

I've been reflecting a lot recently about how Proverbs speaks to our situation — and it seemed to me that Proverbs 11 addresses our situation very clearly. It's a case of taking one bit of scripture and connecting it with one bit of life.

I preached on Proverbs 11 more than fifteen years ago — and I really can't find much to disagree with in what I said then — but those same principles apply very concretely in our time.

Verses 1-8 focus on what it means for righteousness to deliver you — to protect you. Verses 9-14 then focus on words in community — how do you speak of and to those around you? And verses 15-31 deal with what son of community you want to live in.

Because the wise man will recognize that I should live in such a way that if everyone else lived this way, it would be a better world.

Proverbs 11 opens with a proverb that nicely summarizes our theme:

A false balance is an abomination to the LORD, but
a just weight is his delight.

Nowadays we have a lot of regulation that tests and evaluates this. In those days...

A just weight was hard to come by

Leviticus 19:35-36 plainly warned Israel:

*you shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length or weight or quantity.
You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin:
I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Eupt.*

How you weigh and measure reflects on your God.

He delivered you from slavery and bondage— therefore you are
to be just and honest in your dealings.

In the ancient world it was difficult to maintain a single standard weight. How do you ensure that every merchant has the same weight?

How do you determine how much a pound is?

In some places they had stones that were carved in the shape of animals—
a different animal for each weight.

But how do you guarantee that every stone is exactly the same weight?
(usually a variance of less than 6% was considered acceptable)

It would be easy to shave the stone and make it lighter, without significantly altering its appearance!

And then there was the practice of using the lighter stone for selling, and the heavier stone for buying!

Solomon uses this phrase "an abomination" twenty times — usually referring to the heart of the wicked — the thoughts and plans of the wicked — but three times he speaks of false weights as an abomination!

The other two are in chapter 20:

20:10 Two kinds of weights and two kinds of measures are both alike an abomination to the LORD.

20:23 Unequal weights are an abomination to the LORD, and false scales are not good.

Solomon also says:

16:11 A just balance and scales are the LORD 's; all the weights in the bag are his work.

The merchant would carry his weights in a pouch.

Solomon is reminding the merchant that all of those stones were God's work. Do not blaspheme God by using his handiwork to defraud your neighbor.

Do not take the stones that God created and craft them into a tool to harm others.

It is an abomination—it blasphemes God—to defraud others, because you have to twist God's creation to do it.

When you twist and pervert the created order, that is an abomination.

Don't think too highly of yourself!

2 When pride comes, then comes disgrace but with the humble is wisdom.

Pride is a rejection of God's rule.

Pride exalts your self—and, in the end, brings disgrace.

Thinking that you are "somebody" will bring you to shame, when God, in the end, reveals that you are a nobody.

But with the humble is wisdom.

The humble does not claim to be an expert in everything.
But the humble must evaluate the claims made by experts!

The proud only listens to those who agree with me.

The humble will listen to many counselors and will evaluate their advice.

Think back to February.

What were the experts saying?

They were generally saying that there was a 10-20% chance that
this coronavirus would be a real problem!

They said that it was likely that China could contain the outbreak
(like with SARS 15 years ago), and the whole thing would
blow over.

Do you remember what the media was saying back then?

"Everything's fine — you can travel to China — it's no big deal!"

Think about it.

If you see a tornado on the horizon, and the experts tell you that there
is a 10-20% chance that the tornado will plow through your
neighborhood, how would you respond?

Hey, there's an 80% chance that it won't hit
— so let's have a picnic!

It's easy to forget that back in February we really didn't know much!

Even now, there is still so much that we don't know about this disease.

But our ignorance does not mean that any action is pointless!

For instance, for an April Fool Day science magazine, one article pointed out that no
one has ever done a controlled scientific study on whether parachutes are
useful when jumping out of airplanes.

In order to do such a study, one would need to have an equal number
jump out of airplanes: half would have parachutes, half would
have a placebo.

