

Sermon 15, Wisdom's Practicalities, Proverbs 3:27-35

Proposition: For all its grand benefits and blessings, wisdom is also a set of down-to-earth practices that please the LORD!

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, wisdom tell us who our God is and how He wants us to behave. In this, of course, it is like the word of God, which teaches what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man. Our text this morning issues a small blizzard of directives, showing that God wants a lot more of us than just going to church and reading our Bibles. The Christian lifestyle requires some very specific practices, and we're going to look at the ones listed here in some detail. We will then see that all of these practices are rooted in the character of God. Why should we avoid lawsuits? Why should we flee from envy? Because of who our God is, and because of how He blesses us when we seek to obey Him and walk in His wisdom. Though this particular section does not address us as sons, clearly it presupposes that we are walking with God. Its message is for every child of God — not the message that God will save you if you're good enough, but rather the message that the God who has taken you into His confidence wants you to imitate Him. Wisdom is a set of down-to-earth

practices that please the LORD. Do the things that are described here, and you will be like your Heavenly Father and His beloved Son.

I. Wisdom's Practical Precepts, vv. 27-31

We begin with a look at some of wisdom's practical precepts. Again, I want to emphasize that this is not moralism, understood as the claim that simply telling you what you ought to do will give you the ability to do it. These precepts are addressed to the person we described last week — the one who always has his eyes fixed on Jesus Christ. When you are looking to Christ for everything, how will you live?

A. Pay your debts, v. 27

First of all, you will pay your debts. You will not withhold goods from those to whom they belong. If the credit card company sends you a letter and says, "You owe us \$1000," then you need to hand over the money before the due date. Basically, though many translations obscure this, the text is saying that you have a responsibility to give to others what belongs to them. You may not keep it back. If you have the money in bank, then pay the debt.

B. Pay your debts quickly, v. 28

In fact, verse 28 doubles down on this: You need to pay your debts quickly. The situation envisaged here could be the same one envisaged in the previous verse. Think of your neighbor asking for his lawnmower back and you saying, "Can you come back tomorrow?" even though the lawnmower is right there, ready to go back. Or it could be talking about any kind of request for help, for assistance, to borrow something. Don't delay doing good. Don't say "I'll contribute to you in a while."

Now, what about giving to organizations instead of to individuals? That, I think, is more appropriate to schedule and to give on your terms. But the point here still stands: Do not refuse to be generous by the convenient excuse of saying "I'll give later." If you won't give now, then you probably won't give later either. If you're just trying to get the person to go away, then you are sinning against wisdom. You are lying, or at least trying to stretch the truth. If you can only stall long enough, the request will go away. Now, as I said, particularly with organizations, it can be appropriate to get a fundraising letter in March and to plan to give in December. But if it is indeed a cause you want to support, then this verse is telling you not to say "Later" as an easy, less confrontational way of saying "Never." If you're going to say "Never," just say it — but bear in mind that the verse is pretty clear: If it's something you *can* give to a needy individual, then it is probably something you *should* give. Yes, be wise; yes, be careful; yes, read books like *When Helping Hurts* that will give you the conceptual tools to figure out how your charity can actually do good. Don't give foolishly. Don't do things for people that they can and ought to do for themselves. But do be generous, and be gutsy enough to say "Sorry, I won't give" when you honestly don't think that your giving will help.

C. Don't plot against your neighbor, v. 29

Now, this next verse would seem to be very obvious. Don't plan to harm your neighbors! I think we all know not to do this. But let's just think for a moment about how this verse could be

relevant to us today, in a culture that emphasizes getting along with our neighbors. How about the reality that we ought not to get fed up with our neighbors and nourish grudges against them?

It was classic. A few weeks I was talking to one of my neighbors, and I quickly discovered that he was not pleased with another one of our neighbors, whose yard is a big mess. “I’ve called the city inspector out here four times to notify him of code violations!” he said.

I said, “Well, I agree that his yard could use some improvement. But the poor guy is on dialysis three times a week and has been for two years.”

The neighbor I was talking to was instantly ashamed. I could tell. He said, lamely, “Oh. If I had known he was that sick I wouldn’t have made such a big deal about it.”

Brothers and sisters, we all have that neighbor who does things we don’t like, who plays loud music, who parks in front of our house, who leaves his trash can in the street for days at a time, who leaves a bunch of junk all over his yard, who walks around shirtless with the blinds open, who does this, that, and the other that we don’t like. Well, how does Proverbs say to handle it? Don’t devise evil against him. Don’t sit and think about how you would like to stop him, and how much he irritates you.

Even more than our neighbors in other homes, though, this applies to the neighbors who share your home! Don’t think about ways to harm your spouse and your children and your parents. Think about ways to bless them. If you are meditating on ways to say nasty things to your wife, then you are violating this command.

D. Shun frivolous arguments and lawsuits, v. 30

But the next verse takes it a step further and says to not pick fights with people. Don’t confront your neighbor about the trash can thing. Don’t sue your plumber when he leaves some pieces of trash in your crawlspace. Don’t make a big deal out of things that are really not important!

Brothers and sisters, the importance of this command can be seen when we think about how it is to live with someone who violates it. Have you ever had a quarrelsome family member? A boss who loved to pick fights? An abusive spouse? If so, then you know how much such a person can degrade everyone else’s quality of life.

As far as I know, most of you are very far from being contentious and litigious. I praise God for that. And I urge you to continue to stay away from such frivolous fights!

E. Flee from envy!, v. 31a

Well, the next sin mentioned is a far worse one than simply trying to evade generosity and getting a little peeved at your neighbors. This sin has slain many. It was the sin that delivered Jesus over to the cross, in earthly terms. That’s right. I’m talking, and Solomon is talking, about the sin of envy.

