

Sermon 32, A Wealth of Wisdom, Proverbs 10:1-5, 15-16

Proposition: The wise son works to please his father, knowing that his work is a matter of life and death.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, this morning we come to the payoff of the first 9 chapters of Proverbs. For 31 weeks now, we have been hearing, in various forms, the exhortation to listen to Wisdom. Today, we begin to listen to what Wisdom says. In other words, we've progressed from the exhortation to listen to Wisdom to the actual content of Wisdom's speech. We are going to see over the next several months what it looks like to be wise.

Specifically today, we will see what wisdom has to say about work. How can you be wise on the job? What does wisdom at work look like? And what is its outcome? All of these questions will be answered in the context of the ultimate purpose of wisdom, which is to please your father — your earthly father, yes, but even more your Heavenly Father. Be wise, working to please your Father because you know that how you work affects both this life and the next.

I. Wisdom's Point: To Please One's Father, v. 1

The collection of Solomon's proverbs that runs from here to 22:17 begins with this heading. This is the truth that contextualizes every statement about wisdom in the rest of this collection, and really in the rest of the book. Why should you be wise? Because it pleases your father. It makes Him glad. Brothers and sisters, the Christian life is all about pleasing your Father! Now, it is certainly true, as George MacDonald said, that God is easy to please and hard to satisfy. Those of you who had tough earthly fathers may wilt when confronted with the reality that God is a Father who wants to be pleased — who wants us to please Him. But He's not a tough, mean, nasty

Father. He is a loving father, one who delights in you, one who has just given you pages of promises that tell how you will flourish and prosper when you listen to His only Begotten Son who is Jesus Christ the wisdom of God. So why be wise? Ultimately, to please your father. To resemble His one and only Son, His only begotten (as opposed to created) Son.

But a foolish son is a heaviness, a grief, to his mother. The point is simply to say that your wisdom, or lack thereof, matters hugely to your parents. The people who love you most care the most deeply about whether you are wise.

So do you love your parents? If so, then seek wisdom. Do you love your Heavenly Father? Then seek wisdom.

And what is the content of wisdom? What wisdom do you need to internalize? This morning, we will look at wisdom's teaching on wealth, work, and wages. What we will see is that your work matters; there's a wise and a foolish way to do it; and that work undertaken wisely, work done in wisdom (for wisdom and righteousness are ultimately two perspectives on the same reality) is the way to life.

II. Wisdom on Wealth, vv. 2-4

If you count up the ten occurrences of the word "wealth" in Proverbs, you will find that 5 are positive and 5 are negative. In other words, the Bible (and especially this book) has a balanced attitude toward wealth.

A. Wealth is not the most important thing, v. 2

Wealth is not the most important thing! Now, we all know that. But in fact, wealth gained by wickedness is worthless. Treasures of wickedness profit nothing. What does this mean? It means that ill-gotten gains are not ultimately going to benefit you. Things you acquired by theft, by cheating, by lying, by pilfering, by exaggerating — all of those are ultimately of no benefit to you.

Now, we know that obvious forms of theft are wrong. It's the subtle forms of theft that we need to be careful about. Being lazy at work, and thus getting paid for time when you're not working, is one such subtle case. Your paycheck can be a treasure of wickedness if you're not working while at work.

But — notice that the parallelism isn't direct — righteousness delivers from death. Now, a completely stock parallel would have read "But treasures of righteousness profit eternally." The differing lines make you think. What is the difference between treasures of wickedness and righteousness? Well, for one thing, wickedness may give you some obvious treasures. If you steal or cheat or lie, you may get more material wealth than you otherwise would have had. If you cheat your employees, you may get rich enough to buy a mansion.. But righteousness doesn't necessarily offer any earthly treasures. Being righteous doesn't carry with it the lure of immediate gain. But it does offer a much bigger treasure: Life, eternal life. Now, one rabbi (Michael Fox) commented on the passage that this is not eternal life, but long earthly life. But such an interpretation can't be correct. As Qoheleth comments, "How dies the wise man? As the fool." The wise man does die physically. Solomon himself, of course, is long dead, as are the

other contributors to the book of Proverbs. But righteousness delivers from death — not in the temporal sense, but in the eternal sense. If you are blameless in the sight of God, then you will not suffer eternal death but rather enjoy eternal life with God in Heaven. But if you are profiting from and enjoying the treasures of wickedness in this life, that's a sign that you are not righteous and that whatever temporary gain you're getting from your evil practices, it will only condemn you to ultimate death.

So wealth is not the most important thing. It can't save your life. It has to be acquired rightly. And it should never be valued above righteousness. If your boss asks you to do something wrong and you have to quit, quit! Being good is more important than being rich. And anyway, you need not worry that you won't have enough.