Therefore, we do not have conclusive scientific evidence that wearing parachutes works.

(I'm told that they had trouble finding people who
were willing to sign up for the study...

so eventually they did a study with dummies in order to prove what every idiot already knows!)

The arrogant will go to one extreme or the other:

either he will confidently proclaim that parachutes don't work! or he will be so confident that parachutes do work that he will forget to pull the cord — and then wonder why the parachute didn't open...

I'm sure that most of you can see the point!

We don't have conclusive scientific proof that facemasks work. So we certainly shouldn't put our hope and trust in facemasks!

Verses 3-8 then contrast the righteous and the wicked — clearly demonstrating that righteousness can protect you from Covid- 19!

1. How Can Righteousness Protect You Against Covid-19? (VI-8)

- 3 *The integrity of the upright guides them, but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them.*
- 4 *Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.*
- 5 *The righteousness of the blameless keeps his way straight, but the wicked falls by his own wickedness.*
- 6 *The righteousness of the upright delivers them, but the treacherous are taken captive by their lust.*
- 7 *When the wicked dies, his hope will perish, and the expectation of wealth perishes too.*
- 8 *The righteous is delivered from trouble, and the wicked walks into it instead.*

There is a simple chiasm in these 12 lines.

Verses 3 and 8 open and close with the image of the path of life—the two ways that we saw in Proverbs 1-9.

Verses 4 and 7 focus on wealth and death.

At the center, verses 5-6 come to the heart of the matter: righteousness and wickedness.

How you walk on your journey has a great deal to do with your destination.

If you are a person of integrity.

If you are faithful and honest in your dealings with others, then you will be delivered from trouble.

But if you are crooked and treacherous.

If you say one thing to a person's face, and another behind their back, then
you are walking—no, you are running!--into trouble.

That's the point of verses 3 and 8.

The righteous is delivered from trouble, and
the wicked walks into it instead.

The righteous man hears that there is a 20% chance that a deadly plague is coming _and
so he prepares accordingly.

He doesn't panic — but he sees the possibility of danger ahead and so is delivered from trouble.

On the other hand, the wicked — the crooked — the twisted — are more concerned with
how to manipulate the situation for their benefit _with the result that their own
treachery betrays them. When pride comes, disgrace follows.

Verses 4 and 7 then turn to the pursuit of wealth: riches
do not profit in the day of wrath (v4); death
brings an end to the pursuit of wealth (v7).

Or as Jesus put it, "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, then
all these things [all your material needs] will be added to you."

The first question you should ask is, "how can I be most useful in the kingdom of God?"
Righteousness delivers from death.

In the day of wrath, your material wealth will do nothing for you. On
judgment day God will not ask about your bank account!

He will ask, how did you treat the poor?

When your brother was in need, what did you do?

That doesn 't mean, "did you throw money at him?"

Our culture tends to throw money at the poor, and then
claim that we have cared for the poor!

Righteousness has to do with living justly—

as Micah 6:8 says,

"He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require
of you , but to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your
God?"

Do you live a life that is characterized by justice?

by being faithful in your dealings with others? That
is what righteousness means.

I should point out that Proverbs' understanding of "righteousness" is quite different from Paul's usage in Galatians 3.

Paul says that "righteousness does not come by the law."

Paul is emphasizing "righteousness" as your legal standing before God. Proverbs is talking about "righteousness" as the character of your life.

Solomon is not saying that a man becomes righteous before God by his works.

In Solomon's vocabulary, those who heed the call of wisdom, and walk in the way of life, are properly called "righteous."

That is why, at the center of this passage he says,

The righteousness of the blameless keeps his way straight... The righteousness of the upright delivers them.

This is analogous to the NT statements about the future judgment according to works.

Those who have been declared righteous in Christ will also live a righteous life.

But also notice the second half of verses 5-6,

The wicked falls by his own wickedness... the treacherous are taken captive by their lust.

