

Sermon 37, The Righteous in Society, Proverbs 11:9-15

Proposition: God blesses a whole society through the words and for the sake of the righteous people within it.

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- II. Righteousness Blesses One's Neighbor, vv. 9b-11
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- III. The Wisdom of Keeping Quiet About Your Neighbors, vv. 12-13
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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, this morning we look at the corporate dimension of righteousness, and especially the corporate effects of righteous speech. We see over and over in Proverbs the effect that our mouths have on our neighbors. Why does Scripture make a big deal out of this? Because this is one of the most important facets of daily life for all of us. What makes or breaks your work environment? Outside of things like loud machinery or genuine physical danger, what makes a work environment toxic is how your co-workers talk and act there. How you get along with your spouse depends in large degree in how good you both are at talking to each other! How you live in society depends, in major ways, on your ability to speak to other people. And so wisdom, who is not shy about confronting the things that actually make a difference in our daily lives, addresses how we speak to one another. Every proverb in this section deals with how we talk to each other. What we see here is the blessing that comes to a whole society when righteous people are present and speaking up within it.

I. Godless Talk Destroys One's Neighbor, v. 9a

We see first of all that godless talk destroys our neighbor. Notice, if you would, that this isn't talking about the rare homicidal maniac who wants to destroy his neighbor with physical weapons. It's talking about the far more common case we call gossip, insult, and slander, or even just plain bad advice. That kind of foolishness from the mouth can destroy your neighbor. Think about how many lives have been destroyed when authority figures have told them that sexual immorality is okay, that it's okay to sleep with your girlfriend when you're fourteen, that

abortion is no big deal. These are the messages authoritatively spoken by our society, and they destroy lives. Would you like to be the four-year-old girl who gets left with mom's new boyfriend? Brothers and sisters, the godless talk of sexual libertines is destroying our neighbors all around us. Yes, this proverb also applies to gossip and slander — and yes, at times those things can destroy lives. But let's not miss the elephant in the room: the evolutionary indoctrination and the open mocking of God's sexual standards that has resulted in abject misery for many tens of millions of our fellow citizens. It's not too strong to say that it has destroyed their lives. Think of lies like the lie that says "Black people are less human," or the lie that says "Sexual pleasure is your right and you should absolutely take it with anyone and everyone who consents to take it with you," or the lie that says "It's wrong to tell children that they have to believe in Jesus." These lies destroy people! Brothers and sisters, the false ideologies and ideas that you and I authoritatively proclaim have immense destructive power. The solution to these evil things that are spewed out into society to destroy people is to counter them with the truth. Though not every verse in this passage talks about the righteous speaking, the larger context surely indicates that one primary way in which the righteous bless their community is by speaking up. V. 14 especially tends this direction, as, of course, does v. 9. But overall, the rest of the passage focuses on how the mere presence of the righteous is a blessing to their neighbors, even apart from what they have to say.

II. Righteousness Blesses One's Neighbor, vv. 9b-11

That's right. In a world where pernicious ideologies leave a wake of corpses and damaged, just-trying-to-survive people, your righteousness can bless your neighbor.

A. Knowledge Delivers the Righteous, v. 9b

First of all, the righteous person is delivered by his own knowledge. This statement looks back to the previous verses, which talk about how righteousness protects and delivers the righteous person. But it also looks ahead, because (at least in its first half) it talks about how speech impacts the community.

What does it mean to say that the righteous is delivered by his knowledge? Well, the wicked destroy their neighbors by speaking pernicious falsehoods. The righteous person doesn't believe those falsehoods! And so we tell our children not to sleep with their boyfriends and girlfriends. We tell them not to watch pornographic images or engage in sexting. We give them, as best as we can, the knowledge we have that lets us know that participation in the sexual revolution will destroy you rather than giving you any kind of fullness of life. By implication, of course, if the righteous are delivered from the pernicious falsehoods of the godless by their knowledge, then they are able to share that knowledge and deliver others. But as we know, the knowledge of the righteous is on the whole unpopular. You may know that abstinence before marriage is the only levelheaded approach to sexuality. But if you think people are dying to hear that news from you, you need to get out more. Our society insists on precisely the opposite and demonizes those who tout abstinence.

So Solomon focuses on the truth that if you are wise, you are wise for yourself. In a day when the wicked destroy people right and left by spreading misleading facts and wicked ideologies, the righteous will be delivered precisely by their knowledge of the truth which is the only antidote to the lie.

B. The Prosperity of the Righteous Brings Joy to the Community, v. 10

But the sage doesn't stop there. Yes, knowledge will deliver you personally. But consider this: the deliverance of the righteous is their prosperity that gladdens the whole community! That's right. When the righteous prosper, the whole city rejoices; when the wicked meet their downfall, the whole city rejoices more. I'm not going to play political favorites here, but I think we all know people who purchased clocks that would count down to the last day of Barack Obama's presidency with "Jan. 2017: The End of an Error" emblazoned on them. Doubtless many others of our fellow citizens are purchasing clocks with "Jan. 2021: The End of an Error" emblazoned on them. When the fellow you can't stand goes out of office, you and your like-minded political friends rejoice.

