

Living Wisely in God's World

Studies in the Book of Proverbs

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3. Politics, Business and Finance

Corporate Righteousness

We concluded the last session by saying that the wisdom of righteousness is not just personal but corporate, and affects the life of the nation. In this session we will look at this more closely, with reference to political and corporate life.

Those Who Rule

Remember that the Proverbs were collected by kings (Prov. 1:1; 10:1; 21:1; 31:1), primarily that they might have 'an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil' (1 Kings 3:9). So we may expect Proverbs to have something to say about politics and statesmanship, which will apply as much to political leaders today as to kings of old. This will help us both to relate to our political leaders well (see Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17), and to pray for them rightly (1 Tim. 2:1-2).

Human beings are born to rule.¹ God created us to have 'dominion . . . over all the earth' (Gen. 1:26, Heb.). We are to 'inherit the world' (Rom. 4:13; compare Matt. 5:5). The 'Son of Man', along with 'the saints of the Most High', is given 'everlasting dominion' (Dan. 7:14, 18, 22, 27). God gives 'kingdom' (kingship, authority, rule) to His 'little flock' (Luke 12:32). We are to 'judge angels' (1 Cor. 6:3). Those who are 'ransomed for God . . . will reign on earth' (Rev. 5:9, 10). While it may be true, in our sinful situation, that 'Power tends to corrupt' because 'Great men are almost always bad men',² not all exercising of power to rule is bad. In the original conditions under which God bestowed dominion on humankind (see Gen. 1:27-28), it was given to be used in relationship with God, in the blessing of God, for the purpose of God.

Proverbs bears this out. There is seen to be a special relationship between the king and God:

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord;
he turns it wherever he will (Prov. 21:1).

Wisdom says:

By me kings reign,
and rulers decree what is just;
by me rulers rule,
and nobles, all who govern rightly (Prov. 8:15-16).

Kings can participate, in proper measure, in the very wisdom of God:

It is the glory of God to conceal things,

¹ See Martin Bleby, *Power in Relationships: Issues of Love and Control*, Chapter 4.

² Lord Acton, English historian, in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887.

but the glory of kings is to search things out.³
Like the heavens for height, like the earth for depth,
so the mind of kings is unsearchable (Prov. 25:2-3).⁴

Inspired decisions are on the lips of a king;
his mouth does not sin in judgment (Prov. 16:10).

Those who rule will prosper as they remain within God's blessing:

The blessing of the Lord makes rich,
and he adds no sorrow with it (Prov. 10:22).

And those who rule, if they are not to be hitting their heads against a brick wall, need to rule consistently with the purposes of God:

The human mind may devise many plans,
but it is the purpose of the LORD that will be established (Prov. 19:21).

The plans of the mind belong to mortals,
but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD (Prov. 16:1).

Evil plans are an abomination to the LORD,
but gracious words are pure (Prov. 15:26).

Commit your work to the LORD,
and your plans will be established (Prov. 16:3).

So both God and the ruler are to be rightly respected:

My child, fear the LORD and the king,
and do not disobey either of them;
for disaster comes from them suddenly,
and who knows the ruin that both can bring (Prov. 24:21-22).

Ruling in Righteousness

It follows, then, that if rulers are to rule wisely, they need to rule righteously:

It is an abomination to kings to do evil,
for the throne is established by righteousness (Prov. 16:12).

Loyalty and faithfulness preserve the king,
and his throne is upheld by righteousness (Prov. 20:28).

This has practical implications for taxation policy, and right care for the vulnerable:

By justice a king gives stability to the land,
but one who makes heavy exactions ruins it (Prov. 29:4).

If a king judges the poor with equity,
his throne will be established forever (Prov. 29:14).

Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all the destitute.

³ Compare Deut. 29:29: 'The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, to observe all the words of this law'.

⁴ Compare wisdom in Prov. 8:24-31.

Speak out, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy (Prov. 31:8–9; see also 28:3; 28:15).

A wise and righteous ruler will have no dealings with evil:

A king who sits on the throne of judgment
winnows all evil with his eyes (Prov. 20:8).

A wise king winnows the wicked,
and drives the wheel over them (Prov. 20:26).

Rulers and Those Around Them

So rulers need to choose their friends and advisers carefully:

Those who love a pure heart and are gracious in speech
will have the king as a friend (Prov. 22:11).

Righteous lips are the delight of a king,
and he loves those who speak what is right (Prov. 16:13).

Do you see those who are skillful in their work?
They will serve kings;
they will not serve common people (Prov. 22:29).

Take away the dross from the silver,
and the smith has material for a vessel;
take away the wicked from the presence of the king,
and his throne will be established in righteousness (Prov. 25:4–5).

Rulers are not to make all the decisions on their own:

Where there is no guidance, a people falls,
but in an abundance of counselors there is safety (Prov. 11:14).

Plans are established by taking advice;
wage war by following wise guidance (Prov. 20:18).

