

Sermon 41, A Rooted Life, Proverbs 12:1-14

Proposition: To live a rooted life requires the love of discipline, the justice of God, and the practice of righteousness.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, all of us are familiar with the fact that plants have roots. They grow down into the soil in which they're planted, and through their roots they draw up nourishment and water from the ground. Well, we know that human beings have roots too. Our roots are not physical, though, but social: we draw our nourishment not by literally growing a limb into the ground, but rather by connecting with other people and getting support and affirmation from them. To live in a place and make friends and build a family there is called "putting down roots;" a family that is forced to move frequently and has those social connections cut off all the time will feel uprooted and lost.

Well, our passage this morning twice describes the righteous as rooted, rooted so deeply that they cannot be uprooted (vv. 3 & 12, NIV). We are rooted not only in the community of faith we call the church, but also, and ultimately, in God. The well-rooted plant flourishes — and so does the well-rooted human person. Our text this morning describes the soil in which a rooted life can grow, and then it describes some specifics of what that rooted life will look like. Brothers and sisters, this morning with God's help I hope to show you that to live a rooted life requires the

love of discipline, the justice of God, and the practice of righteousness. That's right: you and I need to live a rooted life, a life rooted deep in the soil of discipline, the grace and justice of God, and the constancy, stability, and dependability of righteousness.

I. The Soil of a Rooted Life, vv. 1-3

Our text this morning begins rather like chapter 10, with three foundational principles that inform the rest of the chapter.

A. The Love of Discipline, v. 1

Like many of the chapters in this section of Proverbs, the chapter begins with a "rearing saying." The person who loves discipline loves knowledge. The modern version of this statement is one that you see on t-shirts at the gym: "The will to win is nothing without the will to train."

This statement is linking together two things that we would like to separate. We would like to attain knowledge without discipline, just like we would like to get muscular without working out. But brothers and sisters, the point here is clear: you can't know anything without disciplining yourself to pay attention, to think, to use your head, to remember! People don't love discipline for its own sake; they love it for the reward it brings, the intellectual good of knowledge.

Do you love knowledge? Do you have a thirst to know? I think you do, for you are here in a Presbyterian church where we major on knowledge. We spend a lot of time learning in this congregation — with good reason, I think. The world God gave us has so much in it for us to learn. The more you learn, the more you know your own ignorance!

So once again the sage is exhorting us to love discipline. This means loving preemptive discipline and corrective discipline. It means being glad when God cares about you enough to send some suffering into your life to teach you the discipline of trusting Him. It means rejoicing when you suffer the bad consequences of your folly, because that teaches you to flee folly in the future!

But notice, again, the mismatched character of the second line. A perfect antithesis would say something like "But whoever hates discipline hates knowledge." Instead, "hating discipline" is glossed by "hating correction." What kind of person hates knowledge? What kind of person is stupid? The person who can't bear to hear he's wrong.

A rooted life grows in the soil of hearing rebuke. Intellectual discipline begins with learning that you're wrong. Now, obviously you shouldn't throw out everything you know every time someone says "I think that may not be correct." You'd change your opinion twenty times a day. But the minimum that's being talked about here is giving fair consideration to it every time someone tells you that you're wrong.

Because really, honestly, if you can't hear you're wrong, you're stupid. We have all been taught for our whole lives that folly is a moral condition, not an intellectual one, and that some very smart people can be fools. But brothers and sisters, that's not the whole story. *Moral conditions become intellectual conditions.* That's the point of this verse. The person who is sunk

in pride to the point where he can't hear that he's wrong is stupid. He's not just morally evil. He's not just wrong. He's not just arrogant. He's also a dummy.

This is true across the board — individually, ecclesiastically, socially, politically. The person who can't hear that he's wrong is morally evil and intellectually blighted. Brothers and sisters, to reject discipline and refuse to learn from it, to reject correction and refuse to change, is to be like a brute, as the KJV has it. It's to be stupid. And we wonder why the products of an educational and political system saturated with moral folly are intellectual pygmies. It's no mystery. And if we submit to that system, if we embrace the folly of arrogance, the folly of socialism, the folly of prelacy, the folly of intersectional feminism, the folly of race-baiting or racism, then we too will be first evil and then stupid.

George Kennan taught us that communism could be contained. But evil can't be contained. It will produce stupidity every time.

B. The Justice of God, v. 2

Well, the second component in the soil of a rooted life is an acknowledgement of God's character. God favors (i.e., shows grace to) the righteous, but the man whose life is characterized by wicked schemes He will condemn. God is gracious; God is just. Those are two foundational principles of the Christian faith.

Now, a reader in Solomon's day would have no difficulty with this proverb. He would find it straightforward and refreshing. But we, with two millennia of open teaching of total depravity under our belts, hear this proverb and are tempted to something like despair. What is your first thought on hearing this proverb? Mine was "There is none righteous, no not one" — a quotation from the OT, by the way. But that brings up the question: Is this proverb pointless? Are there any good people whom God favors?

The answer is undoubtedly "yes." Solomon is not saying that these good people are absolutely good, with no spot of sin in their hearts. He is not saying that God looks around, finds good people, and forgives their sins and saves them because they are good. Instead, he is talking about someone who has been born again, who is already saved, and who is therefore able to do good works that please God.

Still sound wrong? I can do no better than quote the words of the Apostle Paul: "Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord" (Col 3:20 ESV). Renewed by the death of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, you and I are able to please the Lord by what we do. The good man obtains favor from the Lord — that is, the man who has already been saved and is walking in obedience receives even more grace, even more favor, from the Lord who is pleased with Him.

Can this proverb describe an unbeliever? No. "Those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom 8:8 ESV). We cannot merit the grace of justification; we cannot even deserve to be sanctified. But God has put His own faithfulness on the line to say that He gives grace to those who please Him. Though there is no respect of persons with God, He does favor the good.

Does that give you strength and hope in your Christian life? Does that make you eager to please your loving Heavenly Father? You will meet with His favor when you do what is good in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Meanwhile, though, Jehovah condemns those who devise wicked schemes. If you plan ungodly things, if you spend time thinking out the steps of how you might cheat on your wife or your taxes, of how you might look at porn and get away with it, of how you might overindulge your sweet tooth, God will condemn that.

We know that no one is righteous and that everyone is by nature a child of wrath. But we must not forget the corresponding truth that the LORD condemns the wicked but favors the righteous.

C. The Constancy of Righteousness, v. 3

The final component of the soil of a rooted life is the truth that wickedness cannot establish you. Think of that word in its full sense. “I’m just trying to get established,” we might say. What does that mean? It means building a whole life — being part of a family, having a job, buying a home, developing a network of relationships both personal and institutional. Wickedness is no aid in that endeavor; in fact, it’s a negative, a drag, something that prevents one from being established. Meanwhile, the root of the righteous cannot be moved. We’re talking this morning about a rooted life. Solomon uses this metaphor because of course roots can’t be moved. They are deep in the ground and that’s where they stay, because if they leave the ground they die. The righteous, then, cannot be uprooted. Why not? Because the Lord Himself guarantees their permanence.

So those are the three basic principles: righteousness endures. God is perfect in grace and perfect in justice. And God wants His people to discipline their minds in pursuit of knowledge.

Now, you might ask, what does that look like?

II. The Practice of a Rooted Life, vv. 4-14

To which the sage responds, “I’m so glad you asked.” He shows us specifically what righteousness looks like in the home, justice looks like for the tongue, and how discipline affects the mind. We have in these 11 verses a mini-portrait of the rooted life.

A. Righteousness in the Household, vv. 4, 7, 9-12

A rooted life begins at home.