But Solomon is talking about something more significant than mass psychology here. The point is that the presence of the righteous is a blessing to the city. This is made very clear in God's dialogue with Abraham, where God eventually promises to spare Sodom entirely for the sake of only ten righteous people! Wow! For ten people God would spare a city that deserved to be smitten with fire and brimstone out of Heaven. Or think of how much God blessed Lot for the sake of Abraham. Again, mere association with the righteous brings vast benefits in its wake.

So if you care about your city, but you have to choose, what should you pursue: Community activism or personal holiness? You won't find a lot in Proverbs about community activism. You won't see many verses about how the righteous demonstrate with street signs while the wicked stay home and do their own work. But you will see statements like this one, that do in fact say that the best thing you can do for your city is to be righteous. When you as a righteous person experience God's blessing, that raises your whole community.

Can we believe this in our day and age? Is this "trickle-down economics"? Whatever name you call it, and whatever you think of trickle-down economics, Proverbs 11:10 clearly says that the prosperity of the righteous makes the whole city glad, presumably because in their prosperity it prospers. The best illustration of this is the saving work of Jesus Christ. In His prosperity, we prosper. As He flourishes, the world community flourishes because He is the Savior of the world.

Does this mean that the best thing you can do for the community is to withdraw into a monastery? Not necessarily. At times, in extremities, that may very well be called for. But most of the time, the proverb is simply telling us that what's good for the righteous is good for the whole city.

C. Righteous Speech Exalts the Community, v. 11

The next verse indicates that it's specifically through the mouth of the righteous that a city is blessed. A city is built up when the upright bless it! Yes, the syntax is ambiguous — deliberately

so, in order to tie this verse to the previous verse. Read in light of v. 10, the first line of v. 11 is saying that when the righteous receive the blessing of God, the city prospers along with them. But in light of v. 11b, 11a is saying that when the righteous open their mouth and speak blessing on the city, perhaps by presenting the truth that counters the harmful ideologies of the wicked, then the city is exalted.

How do you bless your city? First of all, open your mouth to pray for it. Ask the Lord for our political leaders and city employees. Ask the Lord to bless them and assist in their work. And pray for the general public here too. And then, open your mouth. We have a city councilman among us. It is his task to open his mouth to bless the city — to speak up at the meetings with the purpose of bringing blessing on the city.

Compare that once again to the mouth of the wicked, which destroys not just their neighbor but their neighborhood! As the wicked speak, pouring out their destructive views, the ultimate tendency of their words is to undermine true community, to tear the fabric of society, to introduce ideas that, carried to their logical conclusion, will make community life impossible. The currently fashionable religion of secular humanism is one such common idea. It teaches that humans are nothing special, that other animals are just as important as we are, that “speciesism” is a faulty kind of discrimination. It also teaches that sexual libertinism is normal, healthy, and desirable, and laughs at the idea of God, final judgment, sin, and salvation. If Proverbs is correct that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, then secular humanism and other secular ideologies ultimately undermine and destroy community. And what are the truisms of contemporary life in America? That we are more divided than we have ever been. That families are falling apart. That minorities are oppressed and that the efforts to help them have been largely unsuccessful. That civil society is on the verge of a massive breakdown.

Why do we feel like our country is falling apart? Because the city, and by extension the nation, is exalted by the mouth of the righteous when they speak the truth, but overthrown by the mouth of the wicked when they spew out their secular humanist lies. Brothers and sisters, again, the proverb does not say exactly how the upright bless the city. No doubt this is because it happens in a myriad of ways. But surely one of those ways is by speaking the truth. The word of blessing may first take the form of a word of rebuke. The word rightly spoken may need to be a word that says “Don’t move in with your girlfriend. Don’t get a divorce. Don’t believe that evolution is the final explanation for how we got here, much less the sum total of everything that we are.” And it will also need to be a word that says, “The only thing that can save America is not the right candidate, the right party, the right platform; the only thing that can save America is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior of the world.” How do we say that in our city? Well, we start by saying it here in church. We continue by saying it to our children and friends at home. We say it wherever we know that people respect us and are listening to us. The presence of the upright isn’t the only thing that blesses the city. Their words bless it too. So let’s commit to speaking the truth in love, in church, at home, and in public when, where, and as we can according to our own places and callings.

III. The Wisdom of Keeping Quiet About Your Neighbors, vv. 12-13

Well, Solomon was far too wise to stop there. Though the blessing of the upright opening their mouth and speaking the truth helps the city, this is no blanket endorsement of saying whatever whenever.

A. Fools Show Contempt for their Neighbors, v. 12a

First of all, if you think your neighbors are foolish, in general, it is your responsibility to keep it to yourself. Imagine if there was a family in this church who engaged in a financial practice that most of us would consider pretty risky, if not downright incompatible with Christian profession. Now let's say that I preached, by name, against that practice and encouraged all of you to let that family know regularly that their financial practice was unsustainable and probably no good.

