

Proverbs seems to be a very appropriate sermon series for a people living through a pandemic. In one sense, I suppose the prophets would have been appropriate -- reflecting on the judgment of God and the themes of exile and return -- but I suspect that for many of us, what we need is *not* an explanation of *why is God doing this?* but rather, *how do I walk day-by-day in the midst of this?* What we need is *wisdom*.

I had originally planned on preaching topically through Proverbs 10-31, but the more I dig through it, the more convinced I am that there really is a structure and pattern in these chapters that gets lost when you bounce around!

Right now we are in the "proverbs of Solomon" (10:1-22:16). The first section -- 10:1-15:29 -- consists of largely antithetical proverbs -- proverbs that contrast the two ways: the righteous and the wicked, the diligent and the sluggard, the wise and the fool. And, as you have no doubt noticed by now, each chapter talks about *words, deeds, and ends*. What you say and what you do are important in shaping where you are going. The pattern may vary, but plainly these chapters were set up intentionally to be literary units. When we get to chapter 16, we will see a switch from antithetical to synthetic proverbs -- where the second line adds to the first, rather than contrasts with it.

We have seen a pretty regular pattern in this opening part of the proverbs of Solomon.

What you say – and how you live – form the pattern of your life.

If you don't like the trajectory – then turn – repent – change your path.

How do you do that?

Change your words.

Change your actions.

“Easier said than done”!

In a manner of speaking, yes.

But Proverbs isn't talking about a “quick fix.”

After all, Proverbs isn't saying that just one little change will fix everything!

Rather, Proverbs is saying that a life characterized by wisdom is one that pursues wisdom in *every area of life*.

If you just want to change one little thing – and leave other areas of your life a mess –

well, then, don't be surprised when nothing really changes...

Because repentance is not just one little thing.

Repentance involves a whole-souled turning from the old way to the new.

Proverbs 13 opens with a call to such wisdom:

Introduction: The Wise Son (v1)

*A wise son hears his father's instruction,
but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.*

Our Lord Jesus is the perfect model of the wise son.

He learned obedience from what he suffered,
and so passed through "the painful school of discipline"
to eternal glory.

A couple weeks ago we sang from Psalm 119:99-100

*I have more understanding than all my teachers...
I understand more than the aged...*

At first this might seem to contradict Proverbs 13:1.

It sounds like the Psalmist is boasting about being a know-it-all!

But listen to how the Psalmist says it:

⁹⁹ *I have more understanding than all my teachers,
for your testimonies are my meditation.*

¹⁰⁰ *I understand more than the aged,
for I keep your precepts.*

Why does the Psalmist have more understanding than his teachers?

Because he meditates on God's testimonies.

Why does he understand more than the aged?

Because he keeps God's precepts.

In other words, he is a wise son who hears his father's instruction.

He is not a scoffer, but he listens to rebuke.

After all, rebuke a wise man and he will love you.

A man of understanding will listen to rebuke –
and will learn from it!

The scoffer knows what he thinks –

there is no point in contradicting him – he is sure of his own opinion.

Two months ago, the scoffer said, “I’m going to hold Dr. Fauci to those 60,000 deaths”
confident in his own opinion that Covid-19 wasn’t that big of a deal.

Now, as we pass 100,000 deaths,
the same scoffer is busy promoting theories
that explain how the deaths have been overcounted...

If you would be wiser than your teachers,
then heed the voice of your heavenly Father,
who urges you to hear the instruction of your father!

I realize that I tend to appear very convinced of my opinions –
so I know that people are sometimes afraid to contradict me.
But at the same time, I have grown to love rebuke.
So don’t hesitate to disagree with me.
After all, I don’t want to be wrong!

If my view is wrong – or not helpful –
then I don’t want to hold it!
And if your idea is a better way to love God and neighbor,
then we should go with your idea!

The rest of chapter 13 starts with our talk – our words about the things we want most (v2-6),
then, in verses 7-11, we hear of the folly of trusting in wealth,
and the importance of a right estimation of who we are.
Then in verses 12-19, we hear about wisdom and desire –
and how the righteous *will* attain to those things that they want most.
Finally in verses 20-25 we see again the *end* of the path.
Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise!

1. “Whoever Guards His Mouth Preserves His Life” (v2-6)

² *From the fruit of his mouth a man eats what is good,
but the desire of the treacherous is for violence.*

³ *Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life;
he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.*

⁴ *The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing,
while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.*

Verses 2-4 are all about how we talk about what we want.

“From the fruit of his mouth a man eats what is good.”

I have seen this over and over again in the last year.
As I meet contractors, city officials, neighbors –

I have repeatedly found favor in the eyes of so many!

Why?

Because they appreciate the way I talk.

When you speak in ways that show love to others,
they will generally speak and act favorably toward you.

Unless, of course, they are treacherous!
“the desire of the treacherous is for violence.”