Sin sows the seeds of its own destruction.

Those who betray others are betrayed by their own desires.

Of course, our Lord Jesus Christ is the righteous one.

His righteousness delivered him, and kept his way straight.

He is the one who was delivered from trouble, being raised from the dead and seated in glory.

And in the day of wrath, he was found penniless.

As he stood before Pilate and Herod, he had no wealth to defend himself. He had nothing but his own integrity.

It may not have protected him from the fury of man, but the fury of man did not concern him.

He knew that they would be betrayed by their own desires. And so he went to the cross to face that higher tribunal.

And in the day of wrath he was vindicated!

Jesus Christ passed through death and was raised to life eternal.

And that is why righteousness will deliver you from Covid- 19.

If a virus takes you out — that will not alter your character!
Your standing before God is secure in Christ. Therefore,
be who you are in Christ!

2. Words in Community: How Do You Speak in These Troubled Times? (v9-14)

The second section of Proverbs 11 then deals with how we speak to other.

I am increasingly concerned that this crisis will blow us apart.
Not because Covid-19 is such an awful disease (it's not
nearly as bad as bubonic plague), but because we
using words to destroy each other!

Verses 9 and 14 again bracket this section with their concern for the contrast between
the effects of wise and foolish speech upon the community.

*9 With his mouth the godless man would destroy his neighbor, but by
knowledge the righteous are delivered.*

*14 Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an
abundance of counselors there is safety.*

Righteousness — at its heart — has to do with how you order your community.

Verses 10-11 then speaks of relationship of righteousness to the city:

10 *When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices, and
when the wicked perish there are shouts of gladness.*

11 *By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the
mouth of the wicked it is overthrown.*

Undoubtedly the city benefits when it goes well with the righteous.

Certainly you can think of counter-examples:

Proverbs does not give guarantees—"if you do these three things, then
everything will be hunky-dory."

Rather, Proverbs is saying what should be the case.

And further, the city that Solomon speaks of is not just any city.

It is a righteous city!

Solomon is especially thinking of Jerusalem—the city of God.

Verses 12-13 then move from the city to the neighbor:

- 12 *Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent.*
- 13 *Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered.*

Righteous and wicked speech is not just about the city, it is also about the neighborhood.

The "whoever" point out that anyone is capable of this. Be careful how you speak about each other!

You may think—it's just me and my wife, so we can say what we're thinking!

But the problem may be with what you are thinking!

How often have you said something, and then later regretted it?

If you would be trustworthy—if you would be a man of understanding, then remain silent.

When I hear something that I should never repeat,

I immediately bury it.

I do my best simply to forget it.

Then I will never be tempted to repeat it.

Because whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense.

Verse 14 then concludes this section by reminding us of the importance of speaking in community.

We need to talk about our direction as a church—just as any community does.

Whether it be parents talking together about their families, the elders holding a roundtable discussion, or a city having an open forum,

"an abundance of counselors" provides safety.

I should also note that "counselors" are not just any old bums on the street: they are the wise.

The point is that while one wise man is good, many wise men are better.

This is the theory behind presbyterianism.

We have a presbytery that is able to provide wise counsel if our own elders need help.

We try to put Proverbs into effect at the regional level as well.

The ultimate root of this theory is the Trinity itself.

The divine counsel from all eternity has consisted of the Father,
the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The wisdom of God himself is a wisdom that exists in the community of three persons.

What voices are you listening to?

If you only listen to voices that agree with you — then you do
not really have an abundance of counselors!

I want my governors and presidents listening to a wide variety of experts.
I don't expect that the experts will govern the country. No
— that is the magistrate's job!

Epidemiologists and experts in infectious disease are important. But
so are experts in business and economics.

A wise leader needs to listen to all the best information he can find _and
make his decisions based on "an abundance of counselors."

Back before the shutdown — the session was weighing the question of whether
we should shut down!