What would you call me if I did that? Of course! You'd call me a fool, and I would be one. To look down on your neighbor, and especially to talk about looking down on your neighbor, is the work of a fool. So maybe your neighbor does a lot of questionable things. But to engage in naked scorn for that neighbor is not the work of wisdom. Far from it. One thing is very clear from this passage: Wise behavior is that which builds the community! One reason our country is so divided right now is that both sides cherish a strong contempt for each other, and are not afraid to show it. Hillary Clinton called Donald Trump supporters a "basket of deplorables," and those same Trump supporters grabbed that phrase like a badge of honor. Brothers and sisters, both these actions show contempt for the neighbor! We don't respect Hillary, and so we mock her when she calls us deplorable. Imagine FDR labeling a large swath of American society "deplorables." Would people have worn that as a badge of honor, or cringed in shame under the president's withering scorn? Fools on both sides of the political aisle keep right on showing contempt for their neighbors, and this is *not* born of wisdom.

B. The Wise Remain Silent, v. 12b

In fact, if the wise have reason to question their neighbor's right to be respected, they keep it to themselves. Wisdom shows itself in keeping quiet about the perceived weaknesses and failings of your neighbors! Jesus, moved, perhaps, by the overwhelming burden of meditating on this truth alone, tells the whole table "One of you will betray me." But when they all say, "Who is it, Lord?" He doesn't say "Judas Iscariot!"

No. He signals privately to those in the know, to Peter and John, His closest friends and companions. But wisely, He remains silent in the face of the other disciples' inquiries, and half-reluctantly endorses Judas' own question. Brothers and sisters, yes, we bless the city by speaking the truth that counteracts the evil ideologies that destroy our city. But we do not bless the city by exposing people's weaknesses and inadequacies right and left. The wise remain silent about many things that are less than savory!

C. Fools Reveal Others' Secrets, v. 13a

Similarly, fools reveal other's secrets. A walking slanderer, as the Hebrew literally says, reveals secrets. He says whatever he can. Think of the *National Enquirer* or *People Magazine* or *The Sun* or *The Daily Mail*. These periodicals live to get the scoop on what so-and-so is doing. They

move heaven and earth to find out everything they can about celebrities from A-listers down to D-listers and below. What kind of person spends their life writing, and reading, celebrity gossip? A fool. Now, I don't think that most of you are addicted to tabloid-reading. But we can still enjoy winking out our friends' secrets and sharing them with each other with great delight in their unsavory character. The worst form of this is when someone told you something in confidence, not wanting it spread, and you run to make sure the whole family and the whole church knows ASAP. Don't be that fool!

D. The Faithful Keep a Confidence, v. 13b

Instead, be the faithful person who keeps a confidence. Do this to make your Father glad — which is the whole point of wisdom anyway. The greatest example of this, once again, is Jesus Christ, the wise son par excellence. When Peter asks whether John will live until the Second Coming, what does Jesus say? “What is that to you? Follow me.”

Jesus didn't share needless information. He always remembered the WAIT principle: “Why Am I Talking?” That's why we can feel so comfortable in prayer: We know that He will always keep our confidences too.

So remember that at times you bless you neighbors and your city by speaking a blessing — but at other times, you bless your neighbors and your city by not speaking, by holding your tongue.

IV. The Wisdom of Speaking to Your Neighbors, v. 14

Yet that said, wise counsel can save the community. Forget the city; a whole people can perish for lack of counsel! In the multitude of counselors is safety. This is telling you not to make major life decisions without talking to anyone else about them. It's telling rulers and people in authority to even more obsessively consult councilors. And it is reminding you that at times, you may be asked for counsel. Don't be embarrassed to give it when asked — but remember that it is healthy for you to be just one of a multitude of counselors. Once again, your righteousness can benefit the community — if you speak at the right time.

V. The Wisdom of Hating Co-Signing for your Neighbor, v. 15

Well, our section concludes with another warning against cosigning. As we said back in ch. 6, cosigning is an act of folly — and it's foolish act God chose to use to save the world. Jesus guaranteed your and my bad debt. That doesn't mean that we should go around assuming other people's bad debt. Such an activity is foolish in the extreme. The person who hates co-signing, who hates guaranteeing another's good behavior and becoming liable for another's misbehavior, will feel safe.

So how's that for a balanced picture of the wise son in society? He speaks at the right time. He holds His peace at the right time. He gives wonderful counsel, and part of His wisdom lies in warning us against co-signing even as He co-signs for us.

So make your Father glad by blessing your community with His righteousness. After all, that's what the ultimate wise son did. He saved His city, and His world, by being righteous in society. If you are a son of God through faith today, then look to Jesus, and internalize His

wisdom so that you can walk it out in society. In so doing, you will make your Father glad.
Amen.