1. A wife with something to her establishes the household, v. 4

We see first of all a mention of the *eschet hayil*, the “woman of excellence” or the “virtuous woman. Probably the most exact English translation of this phrase is our idiom “that woman has really got something to her” or “there’s a lot in her.” This is the older sense of “virtue” — not just moral excellence, but solidity, strength and force of character, courage and skill in a number of important areas. This kind of wife adorns her husband like a crown. She shows that he rules (one of the major functions of a crown). Women, do you strive to be this excellent wife? Would your husband call you his chief adornment or his greatest embarrassment? You see, a wife who publicly shames her husband is like rotteness in his bones. You’ve heard of osteoporosis, or “bone holes” as we would say in English. Your bones can get weak and brittle and eventually

shatter into pieces if this disease goes on long enough. Well, ladies, this is what you're doing to your husband if you bring him shame. It is wicked to shame your husband. V. 3 already pointed out that wickedness doesn't establish. If you don't like where your household is, ladies, nagging your husband is not going to help establish it. Bugging him, publicly shaming him, calling him out on Facebook — none of those things are going to establish you or household. Rather, living with noble character will adorn him and bless him — and, as we know from v. 3, it will establish you and your household too!

2. Righteousness establishes the righteous person's household, v. 7

You see, our text goes on to promise that the house of the righteous stands firm. The wicked perish. They are no more. That means, going back to v. 4, that if you decide your husband is a deadbeat and you can't stand it anymore that sinning against him will only make things worse!

Where do you look for rootedness? How do you seek to be established? Proverbs tells us that there is only one way to get there, and that's the way of obedience to God.

3. Hard work provides for you and your animals, vv. 9-11

One major component of this obedience to God is found in hard work. V. 9 is a tricky one. The text seems to say that it's better to have a low status but a relatively expensive asset than to pretend have a higher status but lack food. Such a statement seems almost too obvious, though. If we were to translate this into modern idiom, following Rabbi Fox's commentary on this verse, we might say something like "Better to be a nobody and have a car than to exalt yourself and be starving." But, as Fox comments, pretty much anything is better than *that!* To be an arrogant fool who doesn't have anything is indeed a bad spot to be in. Anyway, at the very least the proverb is telling us to accept the status God has given and not pretend that we are really in a different wealth bracket. But another interpretation of the text is possible. In Hebrew, the word "servant" and the word "work" are the same root, with only the pronunciation different — rather like the statement, "I have a flat belly but the L is silent." And so some reinterpret the text to say, "Better to be poor and work hard than to pretend to be somebody and lack food." Based on the content of the next two proverbs, I really like this reading. You see, v. 10 tells us that the righteous care for their animals, while v. 11 tells us that anyone who works hard at his job will have plenty of bread.

Yes, there are low-wage jobs. Yes, there are working poor. Yes, there are Christian people who mistreat their animals. But Proverbs never pretends that its statements are totally without exception. Instead, they are to be taken as statements of what almost always happens, barring some terrible intrusion into the established order. Unless something goes wrong, hard work will provide for you. Your animals will be able to tell whether you're righteous. And it's better to have low social status and work hard than to be higher up the scale and yet have no food.

Notice, too, that the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel. Again, we see at work the principle that righteousness establishes. Wicked people destroy their animals. Think about the sexual revolution crowd who want to legalize bestiality. Talk about being cruel to animals! Even aside from that, of course, anyone who has an animal take the place of a child, or of God, is

ultimately being cruel to that animal by asking too much of it. Your dog can't replace your son. Your cat can't be your god, as much as it might think it wants to. Brothers and sisters, don't be the fool who pursues vanities — vain things (NIV's "fantasies") or vain people. And remember that the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel!

Now, is Solomon saying that the wicked can never do anything kind? In one sense, yes — they can never do anything kind for the right reason, for the reason that they love God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength. But in another sense, he's merely pointing out that evil cannot be contained. If you hate and murder your unborn child, that rage will eventually work its way into how you treat your dog. Unless you repent, it's only a matter of time. The wicked by definition are people who have given themselves over to sin and refuse to control themselves. No wonder, then, that they eventually begin to mistreat everyone, even the dog!