The wise will be careful to guard his mouth – for in so doing he will guard his life (v3).
but he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.

Loose lips sink ships – so the English proverb goes! –
and those who are careless in their words will bring trouble upon themselves.

People sometimes laugh at me because of how long I will hunt for the right words –
and even then, sometimes I can’t find the right words – and have nothing to say!

All of this comes together in verse 4:

*⁴ The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing,
while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.*

This is at the heart of what we will see in Proverbs 13 about the place of *desire*.
The word translated “craves” in verse 4 (avah)
is the word translated “covet” in the tenth commandment in Dt.
It is closely related to the word translated “desire” in verses 12 and 19 (ta’avah).

Desire can be either good or bad depending on circumstances!

The question is what do you desire?
How do you desire it?
And how do you go about seeking that which you desire?!

The word “*nephesh*” can be translated in two ways.
In verse 2 it is translated “desire” – or “appetite” –
in verse 4 it is translated “soul.”

Here in verse 4, the two meanings are intentionally being played off each other.

The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing.
His appetites are not satisfied because he has not learned diligence.

In contrast, the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.
His appetites are richly supplied.

The soul, after all, refers to a person's life – a person's animal existence.
(In Genesis 1, God created the animals –
and they became “nephesh hayyah” – living creatures.
And then God created man, and he became a “nephesh hayyah” – a living creature.)

Insofar as we are breathing, bloody creatures, we are animals –
and the focus here is on our *animal* wants.

If you think about it, Proverbs 13 is very much behind Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount
“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness –
and all these things will be added to you.”

If you are diligent in your pursuit of wisdom –
if you are the sort of person who is characterized by God's righteousness –
then God will supply all your needs for food and clothing.

Verses 5-6 then contrast this righteousness with wickedness:

⁵ *The righteous hates falsehood,
but the wicked brings shame^[a] and disgrace.*
⁶ *Righteousness guards him whose way is blameless,
but sin overthrows the wicked.*

The righteous hates falsehood.
Righteousness guards him whose way is blameless.

(Note – not sinless, but blameless –
this is referring to the one who is walking rightly before God).

In contrast, the wicked brings shame and disgrace –
sin overthrows the wicked.

The second section of chapter 13 then connects all this to the theme of wealth:

2. “Gather Little by Little” – the Folly of Trusting in Wealth (v7-11)

⁷ *One pretends to be rich,^[b] yet has nothing;
another pretends to be poor,^[c] yet has great wealth.*
⁸ *The ransom of a man's life is his wealth,
but a poor man hears no threat.*

These proverbs start with a focus on the heart.

How do you *think about* what you have – or what you lack?

There are those who pretend to be rich – they make a big show of what they have,
but they really have nothing.

Living off their credit cards, they dig a deep hole for themselves.

Others live frugally – yet have great wealth.

What is Proverbs saying about these two?

Well, keep reading.

The ransom of a man's life is his wealth.

If you get in trouble, your wealth can get you out of it.

But the poor man hears no threat.

I wish they hadn't translated it this way...

It's the same phrase as verse 1.

The poor man "does not listen to rebuke."

The ESV makes it sound like the poor man is in a *good place*.

No one can threaten a poor man – because he doesn't have anything!!

That's not what it's saying.

That is falling into the trap of thinking about poverty simply as lack of material things.

No – the problem with the poor is that they do not listen to rebuke.

The poor here is in the same position as the scoffer in verse 1.

What we are seeing is how folly, wickedness, and mocking
all result in turning away from the path of wisdom –
thereby destroying true wealth.

How should we think about these things?

⁹ *The light of the righteous rejoices,
but the lamp of the wicked will be put out.*

¹⁰ *By insolence comes nothing but strife,
but with those who take advice is wisdom.*

If you are teachable – if you heed rebuke – if you diligently pursue righteousness,
then no, you will not "get rich quick"!

But then again -

¹¹ *Wealth gained hastily^[d] will dwindle,
but whoever gathers little by little will increase it.*

“Get rich quick” schemes are almost always harmful to someone –
either yourself or others!
But diligence – “little-by-little” – increases wealth over the long term.

This sort of attitude towards wealth takes time to build.
You have to start small.
It takes a long time when you start small!

But that is the way that God made us – and the way that he made this world.

3. “A Desire Fulfilled Is a Tree of Life” – Wisdom and Desire (v12-19)

The third section then focuses on the relation between wisdom and desire.

I like Bruce Waltke’s summary:

“Fulfillment through Wisdom versus Frustration through Folly”

¹² *Hope deferred makes the heart sick,
but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.*

Think of the dwindling wealth of the wicked in verse 11.

Those who “got rich quick” find their wealth gradually dwindling...

Their deferred expectations now make their hearts sick.

He was about to pay off their credit cards –

but then he lost his job...

One thing leads to another and the next thing you know...

But a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.

“he is transferred from the realm of sickness and death
into the realm of health and life.

