

# Sermon 73, A Successful Character, 21:5-31

**Proposition:** Character determines success because God determines success.

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## Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are going to bite off a huge chunk of Proverbs today. Only one or two other sermons in our series on this book have considered 26 verses at a stretch. But I think these verses cohere well together around the theme signaled in v. 5 of successful planning. We'll see today that in one sense, the character of the one making plans dictates whether he will succeed — but in another sense, the Lord is the final arbiter of success.

We all make plans. But if you want your plans to work, you need to seek the godly, wise character that will make them work, working your plans in reliance on the Lord of wisdom who is also the Lord of all plans.

### **I. How Plans Succeed, vv. 5-29**

All of these verses work, more or less, under the heading of “how plans succeed.” You make a plan, and then attempt to carry it out. What happens?

#### **A. The Planner’s Character Dictates the Plan’s Success, v. 5**

Well, the planner’s character dictates whether it will succeed. That’s the lesson that wisdom teaches.

We tend to think that whether your plan will succeed is based on how good a plan it is. But these many proverbs about the planners and their expectations tell us that actually, it’s your character rather than the goodness of your plan that determines success, because success is measured not by immediate results but by long-term outcomes. Maybe you can get rich quick — but if that leads to eternal death, how can you call that “success”?

#### **1. Evil Planners, vv. 6-20**

So let’s look quickly at all these different types of evil planners, and the total lack of success that accompanies the evil plans.

##### **a) The lies to get rich are a folly that leads to death, vv. 6, 16**

The first thing we see are the lies to get rich. Sometimes you can get rich by telling lies — perhaps by bluffing in your gambling, or by lying about whether you need donations, or by telling the IRS that your income was many hundreds of thousands of dollars less than it actually was, and so on. Brothers and sisters, to lie for the sake of money is to wander from the way of understanding. It may seem good up front — but the one who does it will end up resting peacefully, not in Heaven but in Hell, in the congregation of the dead.

Lying to yourself about your workaholic tendencies will lead to death. And the same goes for many, many other kinds of lies. If they are attempts to gain money, they are folly, and their end result will be death.

##### **b) The violence that drags you away, v. 7**

Another foolish way to plan is to plan on doing violence. The violence of the wicked will drag them away! Their plan was to benefit in some way through violent assault, or through violent sexual play, or through some other kind of violence. But those plans won’t ultimately succeed, because they will result in the wicked being dragged away from the path they thought was going to benefit them.

##### **c) The guilt that makes you crooked, v. 8, 15**

Violence and lies are, of course, obvious sins. But guilt makes you crooked too! Just living with something on your conscience produces crookedness in your walk. The most obvious example is a father or some other authority figure who through sin has lost his moral authority. David, for instance, lost the ability to rebuke Joab once he sent Joab to commit murder on his behalf. And so it goes. Brothers and sisters, the very status of being guilty will wreak havoc with your plans

— but the conduct of the pure is upright. If you have guilt in your life, take it to Jesus and deal with it. When you do, you'll be amazed at how much more successful your conduct is. Your work will then be upright.

**d) The contentious spirit that's impossible to live with, vv. 9, 19**

Another kind of evil plan or thought is the plan to be contentious, to try to cause fights. If you are a woman like this, you make life so awful that your man would literally be better off out in the middle of nowhere, in the most tangled and isolated wilderness, than he is sharing a home with you. He would be better off living on the roof, exposed to all weathers and the danger of falling off and dying, than he is living with you. Of course, this is just as true of quarrelsome and angry and abusive men as it is of women. If your character is such that you won't let anyone live in peace with you, then you are not pleasing to God. Your plan to have a good life will be destroyed by your desire to start fights.

**e) The evil desire that destroys community, vv. 10, 13**

And indeed, part and parcel of this contentious streak is the evil desire that destroys community. The soul of the wicked craves evil to the point that another human being is an irritant to him by his very presence. That's why his neighbor finds no favor in his eyes. His plans to do evil are hampered by the very existence of another person whose existence is a good gift from a good God.

One way this evil desire that dislikes the very existence of the neighbor manifests itself is in closing your ears to the cry of the poor. Now, it's understandable that at some level you can (and probably should) justify a reticence to listen with a doubt that this person is actually poor. I'm stopping my ears to the cry of the rich, or at least to the cry of the relatively well-off. But brothers and sisters, certainly in the church, with people you know and see regularly, you should know who's really poor and who really needs your help. And you should be willing to help them. In addition, I would suggest (with very strong biblical evidence) that if you are not regularly giving to the poor, both in money and in time, then your plans to be heard by God when you cry out to Him are not going to succeed. Your character is such that you don't care about those less fortunate who are crying to you for help. Don't live that way, I beg you!