1. Envy Defined: Sorrow at another’s good

What is envy? It is sorrow at another’s good. The classic example comes from the college campus, where I come back to my dorm room and announce “I got 100% on that tough test in astrophysics” and my roommate says, “I hate you.”

It's supposed to be a joke, right? But all too often it's not. It's deadly serious. If you do better than I do, have more smarts, have more money, have a nicer car, have something I want, then I hate you! I am not only sorry, but am even personally offended by the good you have that I don't. In its most malicious form, envy is not even about good someone else has that I don't have, but is just mad that another person has that good thing, regardless of whether I have it. That's right: in the most advanced cases, people envy what they already have. I have good grades, but I'm frankly upset that so-and-so also has them! But in most cases, of course, envy is directed to another's good that you lack. "We've struggled with infertility for ten years, and my brother got married last month and now his wife is expecting. I hate him!"

Well, our text this morning tells us to flee envy. Humility means, among other things, the ability to rejoice in another's good as if it were your own. If you are truly humble, you will be delighted that your neighbor drives a 2019 Cadillac XTS while you're driving a '95 Nissan. You will be glad that he can have such luxury, rather than sorrowing over the fact that he has it and you don't.

The particular person we're told not to envy is the violent man. Now, is it good that he is violent? Of course not. We're not envying his violence, or even being warned against envying his violence. We are being warned against envying the good things things that he has. This can take two forms.

2. Personal Envy: "I hate that violent man's prosperity!"

The first is what I'm calling "personal envy." It is basically sorrowing over some good that the violent person enjoys. Thus, for example, a member of the Black Lives Matter movement might be very angry that a cop accused of killing an unarmed black guy has been put on paid administrative leave for six months, with no further penalty. What just happened? The cop murdered someone, and his only penalty was six months' paid vacation! Surely, if such a thing did happen (and I regret to say that it has indeed happened, so far as I can tell), one might well sorrow over the good of vacation that that murderer got. But to take an example from the other side of the political spectrum, let's think about the transliteration of this phrase. The Hebrew literally has "man of *hamas*." That's right — the Hebrew word for "violence" is *hamas*, and that of course is a word with which we're all familiar because it is the name of a political party/terrorist organization operating in the Gaza Strip today. Let's just say that a Palestinian youth grows up in a Christian home in Gaza. His family is poor, and has almost nothing thanks to the political chaos caused by Israel and Hamas fighting all the time in the area. Yet his good friend is the son of one of Hamas' top commanders and always has a plenty of food and clothing and even a car of his own. He knows that his friend's wealth is due to his family's participation in a terrorist organization. Yet he cannot help but envy the prosperity of the violent man, the man of *hamas*, his friend's father. He is deeply envious, deeply sorrowful, deeply angry over the fact that such a wretched human being, one who is, as he sees, a major part of his own family's poverty, should have so much and apparently be so prosperous.

Brothers and sisters, these are tough situations. Yet Solomon doesn't soft-pedal anything. He doesn't tell us not to envy the man who cheats on his golf score. He tells us not to envy the violent. By definition, violence is going to hurt and even kill other people. We will probably regard the violent as wicked murderers who need to be punished. And we will therefore see any good thing that comes their way as doubly problematic — not only is it not ours, but they are violent and don't deserve it! They deserve to have the book thrown at them. They deserve life in prison at the very least. And yet here they are, taking six-month paid vacations, driving around the dirt-poor streets of Gaza in their new Lamborghinis, and generally making themselves obvious targets of envy. Guess what the word of God says? "You are not allowed to envy that person. You are not allowed to covet his ill-gotten gains for yourself. You are not allowed to be upset that he is so prosperous."

Brothers and sisters, this is a hard command. We desperately want the violent to not prosper. We want them to be punished, to be stopped, to stop dealing out their violence and prospering in it. And insofar as we want justice, that is good and right. But the minute we begin to envy what they have and to hate them for their prosperity or some other good they have (respect, community standing, political clout), we are violating God's command. Do not hate the violent because they have some good you don't!

3. Political Envy: "I want the power to treat the unjust unjustly!"

But there's a second branch to this sin of envy, and this one is institutionalized in modern political culture. It is what I'm calling political envy, in which you begin to desire the power to treat the unjust unjustly. I haven't read the book, but the title of David Faris' *It's Time to Fight Dirty: How Democrats Can Build a Lasting Majority in American Politics* (2018) is a great example of this way of thinking. "I envy the violent man" can, in political terms, ultimately become "I desire the power to use violence against the violent and against anyone else who gets in my way or in the way of my ideology." Ultimately, anyone who suggests that we don't need due process, that some people are just obviously guilty scum, is envying the unjust — is, in fact, envying their injustice, looking at it as a positive good and being sorry that their group has it and ours doesn't. Brothers and sisters, don't envy the ability to be unjust. Don't envy the oppressive power of the oppressors and wish that you could turn it against them.

To envy the violent is not the way of Jesus Christ. He chose to suffer unjust violence rather than to call on twelve legions of angels to come in and fight for Him. He did not envy the power to treat people unjustly, the power that was used against Him. He was content to suffer the violence of the wicked and commit Himself into His Father's keeping. Brothers and sisters, that is our call too. Do not envy the violent person, the man of *hamas*. Don't wish that you could be violent too. Don't wish that you were prosperous like the violent man and hate him for his prosperity. Instead, commit your ways to the Lord. Be like Jesus.

F. Choose your role models carefully, v. 31b

Finally, our text warns us to choose our role models carefully. Don't imitate the violent man in anything. Even if you like his swagger, or his taste in firearms, or his clothing, or his leadership

qualities, don't follow him. Don't be like him. The larger point is to choose your role models based on character. Pick people who show wisdom and be like them. