

A SOVERIGN, JUST GOD RULES

SERIES: CHOOSE WISELY



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Proverbs 16:1–9
Second Message
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Proverbs 16:1–9

Before we look at a collection of Proverbs, I'd like to continue with the introduction that Scott Grant began last week. For me, this preaching assignment represents a significant challenge. I haven't spent much time in the book of Proverbs over the years. Nor have I heard them taught that often. Most frequently, Eric Soderberg did give a wonderful sermon from Proverbs last summer during our sermon series called "Kingdom Work."¹

As I was reflecting on my neglect, a few things came to mind. For my read-through-the-Bible program last year I would often listen to the day's passages in the car on my way to work. This approach works well for Biblical narrative. It also works for the Psalms and the New Testament letters. But if it works at all for Proverbs, it's just for the first nine chapters. After that, saying after saying melt together and you can't begin to make sense of them. Soon your mental jug overflows, and they all go down the drain. It's like Lucy and Ethel in the TV show *I Love Lucy* trying to eat chocolates on a conveyer belt in a candy factory. You just can't take them in that fast.

I also realized that I should have more interest in Proverbs because I like to create proverb-like sayings to help me make sense of my own life. Those of you who know me have probably heard too many times that "I'm one dumpster away from total bliss." Or for fixing computer problems, I came up with "Holmlund's first law of troubleshooting: it's always the cable." When my kids started driving, I'd tell them, "nothing good happens after midnight." A few others: "Differed maintenance is a way of life." "95% of any plumbing repair is removing the old fixture." My grandfather had a couple that I recall him often saying: "Hunger is a gift from God, that's why we should always thank him for our food" and "There's a place for everything and keep everything in its place." My mother, when trying to turn left onto a busy street, would simply sigh and say, "he who hesitates is lost."

Rest assured I don't confuse these remarks with the inspired sayings we find in Proverbs. But there's something about them that is intriguing. I'm sure that if a dumpster were placed in my driveway next week, and I filled it up, that my longing for peace and tranquility

will not be fulfilled. We all know that not every computer problem is caused by a bad cable. A lot of good things do happen after midnight, most notably the birth of many of our children.

So what am I communicating in these short, pithy sayings? It's not the absolute literal meaning of the words always holding true but something more nuanced. I'm saying that my possessions are starting to own me and not the other way around. I'm saying that when faced with a problem, computer or otherwise, I all too often overlook the obvious. I'm saying that there's no real upside for a teenager to be out and about after midnight.

I'm saying that life is a little more complicated and that we need to think! This isn't my idea, of course. This is captured beautifully in the Proverbs. We all need to think, because life isn't black and white. Different times and situations call for different actions and responses. One size doesn't fit all. You can't put a square peg in a round hole.

I read a fascinating article on *The New Atlantis* website about the Nobel Prize-winning physicist, Richard Feynman. When he was young, he earned pocket change by fixing radios for his neighbors. The article describes one of his repairs:

*One radio that started up with a tremendous roar and wobble before calming itself and playing right required more than the usual consideration. The customer saw Feynman walking back and forth instead of taking the radio apart right away, and he told the kid that he must not know what he was doing. The imperturbable boy answered, "I'm thinking!" Feynman thought some more, then proceeded to reverse the order of the tubes—and the radio played perfectly. The skeptic was now a true believer. As Feynman tells the story in his bestselling memoir of vignettes, "Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!: Adventures of a Curious Character" (1985), the neighbor then 'got me other jobs, and kept telling everybody what a tremendous genius I was, saying, "He fixes radios by thinking!" The whole idea of thinking, to fix a radio—a little boy stops and thinks, and figures out how to do it—he never thought that was possible.'*²

I realized that I lack Feynman's disciplined thinking when I read the Proverbs. I can't disassemble them right away, so I give up. The meaning or application is not immediately apparent, so I move on to the next thing. It seldom dawns on me that I must actually stop and think. What a concept!

We don't seem to have much time for thinking nowadays. If it's not on the first page of a Google search, then we assume the answer isn't worth pursuing. But Proverbs is all about the life-long process of learning to live life skillfully, as God intended. It's not an effortless endeavor. I was listening to a recorded lecture by Ed Clowney of Westminster Seminary, and he recalled what his colleague Tom Nicolaus said: that we know about the milk of the Word and the meat of the Word. "Well," Nicolaus said, "Proverbs are the 'hard candy' of the Word. You've got to put one under your tongue and suck on it a while to get anything out of it."³ I'm finding that to be true.

The other barrier we face, that I alluded to earlier, is that Proverbs, especially the middle section, does not appear to tell a story. We rightly consider the entire Bible to tell one unified story of God's creation and then his redemption of that creation. We spent an entire year going through that story. A preacher can't do justice to a passage in the Old Testament, for example, without understanding at what point in the grand story it resides. And even the long, to us tedious, legal codes of Leviticus are given at a specific time and place. They have a place in the story.

Perhaps that is why if we know anything at all about Proverbs, it is the first nine chapters and chapter 31. Those chapters come closest to telling a story. And in a sense, I think they do provide a framework of sorts that can help us navigate through the book.

As Scott taught us last week, the central theme of Proverbs is that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The word used for God in most of the book is Yahweh, the one he gave to Moses. The one Jesus applied multiple times to himself in the Gospel of John. It is not the generic term for God but rather his personal name. This means that wisdom is intimately tied into relationship. One cannot be wise in isolation.

Proverbs begin in the home with lessons to a son from this father and mother. We can all picture this setting quite easily. It's clear from the lessons that the son is on the verge of adulthood. And the very first lesson after the opening prologue is a severe warning about

being careful with whom you run. Dave Bland, whose book *Proverbs and the Formation of Character* I found very helpful, says this first lecture is meant to get the youth's attention.⁵ Even the smallest of bad choices can lead to dire consequences. Stay far from those whose "feet run to evil" and who "make haste to shed blood" (Proverbs 1:16).

Many of us know people who have fallen in with the wrong crowd early in their adult years, only to have the course of their lives changed forever. Maybe something similar happened to you. I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that the rise of gangs today is one of the most severe threats to our nation's stability and well-being. A civilization whose next generation trains itself on the streets will cease being civilized. Thus, it is so vital to parent not just our own children but those whose parents aren't in the picture. In this very first lesson of Proverbs, the father and mother warn the son that it's not that difficult to make a mess of your life. We all need someone to tell us this when we're young, especially if our mother and father aren't around.

The focus on the son in the first nine chapters should not deter us from applying these lessons today to both our sons and daughters. The original cultural context is a patriarchal society. It's possible that daughters at that time were less likely to stray from family tradition and therefore did not need such direct exhortation. However, since the mother is involved in the training together with the father, it's clear she has also been instructed in wisdom at some point in her life.⁶

Furthermore, Wisdom calls to everyone, the old as well as the young. Whoever is simple, whoever lacks sense, turn in here and eat Wisdom's bread and drink her wine (Proverbs 9:4-5). She gives instruction to a wise man so that he will be wiser still (Proverbs. 9:9). That's a more elegant way of saying that you can, in fact, teach an old dog new tricks, at least a wise old dog. For those of us committed to following Jesus faithfully, we can never say we are "too set in our ways", that we're unable to change. If we do, we have either given up or are too prideful. Maybe both. Instead, forgetting what lies behind, we press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13-14).

So the first nine chapters give us the picture of moral instruction in the home, of a father and mother diligently teaching their son in the ways of wisdom. The book concludes with chapters 30 and 31, two sections distinct from those that precede it. Many of us are familiar with the virtuous woman described in chapter 31, beginning in verse 10.

This woman is the culmination of the book. Dave Bland writes, "What is portrayed is a lifetime of discipline, instruction, hard work, and fearing God that is condensed into a single poem." Furthermore, he writes that after reading through King Solomon's collection (ch. 10-22), and then those collected by King Hezekiah (ch. 25-29) and King Lemuel (ch. 31:1-9), we might expect "that the ultimate paradigm of wisdom would be a king or a well-known sage. Surprisingly, whom they present is an ordinary person (31:10-31)! They put forward an unknown woman of wisdom."⁷

This means that Proverbs 31 is not just for women. Both men and women are called to pursue the character she has attained in her God-centered community. That is, we all are to develop the qualities of trust, service, prudence, discipline, generosity, courage, hard work, and most importantly the fear of the Lord.⁸ Verses 25 and 26 of chapter 31: "Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she smiles at the future. She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue." (NASB) Who wouldn't want that said about them, man or woman?