B. Wealth is a gift from Yahweh, v. 3

For wealth is God's gift. I can hear some of you saying, "I can't afford to quit. What will happen to my family? I need to keep doing this wrong thing in order to provide for them." Well, that's where v. 3 steps in. Yahweh will not allow the righteous to famish. Now, what kind of promise is this? Surely good Christians have died in famines at times, right? No doubt. That's because this is a proverb, not a promise. God has promised that whoever comes to Him He will never cast out. That's a promise. That's always true. But the proverbs are not always exceptionless principles. The easiest way to see that is simply to read the whole book, in which proverbs making different or even seemingly opposite points sit next to each other. The most famous example is in ch. 26, "Answer not a fool according to his folly" and then "answer a fool according to his folly." But other matching sayings could be cited. The bottom line is that a proverb is generally true but is not, and is not intended to be taken as, the full, final, nuanced statement of the whole truth on the topic it mentions.

So let me put it this way: Have you ever met a starving righteous person? Perhaps you have, in some area where there was a general famine. But in some area where most people have what they need, have you encountered a starving righteous person? The general tendency of righteousness to life is manifested in the particular truth that the righteous person works hard and provides for his own needs by working, while at the same time the LORD provides for righteous people, both through their work, the kindness of others, and direct gifts.

But the same God who provides for His people casts aside the desires of the wicked. Now, often we see the wicked prospering. (Proverbs and Ecclesiastes acknowledge that reality, as does the Bible more generally.) But ultimately, God frustrates the desires of the wicked. That is, they don't get what they ultimately want. They might have lots of worldly goods and pleasant experiences, but they do not have the peace in the heart and in the conscience that lets them enjoy those things. And their desire for security and eternal joy is certainly not met either.

So wealth is a gift from God, one that He gives to those wise sons who please him, while frustrated desire is a curse that He lays on the wicked. They want, but cannot obtain because God has subjected their desires to futility.

C. Wealth demands hard work, v. 4

But though wealth is a gift from God, it is a gift that He generally gives to us through our own work. He has made us to cooperate with Him, to work along with Him. That's why He put Adam in the Garden to dress it and keep it. That's why Jesus said He and His Father work. We are to work like God, and like God made us to work. So that's why God tells us not to be limp-wristed, not to be slack-handed, but rather to be diligent. Work hard; its results are far preferable to the treasures of wickedness.

What does diligence look like? It looks like showing up on time, doing your work with excellence, speed, and focus, and constantly thinking about how to do your work better. The diligent person will get wealthy, all other things being equal. As we'll see later, poverty is a huge threat, a menace from which all of us want to escape. Because righteousness leads to life, it also leads away from the death-dealing reality of poverty. This is the truth behind the prosperity gospel. But it is only part of the truth. In this age, God's people are sometimes rich and sometimes poor. Only in the age to come will righteousness be fully realized, will its tendencies come into their own. In that age, every wise son will be rich because he will enjoy the wealth of his Father's house.

Do you see the gospel in Proverbs, then? The gospel is that Jesus lived, died, and rose to make you an adopted son of God through faith. Proverbs is a message to sons, telling them how to live in a way that will please their Father. One way you can and must please your father is by working hard, not for wealth (which is His gift anyway) but to please Him.

III. Wisdom on Work, v. 5

Well, not only does a wise son work.

A. The wise son works at the right time, v. 5a

He works at the right time. He makes hay while the sun shines, as our culture's version of this proverb has it. He gathers in summer, when the plants are producing. He stores up what he'll need for the winter at the time when food is abundant.

In our day, of course, tradesmen of all descriptions are happy to store food for us and sell it to us when we need it. So let's talk for a second about other applications of this proverb. A wise son gathers in summer — that is, he acquires what he'll need when the time is right to acquire it. This is not the ancient sage's way of telling us to grab Black Friday deals. More likely, it's an instruction to get wisdom at the time when it's available. Right now, when times are good, store up Biblical knowledge in your heart. Spend time worshipping God. Gather the truth and understanding and spiritual habits you'll need now, so that when the evil day comes, when persecution arises, when you're thrown into solitary confinement or laid up with a splinter in the eye, you'll already have a large stock of what you need to continue to prosper spiritually. The wise son plans ahead and provides what he'll need. Yes, this means saving for retirement. Yes, this means canning applesauce when the tree in the yard produces a lot. But more than anything, it means being ready for all that life can throw at you and having the wisdom to shoot down all

the foolish ideas that will come for you. You can't reduce this proverb to one implication. Any kind of planning ahead is covered here. That's the kind of children that the Father wants!