The fruit of that tree revitalizes energies,
renews courage to live and to plan for the future,
and extends life forever.” (Waltke, 563)

Plainly, in the context of chapter 13, the desire is a wise and prudent desire!

After all:

¹³ *Whoever despises the word^[e] brings destruction on himself,
but he who reveres the commandment^[f] will be rewarded.*

The phrase “reveres the commandment” uses the same verb as the “fear of the LORD.”

If you fear God, then you will also fear his commandment.

And verse 14 continues the theme:

¹⁴ *The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life,*

that one may turn away from the snares of death.

How do you know what desires are good desires?
Listen to the teaching of the wise!
Because the teaching of the wise is a fountain of life.

¹⁵ *Good sense wins favor,
but the way of the treacherous is their ruin.^[g]*
¹⁶ *Every prudent man acts with knowledge,
but a fool flaunts his folly.*

Verses 15-16 then build on this by speaking of how good sense and prudence results in favor, but the fool flaunts his folly – and the disloyal dislodge themselves by their treachery.

All of this is illustrated by verse 17:

¹⁷ *A wicked messenger falls into trouble,
but a faithful envoy brings healing.*

Notice how the wicked messenger brings harm to himself (and thus presumably to others), while the faithful envoy brings healing to others (and thereby benefit to himself).

Messengers were really important in the ancient world.

There were no telephones – no newspapers – no internet.

If you want to communicate important information to someone else –
then you must send a messenger.

And whether you are sent as an ambassador from one king to another –
or whether you are sent as a messenger from one town to the next –
the whole community is relying on *you* to get the message right –
and to present it winsomely and wisely to the recipients!

Tone matters!

The point of faithfulness is that you are concerned not so much for yourself –
as for your fidelity to the one who appointed you.

Paul speaks often of preachers as *heralds* – messengers – ambassadors.

We are appointed to bring the message of heaven to *you*.

We go astray when we think first of ourselves.

Verse 18 then parallels verse 13 – the reward that comes to the one who fears the LORD
and his commandment:

¹⁸ *Poverty and disgrace come to him who ignores instruction,*

but whoever heeds reproof is honored.

And verse 19 returns to the opening theme of desire:

¹⁹ *A desire fulfilled is sweet to the soul,
but to turn away from evil is an abomination to fools.*

Fools don't see the point of turning away from evil.

Indeed, fools are so set on their folly
that they consider it an abomination to turn away from evil!
Their course is so "obviously right" to themselves
that they cannot heed rebuke.

"The difference between the appetites and fates of the wise and the fool
is as great as the gulf fixed between heaven and hell." (Waltke, 570)

4. "Whoever Walks with the Wise Becomes Wise" – the End of the Path (v20-25)

And that is why it is so important to *practice* walking on the path of wisdom:

²⁰ *Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise,
but the companion of fools will suffer harm.*

Again Waltke's summary is helpful:

"The blessed future of a wise son versus the baneful end of fools"

If you think about the topics that we have covered tonight,
verses 21-25 summarizes all of this well:

²¹ *Disaster^[h] pursues sinners,
but the righteous are rewarded with good.*

The picture in verse 21 is of "Disaster" (or "Evil") as an avenger of blood
pursuing sinners.

But the righteous are rewarded with good.

Think of how Jesus speaks of this –

the one who gives a cup of cold water to a disciple shall not lose his reward.

"Righteousness" is not some big fancy deed!

It simply means *doing the right thing*.

And when you do the right thing:

²² *A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children,
but the sinner's wealth is laid up for the righteous.*

You can easily question this one.

Uh, pastor, there are lots of sinners who give an inheritance to their children –
and there are lots of good men who leave nothing...

But in the long run – there is an inheritance that comes to your grandchildren.
It may not be money.
But there is an inheritance!

And the sinner's wealth will end up in the hands of the righteous.
Maybe not immediately – but sin makes you stupid –
and stupidity catches up to itself!

Verses 23-24 explain this:

²³ *The fallow ground of the poor would yield much food,
but it is swept away through injustice.*

The problem for the poor is not God's creation – even fallow ground would yield food!
Rather, the problem is injustice.

So think back to verse 22 –
why does the good man sometimes not have an inheritance for his children?
Injustice.

My father was a good man – why did he not leave an inheritance to his children?
An unjust divorce.

And then verse 24 urges parents:

²⁴ *Whoever spares the rod hates his son,
but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.*

If you love your children, discipline them.
Discipline them *in love*.

Never use the rod in anger!

After all, if you appear angry in your use of the rod –

then you are contradicting what the rod is supposed to show!

The rod is supposed to show *love*.

Therefore, *every use* of the rod *must be* with love and self-control.

And if you fail to show love in your use of discipline,

then you need to repent and ask your children to forgive you.
You need to be disciplined in your use of discipline!

And the end is that:

²⁵ *The righteous has enough to satisfy his appetite,
but the belly of the wicked suffers want.*

Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you...