**f) The scoffing that leads to punishment, v. 11**

Well, life as a scoffer also leads to punishment. The point of this proverb, of course, is not primarily to warn against the punishment that a scoffer can expect, but rather to point out that even a naif can learn by watching the wicked get punished — and that this too is wisdom! You see, wisdom is not just knowing, but is also the ability to learn. Your plans will succeed over the long term when you gain the ability to be instructed by watching. As Jack London's canine hero Buck learned by watching a dog fight, so you and I need to learn by watching others get rebuked. The wise man can learn just by hearing someone speak a word of warning to him; the simpleton has to see someone get viciously punished before he can learn. But even the simpleton can learn! So if you want your plans to succeed, watch and learn. Get the kind of God-fearing character that's capable of changing in response to what it hears.

**g) The wickedness that impels God to ruin your house, v. 12**

Well, once again, there are variant interpretations of this proverb. It appears to be saying that God carefully scrutinizes the household of the wicked and will bring them down. But a very small change to the Hebrew text renders it “A righteous man carefully considers the house of the wicked and recognizes that wickedness will be its ruin.” Either way, of course, the statement is true. God will bring down the wicked, and He will destroy their household through their own wickedness. So will their plans succeed? Ultimately no, because the Righteous One is considering them closely. He’s using the lamp of their spirit to see right through them.

**h) The pleasure-loving that leads to poverty, vv. 17, 20**

Well, what about living for pleasure? That too, friends, will not result in successful planning. Do you think living for pleasure is a characteristic of our time and place? Well, last year the American entertainment industry spent about a hundred billion dollars on producing movies and television programs. That’s roughly the same amount that America spent on the oil industry. The person who lives for pleasure won’t be rich. Wisdom gathers wealth, but folly gulps it down. Your plan to be rich can’t succeed if you’re living for pleasure.

**i) The life forfeited to save a morally better person, v. 18**

The final sort of plan that fails is this one: the life forfeited to save a morally better person. God will give the life of the wicked in order to save your life. He’ll spend their lives in order to protect yours. That’s the message here. It’s a harsh one. But what’s far more amazing than this message is that in the gospel, the opposite occurred: the righteous was given as a ransom for the wicked, and the upright was given as a ransom for the treacherous. Hallelujah! Once again, the foolishness of God is wiser than men. His plan succeeded because of His holiness and uprightness, even while our plans collapse and die because of our own wickedness.

**2. Good Planners, vv. 21-23**

Thankfully, though, after the long lineup of wicked planners whose plans fail, a little relief is here in vv. 21-23. These planners are good, they plan good plans, and their plans succeed.

**a) The righteousness that leads to righteousness, v. 21**

The first of these planners is the one who seeks righteousness. He pursues righteousness, and he finds it — and along with it, life and honor. Brothers and sisters, this is just another way of saying what Jesus said later on, that those who hunger and thirst after righteousness shall be filled. And when you are filled with righteousness, when you have received God’s goodness and delight in it, that brings with it side effects. The first is life. If you aren’t righteous, you’ll die. Wickedness kills. Sin kills. And so righteous behavior is the only way to life. There is no salvation without being good! Yet at the same time, Jesus is our righteousness, and to pursue Him is to find righteousness that comes from outside of you to dwell within you. The name of that righteousness is Jesus. When you’re united to Him by faith, He gives you His own righteousness, thus making you forensically righteous. Then He makes you ethically righteous too. He justifies, and He sanctifies. And when He does, the result is life. But the other result is honor. You will be looked up to. When you’ve been saved, you will be somebody — not in the

bad sense, of being a celebrity or something like that, but in the good sense, of being admired and respected by those who know you. If you are truly righteous, that brings with it a certain amount of respect.

So how do you succeed? Pursue righteousness and steadfast love, and you will find them.

### **b) The wisdom that conquers cities, v. 22**

But secondly, wisdom can also conquer cities. The plan to triumph in battle against a city succeeds when the planner is wise. He climbs up the city and pulls it down. Battle planning is not easy, but it can succeed through wisdom.

### **c) The reticence that safeguards the soul, v. 23**

Finally, the last kind of wise planning is the plan to keep your mouth shut. If you can keep yourself from talking too much, you can keep your soul from trouble. The Bible has a lot to say about speech, and it never recommends just running your mouth!

## **B. The Planner's Name Exposes His Character, vv. 24-29**

Well, after that bit of cheeriness, we return to profiles of the wicked whose plans fail. Their name exposes their character!

### **1. The scoffer is proud, v. 24**

The scoffer, for instance, is proud. He may tell you that he is just a guy with a strong sense of humor who sees the funny side of everything. Scripture begs to differ. The scoffer is an angry person and an arrogant person. He laughs at everything not because he's so humorous but as a way of deflating everything, of dragging it down, of making look ridiculous compared to him, the wonderful knowing scoffer who sees through everything.