B. The wise son's work makes his father proud, v. 5b

And that work that a wise son does makes his Father proud. The harvest is a crucial time for any farmer, and especially for a subsistence farmer who will literally have nothing to eat unless he harvests the crops and gets them stored before they go bad. That's why sleeping (the word is more like our word 'stupor,' referring not to healthy sleep but to a bad and harmful condition of being "out of it") in harvest is such a shameful thing. The foolish son doesn't pay attention, doesn't see what needs to be done, and doesn't jump up to help with it. I remember years ago one of my cousins spent the night at my parents' home. After breakfast, my siblings and I all got up and started cleaning up. But my cousin sat down in the living room on a recliner and poked his head around the back of the chair so that he could talk to us. He sat there and chatted while I did the dishes; it was the weirdest thing. I remember asking mom after he left if there was something wrong with him, sitting by like that while work was going on. She assured me that he probably just didn't know what to do and so he didn't do anything. Regardless, brothers and sisters, on the simplest, this-worldly level, the second half of Proverbs 10:5 is telling you that if you see someone working, help that person! If you're at my house, offer to do the dishes. But in all seriousness, the wise son is one who helps when he sees that it's needed. He's out there working when it's time to work.

Brothers and sisters, two proverbs in a row have emphasized the truth that a wise son helps at the right time. I want to illustrate that with a Biblical story, one that I think you'll recognize. It's about a Son, a Son who came to earth in the fullness of time died at the right time for the ungodly. He saw that we needed help, and He got out there and helped. Why should you help someone else when they need it? Because Jesus Christ helped you when you needed it. He died for you when you were powerless. And so wisdom tells you to emulate your Savior.

A Son who wouldn't save the world would have been a disgrace to our Heavenly Father. Perish the thought! Can you imagine Jesus getting up to the point of no return, then calling the 12 legions of angels and blasting His way out of custody, then ascending back to heaven with the work undone? I think most of us can imagine ourselves doing that — just backing out, quitting, telling the Father that if He wanted the world saved, He was going to have to find another candidate. But that would have been the ultimate in causing shame. That would indeed be a son to be ashamed of. But Jesus is the ultimate Son who makes His Father proud. Don't you want to imitate your Lord, working at the right time to help others when they need it most?

IV. Wisdom on Wages, Ultimate and Penultimate, vv. 15-16

Well, the chapter moves on to talk about the tongue and communication, but it returns to the theme of wealth halfway through for another look, this time at physical wealth and poverty.

A. Penultimate Security: Wealth

The rich man's wealth is a strong city. In those days before airplanes and artillery, a thick stone wall with defenders inside it could keep intruders out for a long time — long enough that they

would often decide it wasn't worth it to keep sitting there long enough to get inside. Wealth is like that kind of strong city. If you have it, you are not perfectly safe. Of course not; even for the President of the United States, such a thing is impossible for mortal man. But you're a whole lot safer than you are living in some cottage that's not behind stone walls and that any marauder can easily get at. Wealth is a strong city, one that keeps a lot of harms and disasters at bay.

B. Penultimate Risk: Poverty

Poverty, by contrast, is a destroyed city. It's still a place to live, and it still offers some shelter and protection. But it is a ruin, and nothing much works there. The NKJV translation isn't quite right; it's not that poverty "ruins" the poor, but rather that poverty is their ruins. It is the bombed-out, broken-down city in which they live. The poverty of the poor offers little protection from the disasters of life.

So why does Solomon point this out? Because he wants to get you thinking in terms of security and insecurity. Wealth brings a measure of security, while poverty brings a truckload of insecurity.

C. Ultimate Security: Righteous Work

But the ultimate in security is not found in wealth, because as we already saw, for the child of God wealth is not ultimate. Rather, life, eternal life, comes from righteous work that leads to life. Righteous work is the ultimate security.

That means, brothers and sisters, that you and I need to stop trusting in our stuff! The contents of our garages and bank accounts and IRAs will not save us. Sure, they provide a measure of security. But they cannot guarantee life. What guarantees life? Doing good works, the kind of works that only a wise son can do. God rewards our good works with eternal life, not because we force His hand but because He wants to provide for us.

D. Ultimate Risk: Unrighteous Work

Notice that the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life. This verse, too, while it describes the wicked as earning a wage, describes the work of the righteous as directed toward life. The outcome of righteous works is life; the outcome of unrighteous work is sin, ultimately leading to death. God gives eternal life, but He only gives it through the means of righteous working.

How you work matters. How you behave on the job is relevant to your eternal destiny. It's not what makes you a son. Rather, your sonship is what creates the demand that you imitate your elder brother the Lord Jesus and please your Father, our great God. What about the disgraceful son? If he's truly a son, he will be saved and will eventually be a wise son who works hard in righteousness. But if you're acting like a foolish son, look out.

Brothers and sisters, be wise. Be like Jesus. And the wages of your work will endure forever. Amen.