Wise warriors are mightier than strong ones,
and those who have knowledge than those who have strength;
for by wise guidance you can wage your war,
and in abundance of counselors there is victory (Prov. 24:5–6).

We need to be wise and circumspect in the ways we relate with those in power:

When you sit down to eat with a ruler,
observe carefully what is before you,
and put a knife to your throat
if you have a big appetite.
Do not desire the ruler's delicacies,
for they are deceptive food (Prov. 23:1–3).

The dread anger of a king is like the growling of a lion;
anyone who provokes him to anger forfeits life itself (Prov. 20:2).

Rulers in Perspective

Rulers also need to take care that power does not go to their head:

The glory of a king is a multitude of people;
without people a prince is ruined (Prov. 14:28).

They also need to ensure they have a lifestyle fit for rulers:

The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him:
No, my son! No, son of my womb!
No, son of my vows!
Do not give your strength to women,
your ways to those who destroy kings.
It is not for kings, O Lemuel,
it is not for kings to drink wine,
or for rulers to desire strong drink;
or else they will drink and forget what has been decreed,
and will pervert the rights of all the afflicted.
Give strong drink to one who is perishing,
and wine to those in bitter distress;
let them drink and forget their poverty,
and remember their misery no more (Prov. 31:1–7).

And there are salutary sayings that put their power into perspective:

the lizard can be grasped in the hand,
yet it is found in kings' palaces.

Three things are stately in their stride;
four are stately in their gait:
the lion, which is mightiest among wild animals
and does not turn back before any;
the strutting rooster, the he- goat,
and a king striding before his people (Prov. 30:28–31).

And a reminder that things can still happen, even without rulers being there:

the locusts have no king,
yet all of them march in rank (Prov. 30:27).

Integrity in Business

These admonitions on use of power apply also to those in business. The economy looms large in local, national and global life, even to the extent of becoming a rival god that determines and controls people's lives. Proverbs has some sensible advice on economic relations that can mitigate some of that undue preponderance and preoccupation.

In its setting, Proverbs addresses issues in primary production, manufacturing and trade. Primary industry requires on-the-ground knowledge and sensitive management:

Know well the condition of your flocks,
and give attention to your herds;
for riches do not last forever,
nor a crown for all generations.
When the grass is gone, and new growth appears,
and the herbage of the mountains is gathered,
the lambs will provide your clothing,
and the goats the price of a field;
there will be enough goats' milk for your food,
for the food of your household
and nourishment for your servant-girls (Prov. 27:23–27).

Agriculture also repays proper planning and right priorities, getting infrastructure for the means of production in place before you look after yourself:

Prepare your work outside,
get everything ready for you in the field;
and after that build your house (Prov. 24:27).

Diligence and hard work pay off:

A slack hand causes poverty,
but the hand of the diligent makes rich.
A child who gathers in summer is prudent,
but a child who sleeps in harvest brings shame (Prov. 10:4–5).

Those who till their land will have plenty of food,
but those who follow worthless pursuits have no sense (Prov. 12:11)

In all toil there is profit,
but mere talk leads only to poverty (Prov. 14:23).

Anyone who tills the land will have plenty of bread,
but one who follows worthless pursuits will have plenty of poverty (Prov. 28:19).

All this is 'the business that God has given everyone to be busy with' (Eccl. 3:10; compare Gen. 2:15).

Manufacturing also requires diligence and perseverance:

She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands . . .
She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
Her lamp does not go out at night.
She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle . . .
She makes linen garments and sells them;
she supplies the merchant with sashes (Prov. 31:13, 18–19, 24).

Those in trade and services need to be reliable:

Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come again,
tomorrow I will give it"—when you have it with you (Prov. 3:28).

God has a particular interest in seeing that trade is honest and fair:

Honest balances and scales are the LORD 's;
all the weights in the bag are his work (Prov. 16:11).

Honesty and justice are to be the hallmarks of business dealings, because that is the way God is:

A false balance is an abomination to the LORD,
but an accurate weight is his delight (Prov. 11:1).

Diverse weights and diverse measures
are both alike an abomination to the LORD . . .
Differing weights are an abomination to the LORD,
and false scales are not good (Prov. 20:10, 23).

In business planning, as in everything else, we need to know God, and act in concert with others:

All one's ways may be pure in one's own eyes,
but the Lord weighs the spirit.
Commit your work to the Lord,
and your plans will be established (Prov. 16:2-3).

Without counsel, plans go wrong,
but with many advisers they succeed (Prov. 15:22).

These two things amount to the two great commandments: love God and one another (Matt. 22:37-40).

Investment and Finance

There are stern warnings against the folly of trying to make money quickly:

For in vain is the net baited
while the bird is looking on;
yet they lie in wait—to kill themselves!
and set an ambush—for their own lives!
Such is the end of all who are greedy for gain;
it takes away the life of its possessors (Prov. 1:19).