We see then that there is a kind of story built into Proverbs, one which gives us a way to mentally place the middle chapters of 10 through 29. These are my "fly-over chapters", my clean pages. Scholars refer to them as the "sentence literature", a term I can't say really whets my appetite for further investigation.

But the label is appropriate. I think it was Cervantes who observed that a proverb is "a short sentence based on long experience." And that is exactly what we have beginning in chapter 10: short sentence after short sentence. Almost all of them are only two lines long. They fill in the gap between the adolescent son and the wise woman. This is the material to be mastered in life. The sentences need to be considered as a whole because, as I mentioned, different situations call for different responses. It has been said that he who knows one proverb knows none. You can't use one proverb as the hammer to which everything else looks like a nail.

In the original Hebrew, the proverbs are much shorter than in our English translations, just 7 or 8 syllables total. This made them easier to remember. Golfers have a saying on the putting green: "never up, never in," which is short and memorable. It means, "if you don't strike the ball at least as hard as the distance it is from the hole, it has no chance at all of going in." Sometimes our English translations of Proverbs seem to be far from the brevity of "never up, never in." Therefore,

we must work that much harder to commit them to memory.

Let me conclude this overview with a brief word about Biblical poetry. This is a key reason why thinking is necessary when reading Proverbs. When we read quickly, it might seem that the second line of a proverb either simply restates the first or is its exact opposite. But close examination reveals much more is going on. We need to look for heightened emphasis, or contrast in verbs, or maybe a singular subject versus a plural one. We need to look for all kinds of things.

There's much more that can be said about this, but that will have to wait. Please consider that these sentence Proverbs may be one of the easiest ways to introduce regular family devotions or have more meaningful conversations with friends. Imagine sitting down to dinner and asking everyone to compare their day to Proverbs 15:1: "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." Or, perhaps at Thanksgiving, reflect on 15:17: "Better is a dinner of herbs where love is than a fattened ox and hatred with it." As there are hundreds of sentence Proverbs, we won't readily exhaust the supply.

Let's look now at Proverbs 16:1-9 located on p. 539 of your pew Bible. In addition to Dave Bland's book, Dr Bruce Waltke's lecture on this chapter at biblicaltraining.org⁹ was very helpful to me. These nine verses are at the start of the second section of Solomon's collection that runs from chapter 10 through 22:16. They are also almost exactly in the middle of this collection. The preceding six chapters have been concerned primarily with human actions. But now we see the focus shifts. Bland says the unifying theme of all nine is "a fundamental belief in the active presence of God." 10 Verses 1 through 3 describe the sovereignty of God. Verses 5 through 8, His justice. Verse 4 links the two sections together. Verse 9 links back to verses 1 and 3.

We live in a culture of extremes. On the one hand, there's so much tragedy, anger, pain, and sorrow around us that it's easy to get the impression that life is entirely random and out of control. It seems there's nothing we, or God for that matter, can do about it. Bad things just happen to good people, period. At the other extreme, are those weaned on Henley's "Invictus": the masters of their fates, the captains of their souls. For these "unconquerable" ones there is no problem that cannot be solved with some nifty code and enough computing power. The tower of Babel will soon be rebuilt. On Mars.

However, the first nine verses of Proverbs 16 show us the divine perspective, one that is neither utter despair or supreme over-confidence. All but one of the proverbs, verse 8, include “the LORD”. Again, this is God’s personal, relational name. It’s the name that signifies His desire for us to know Him intimately and to be in His presence. To borrow from Francis Schaeffer, “He is there, and He is not silent.” As I read each proverb, I’d like to pause for a few seconds before making any comments. Hopefully, this will let them sink into your own minds just a bit more. I’d also encourage you to set aside some dedicated time in the near future to reflect on these words and see how God is speaking to you through them.

Proverbs 16:1:

The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.