So if you're around a scoffer — anyone mocking God, Christians, morality, etc. — don't let him define himself as a humorous person. Recognize that he is an arrogant, angry person who is expressing his spleen by trying to tear down good things through humor. And if you tear down good things with your humor? Repent.

What about the problem of people who take themselves too seriously, who can't see the funny and ridiculous side of their own efforts? Sure, that's not good. And it's okay to use humor to take down pride that's not good. But don't use it to attack what is good. If you do, you're this arrogant, angry person.

### **2. The slacker is lazy, vv. 25-26**

Well, if the scoffer is proud and angry, the slacker is lazy. He craves all day long. What's the opposite of this craving? Generosity. The righteous is generous. So tell me, Christian: Are you generous, or are you greedy? Are you lazy, or do you work hard? The slacker is lazy, and his plans will fail. They'll fail so badly that he will die, because you can't live without working.

### **3. The righteous is generous, v. 26b**

The righteous, on the other hand, is generous. He gives. His name reveals his character. What charitable contributions have you made this year? How faithfully do you support your church, your local homeless shelter or children's shelter, and other non-profits that help the poor? For the record, I will say that it isn't charity to give money to the rich. Donating to a university with a fat

endowment, for instance, is not charitable giving, regardless of what the tax code says. Donating to someone who's impoverished is charitable. Donating to someone who would not be eating, or to an organization that would not be keeping the doors open, without your money — that's charity.

I hold back in my giving. Does that mean that Scripture is wrong? No. It means that I am not as righteous as I should be. My trust in the Lord is maybe a little more conditional than I'd like to admit. I'm deep in debt on my mortgage, and I don't want to give without holding back because I owe more than I can pay in just a few years of working. Maybe I shouldn't have gotten a mortgage — but I did.

What's the solution? How do you become more generous? By spending time with God, who gave His own only begotten Son.

#### **4. The wicked is an abominable worshipper, v. 27**

What else do names say about people and their plans? They say that the wicked is an abominable worshipper. God values obedience more than sacrifice, righteousness and mercy more than outward acts of worship. And so, surprise, surprise, the wicked is a terrible worshipper. His outward act of piety is offensive in its own right, and even more offensive when he offers it to buy off God.

Do we do this? You bet. We come and sit here in church while planning to go home and look at pornography. We lead our family in family worship while meditating on a nugget of gossip to share with our wife as soon as family worship is over. We come and sing and pray but have no intention of giving without holding back. Brothers and sisters, don't let your life be characterized by this! Instead, spend time with the wise Son, who is the perfect worshipper — and learn to worship too.

#### **5. The false witness is not a listener, v. 28**

The false witness is not a listener. He will not succeed in his speech. "The truthful lip shall be established forever, But a lying tongue is but for a moment" (Pro 12:19 NKJ). That's what our text means by its reference to speaking forever. If you listen to the truth, you'll get to go on speaking through eternity as you dwell in the presence of God. But if you insist on telling lies, you will perish. Your mouth will be stopped. The plans of lying witnesses, in other words, cannot and will not prevail forever.

#### **6. The wicked are bluffing, v. 29**

Put another way, no matter how threatening the wicked appear, ultimately they are bluffing. They don't have the power to hurt us permanently. The upright give thought to their ways. They don't just fake it, put on a bold face and do whatever they want. Instead, they pay attention to what they're doing — again, a theme we've seen many times. Do you flop your way randomly through life, or give thought to your ways?

### **II. Yahweh, the Final Arbiter of Success, vv. 30-31**

Well, after that long slog through all of these people whose plans are going to fail because their character is rotten, we come to two verses that sum it up. Their point: Yahweh God is the final

arbiter of success. There is no wisdom, there is no understanding, there is no counsel, and there is definitely no success against the LORD.

**A. Wisdom Does Not Work Against God, v. 30**

Wisdom doesn't work against God! The triple repetition sets up a powerful rhythm that "against the LORD" brings to a thudding halt. It pounds home the point. If you think you're wisely opposing God, you're a fool. If you're taking counsel with people you consider wise against God, you're a fool. If you think you understand something that makes God look bad, if you think you know something that makes Him evil, you're a fool. Wisdom does not work against God because God is the final arbiter of wisdom!

**B. Technology Does Not Guarantee Victory, v. 31a**

Furthermore, technology doesn't guarantee victory. The war horse was the ultimate piece of military technology in that era. But it provides no guarantee of success — in fact, not in the slightest. The same goes for today's aircraft carriers. They can't guarantee victory.

**C. God Is the Ultimate Source of Success, v. 31b**

Brothers and sisters, yes, your character influences your chance of success. But that's because God Himself is the ultimate source of success. You can't succeed without Him in any meaningful or lasting way. So take comfort in this, that you know Christ, that you are friends with the Wise Son whose sound wisdom has prevailed against everything that tried to stop it. Jesus reigns. Jesus is victorious. Cling to Him by faith, and you will share His triumph. Amen.