An estate quickly acquired in the beginning
will not be blessed in the end (Prov. 20:21).

The miser is in a hurry to get rich
and does not know that loss is sure to come (Prov. 28:22).

And vividly:

Do not toil to acquire wealth;
be discerning enough to desist.
When your eyes light on it, it is gone,
for suddenly it sprouts wings,
flying like an eagle toward heaven (Prov. 23:4-5).

Bread gained by deceit is sweet,
but afterward the mouth will be full of gravel (Prov. 20:17).

Exactung undue interest, or withholding sales to push the price up, is promoting your own interest at the expense of others:

One who augments wealth by exorbitant interest
gathers it for another who is kind to the poor (Prov. 28:8).

The people curse those who hold back grain,
but a blessing is on the head of those who sell it (Prov. 11:26; compare James 4:13-5:6).

This is the peril of 'covetousness, which is idolatry' (Col. 3:5 RSV; compare Prov. 11:28). On the other hand:

By wisdom a house is built,
and by understanding it is established;
by knowledge the rooms are filled
with all precious and pleasant riches (Prov. 24:3-4).

There is to be a shrewd understanding of people's self-serving propensities:

"Bad, bad," says the buyer,
then goes away and boasts (Prov. 20:14).

A bribe is like a magic stone in the eyes of those who give it;
wherever they turn they prosper (Prov. 17:8).

A gift opens doors;
it gives access to the great (Prov. 18:16).

A gift in secret averts anger;
and a concealed bribe in the bosom, strong wrath (Prov. 21:14).

These actions are not necessarily commended—they simply describe what is. For those who know God, scrupulous straightforwardness is expected in matters of justice:

The wicked accept a concealed bribe
to pervert the ways of justice (Prov. 17:23).

Those who are greedy for unjust gain make trouble for their households,
but those who hate bribes will live (Prov. 15:27)

This is in keeping with the God 'who is not partial and takes no bribe' (Deut. 10:17; 16:19; 27:25; Exod. 23:8; Isa. 33:15; Amos 5:12).

Dealing with people in the world does not mean we have to be naïve or gullible. Rather, it is a matter of being 'wise as serpents and innocent as doves' (Matt. 10:16). The foolishness of accepting unlimited liability for another (easy credit!) is to be eschewed:

My child, if you have given your pledge to your neighbor,
if you have bound yourself to another,
you are snared by the utterance of your lips,
caught by the words of your mouth.
So do this, my child, and save yourself,
for you have come into your neighbor's power:
go, hurry, and plead with your neighbor.
Give your eyes no sleep
and your eyelids no slumber;
save yourself like a gazelle from the hunter,
like a bird from the hand of the fowler (Prov. 6:1–5; compare 11:15; 17:18; 20:16; 22:26–27).

There are times when we are not obliged to put ourselves in a position of helping out, but rather of entrusting people to the Lord—only God can ransom another person's life (Ps. 49:7–8; Job: 17:3).

Riches and Poverty

Once we have wealth, what are we to do with it? As always, God comes first, and His blessing follows:

Honor the Lord with your substance
and with the first fruits of all your produce;
then your barns will be filled with plenty,
and your vats will be bursting with wine (Prov. 3:9; compare 11:24–25).

This is in recognition that 'The blessing of the Lord makes rich' (Prov. 10:22). Wealth is not to be despised:

The wealth of the rich is their fortress;
the poverty of the poor is their ruin (Prov. 10:15; but see also 18:11).

The poor are at a real disadvantage (except for Prov.13:8; 28:11):

The rich rule over the poor,
and the borrower is the slave of the lender (Prov. 22:7; see also 13:23).

The poor use entreaties,
but the rich answer roughly (Prov. 18:23; see also 21:13; 22:6; 22:22; 30:14).

If the poor are hated even by their kin,
how much more are they shunned by their friends!
When they call after them, they are not there (Prov. 19:7; compare 19:4).

The poor are disliked even by their neighbors,
but the rich have many friends (Prov. 14:20).

In the face of this, the wealthy have a particular responsibility:

Those who despise their neighbors are sinners,
but happy are those who are kind to the poor (Prov. 14:21).

This is because the poor, like the rich, are made in the image of God:

The rich and the poor meet together;
the Lord is the maker of them all (Prov. 22:2; compare 29:13).

And so:

Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker,
but he who is generous to the needy honors him (Prov. 14:31).

Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD,
and he will repay him for his deed (Prov. 19:17; see also 22:9).

In the light of this:

Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity
than a rich man who is crooked in his ways (Prov. 28:27).

Or perhaps better still:

Remove far from me falsehood and lying;
give me neither poverty nor riches;
feed me with the food that is needful for me,
lest I be full and deny you
and say, "Who is the Lord?"
or lest I be poor and steal
and profane the name of my God (Prov. 30:8).

(See further 1 Tim. 6:6–10, 17–18).