So how can you be established? By being kind to animals, by working instead of pursuing fantasies.

4. Righteousness actually establishes, v. 12

You see, righteousness actually makes secure. Once again, we have the mismatched proverb lines. Filled in, the proverb would say something like "The wicked desire the security they think evil brings, but only the righteous have that kind of secure rootedness." Brothers and sisters, while it looks like the wicked prosper, they are doomed to be destroyed. Again, it's only a matter of time because God is a just God. So if you want to be established, pursue righteousness. If you don't want to be established, then go ahead — give yourself over to evil and see what happens. You'll find that you desperately want some rootedness, some security, and that it's exactly what you don't have because God Himself is against you.

B. God's Justice for the Tongue, vv. 5-6, 13-14

Well, not only does righteousness establish you; God's justice will also come for your tongue. How you talk matters.

1. God blesses right words, vv. 5-6

Our God blesses right words. The wicked try to kill with their words, whereas God gives life to those who speak righteousness from their mouths. Though the Lord is not mentioned here as the agent who rewards good speech and punishes bad speech, the context makes it all too clear that He is the one who makes these things happen.

So how do you talk? Do you make the right plans and think the right thoughts that will rescue you from the fate in store for the wicked?

2. Wicked words kill, vv. 5-6

The wicked don't make righteous plans or give righteous advice — and they won't be rescued. From what? From the destruction that lies in wait for evil speakers! Their deceitful counsels will undermine them and bring them down.

3. Good and evil words bring their own rewards, vv. 13-14

Later on, our passage says the same thing. Evildoers are trapped by their talk, but the righteous escape.

How do you speak? Does your mouth entangle you? Do you get caught out in lies? Or are you filled with good things because of how you speak? Truth is attractive. Truth is winning. And if you have it and apply it, then you will be attractive.

And then Solomon brings up deeds. How you talk is not irrelevant to how you behave. The righteous will be repaid on the earth — and how much more the wicked! Brothers and sisters, if your words and deeds came around to you (our English proverb, “What goes around comes around”), would you like it? Would you appreciate it? Would it be something you could handle? Would you like to take what you’ve dished out?

Think about Jesus. He could say yes to that question because He’s the wise son who makes His Father glad. His good words and deeds have brought Him the reward of sitting down to reign with His Father. Do you imitate Him? If so, your life will be rooted. Your speech can bring you the Lord’s favor — or His opposition. How do you verbally treat others?

C. Discipline for the Mind, v. 8 with v. 1

Well, let’s go back basically to the middle of our passage. Here we have an application of that final component of the soil in which a rooted life grows. This is the component of discipline.

1. Undisciplined = stupid = despised

The person with a warped mind, a perverted mind, a gutter-brain — he will be despised. How does one get there? By refusing discipline. You can get your mind all twisted up if you refuse to let it be straightened out by the rebuke of Scripture, the Bible, and the body of Christ, not to mention the blunt-speaking unbelievers who see us more clearly than we see ourselves. Don’t let yourself be disciplined and you will be intellectually stupid and morally perverse. Once you’re in that condition, people who have some sense will despise you. They will look down on you as the pervert and idiot that you are.

What do you think of perverts and idiots? Not much. That’s what I think of them.

Your social standing as well as your intellect depends on your ability to submit to discipline. Jesus submitted to discipline by undergoing the miseries of this life. And Solomon is calling you to be a wise son just like your savior.

2. Disciplined = wise = praised

Meanwhile, the text also equates the disciplined with the prudent and insightful man. That person will be praised. Ultimately, of course, we know that this praise is not only human, but divine. God will say “Well done, good and faithful servant” to the disciplined, wise, faithful Christian.

So how about it? Do you want to be praised by God? Do you want Him to favor you and speak well of you? In Christ, you already have His favor. Won’t you respond to your adoption by living like a wise son? The best part of being favored by God is simply enjoying His joy in you. Can you do that? I beg you to do so. Embrace your status as a wise son, and make His Father heart glad. Amen.