We do have a short, pithy version of this in English: “Man proposes but God disposes.” The proverb does not teach that planning is wrong. We are stewards of God’s creation and charged with its care. That takes planning, among other things. A preacher prepares diligently but prays even more earnestly that it is God who will speak, never more so than this morning.

But our plans always require our humility. In Numbers, the prophet Balaam found that out the hard way. Three times he tried to curse God’s people. But only blessings came out. The last word always belongs to the LORD. James 4:15 addresses those who think otherwise. We ought to say, he writes, “if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” In the book of Acts, the apostle Paul and his companions “attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.” (Acts 16:7) Caren McCormack spoke last August about how to respond when your plans are disrupted in her excellent sermon titled “Direction for Detours”¹¹.

We hold all our plans loosely. We demonstrate the attitude of Jesus: Not my will, but Thy will be done. Think about the events in your life that have not gone as you planned. Ask yourself if you can see how the LORD answered in those cases.

Proverbs 16:2:

All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the spirit.

We like to think we’re right. We have a hard time admitting we’re wrong. But none of us has perfect insight. None of us has completely pure motives. None of us is entirely objective, try as we might. Each one of us fails to see the log in our own eye. But the LORD weighs our spirits. He sees what no one else can see. We cannot fool him. We cannot “fake it ‘til we make it.”

The word for spirit in the second line literally means “wind”. In other words, God weighs the wind. He weighs the unweighable. “Weighs” reminds me of King Belshazzar in Daniel 5. Though he knew how God had humbled Nebuchadnezzar, he did not humble himself. Instead, Daniel tells him that he lifted up himself against the Lord of heaven. He did not honor the God in whose hand was his breath (Daniel 5:23). And so Daniel interprets the handwriting on the wall for Belshazzar. His days were numbered. His kingdom would be divided. He had been weighed in the balances and found wanting. (Daniel 5:24-28)

What a devastating summary of an arrogant king’s life, of any life: you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting. How many of our political leaders, our titans of industry, our celebrities today ponder these words? How many of us ordinary folk? When you see your handwriting on the wall, what does it say? No wonder David prays: “Search me of God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way” (Psalm 139:23-24, NASB).

Proverbs 16:3:

Commit your work to the LORD and your plans will be established.

Because we cannot trust our motives to be pure, says Waltke, we must live by faith. We are to submit everything we do to the LORD. This proverb reminds me of what Jesus said, in the Sermon on the Mount: “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” (Mt. 6:33) The order is the same. Commit your works to the LORD first. Then your plans will be established. The LORD will separate the wheat from the chaff, preserving what has lasting value.

Proverbs 16:4:

The LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.

The first line of the proverb looks back to the previous three verses, linked by the word “purpose”. This is the same word translated as “answer” in verse 1. This is Proverbs’ short, cryptic version of what Paul is talking about in Romans 8:28: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” It’s what Joseph was telling his brothers after Jacob died: “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.” (Genesis 50:20)

This line is tremendously reassuring, though not always easy to accept. There are no mistakes in God’s economy. Whatever our circumstances, whatever our deficiencies, whatever our defects, whatever our sins. Each one of us was made to be used by God for His good purposes. There are no throw-away people. There are no throw-away lives.

The second line of verse 4 looks forward to verses 5 through 8, the justice of God. It is not a proof-text that suggests some were created with no other possible destiny but damnation. Rather, it is a sobering reminder that someday, there will be a day of reckoning. There will be a judgment by a righteous Judge. Those who choose poorly, choose trouble. Which leads to the next verse.

Proverbs 16:5:

Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the LORD; be assured, he will not go unpunished.

Our region is filled with engineers, people who solve problems. The way to solve a problem is to first identify its root cause. Well, pride is the ultimate root cause. Pride is the condition of each human heart that says, “My will, not Thy will.” Pride insists that we can dismiss God that He is unnecessary. It is the ultimate denial of reality. Pride is the ostrich with its head eternally in the sand. That is why it is an abomination to the LORD. It is just not true. The clay does not shape the potter. Our pride will not last.

Proverbs 16:6:

By steadfast love and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for, and by the fear of the Lord one turns away from evil.