It was awfully kind of the governor to take that question out of our hands!

Now that the governor has left us in charge of making our own decision, we
wanted to make sure that our practices are even better than the stores.

We cannot be fool proof.

We can't guarantee that no one will catch Covid-19 here.

But in an abundance of counsellors there is safety.

If you ever have a "case of conscience" — if you ever are facing a difficult situation
and you are seeking wise counsel,

I strongly recommend that you ask to come to a session meeting and ask your elders.

Sure, you can get a good answer from the two elders who visit you in our regular visitation _
but when you get all these guys together — they really start to feed off of each other!

The first answer that we came up with on Saturday morning sounded like a good one —
but as we kept going — as the conversation kept going 'round the circle — the
answer kept getting better and better!

3. What Sort of Community Do You Want to Live In? (v15-31)

Thirdly, we see that wise speech in community results in faithful actions in the community.

15 *Whoever puts up security for a stranger will surely suffer harm, but
he who hates striking hands in pledge is secure.*

We start with the basic principle: don't be stupid.

If you insist on engaging in risky economic behavior, you will pay for it.
(And as we suggested when we discussed this in Proverbs 6,
it is likely that Solomon is speaking of someone who
is trying to make money on the deal)

Verses 16-22 form an inclusio with the references to the gracious woman
and the woman without discretion.

16 *A gracious woman gets honor, and violent men get riches.*
22 *Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.*

While Proverbs generally takes the masculine gender as default, it
is equally applicable to men and women.

Verse 16 is particularly striking because you would think that the contrast would be:
A gracious woman gets honor, and violent men get shame.

But no, violent men get riches.
But what are riches without honor?

Look at the next verses:

"a cruel man hurts himself" (v17)
"the wicked earns deceptive wages" (v18)
"he who pursues evil will die" (v19)
"Those of crooked heart are an abomination to the LORD" (v20)
"Be assured, an evil person will not go unpunished." (v21)

And then we come to the woman who is contrasted with the gracious woman.

The beautiful woman without discretion.

Beauty without wisdom has no honor.
She is like a gold ring in a pig's snout.

But the gracious woman gets honor.
(We'll see the fruit of this in Proverbs 31)

But our chiasm works its way in as

Verse 17 speaks of the kind man and the cruel man, while verse 21 speaks of the
evil man and the offspring of the righteous.

Verses 18 and 20 contrast the wages of the righteous and the wicked (v18) and
the way the LORD looks at them (v20).

20 *Those of crooked heart are an abomination to the LORD, but those of blameless ways are his delight.*

A false balance and a crooked heart—these are the things that the LORD hates.
But he takes delight in those whose ways are blameless.
And of our Lord Jesus Christ the Father declared, this is
my beloved son, in him I am well pleased!
And now in Christ, God is pleased with you!

At the center of the chiasm is verse 19—which puts the focus on life and death, reminding us of Proverbs 1-9.

19 *Whoever is steadfast in righteousness will live, but he who pursues evil will die.*

What sort of community do you want to live in?

The future is clear.

God is bringing judgment on all the earth.
Are you going to line up with God's ways?

What are you chasing?
What are you pursuing?
Are you steadfast in righteousness or pursuing evil?

Jesus is the one who was steadfast in his righteousness, and so those who are in him may pursue righteousness, seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness as those whose hope is nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.

Verses 23-31 continue the theme of benevolence in community, focusing around the question of how do you use your wealth in this life?

We see the familiar eschatological focus in verse 23 the desire of the righteous ends only in good; the expectation of the wicked in wrath.

What is your attitude toward your wealth?

One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want.
Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered.

Do not hoard grain in order to drive up prices, but sell it so that others may live and bless you!

Do not trust in your riches, because in the end, they will fail. Rather
— use your riches to love God and neighbor!

Verse 30 comes to the heart of the matter:

*The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and
whoever captures souls is wise.*

Jesus has borne good fruit—because he is indeed the tree of life.