.

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