Of all the walks I wish I could have taken, the Road to Emmaus is at the top of the list. Jesus was explaining to the two travelers how all the Scriptures pointed to him. I wonder if he shared this proverb with them?

Here is the antidote to our pride. Here we see the true justice of God, doing for us by his loyal love and faithfulness what we could not do for ourselves. Here is the Gospel in Proverbs. Jesus is the one who perfectly lived Proverbs 16:6. In 2 Corinthians Paul writes, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Just a few verses prior, he had written, “knowing the fear of the LORD, we persuade others...the love of Christ controls us...he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him....” (2 Corinthians 5:11-15).

Proverbs 16:7:

When a man's ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.”

Bruce Waltke points out that this proverb is the antithesis of verse 5. The prideful are punished but those who please the LORD are rewarded. And again, verse 6 shows us what it looks like to please the LORD. Steadfast love. Faithfulness. The fear of the LORD. But this can only be done in Christ, as he said, “...apart from me, you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

Proverbs 16:8:

Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice.

This proverb acknowledges a difficult truth: God’s justice is frequently delayed. The righteous often have little while the unjust have a lot. But God’s justice is also certain. Otherwise, this proverb would be false; little would never be better. If there is no justice, no accountability for how we live, no final judgment, then life is a beer commercial. You only live once, so you’ve got to grab for all the gusto you can.

But God’s justice is indeed certain. Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice. Imagine the power of this proverb: at a business school’s first day of classes; in the garage of a startup looking for funding; when a billion-dollar “unicorn” discovers its machines don’t work after all; for disruptive technologists who want to flout existing laws; for anyone of us going to work tomorrow. Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice.

Proverbs 16:9:

The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.

Verse nine brings us full circle to the beginning of chapter 16. Dr. Waltke says one way to translate “man” here is “earthling.” I like to jokingly say, “Greetings, earthling!” to the checker at the grocery store. This usually gets me a puzzled look at best. But using that word here is appropriate. “The heart of the earthling plans his way.” Earthling reminds us of our mortality. It reminds us of our connection to the dust. It reminds us that, plan as we might, the God who raises mortals from the dead is the One in control. He establishes our steps.

Our connection to dust made sense to Richard Feynman. The fact that all things are made of atoms was to him the single most important statement of scientific knowledge.¹⁰ But he also said this, in a 1959 television interview that the station ultimately declined to air:

“It doesn’t seem to me that this fantastically marvelous universe, this tremendous range of time and space and different kinds of animals, and all the different plants, and all these atoms with their motions and so on, all this complicated thing can merely be a stage so that God can watch human beings struggle for good and evil—which is the view that religion has. The stage is too big for the drama.”¹¹

For all his brilliance, and his peers described Feynman’s thinking as essentially magic, the great physicist could not imagine a God so concerned with human choices. But that is the message of Proverbs this morning. That is the message of Proverbs every morning. God is sovereign, he is just, and he cares what we choose. Think carefully. Choose wisely.

Endnotes

¹ Eric Soderberg, “Wisdom at Work” (sermon, Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, CA, July, 30, 2017), <https://pbc.org/messages/wisdom-at-work>.

² Algis Valiunas, “Richard Feynman and the Pleasure Principle,” *The New Atlantis*, Spring 2018, <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/richard-feynman-and-the-pleasure-principle>.

³ Edmund P. Clowney, “Preaching Christ from Wisdom & Poetry,” *Westminster Seminary*. Podcast audio, 1987. tape 4, 52 minute mark, <https://www.wscal.edu/resources/itunes-u>.

⁴ Dave L. Bland, *Proverbs and the Formation of Character*, (Cascade Books: Eugene, OR: , 2015), 18.

5. Bland, p. 18
6. Bland, p. 40, footnote 72
7. Bland, p. 171
8. Bland, p. 172
9. Biblicaltraining.org <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/proverbs/bruce-waltke>, lecture 11
All references to Dr. Waltke’s insights are from this lecture.
10. Bland, p. 143
11. Caren McCormack, “Directions for Detours”, August 6, 2017 <https://www.pbc.org/messages/59835f3f085d5e1c31bfa0eb>
12. See footnote 2
13. See footnote 2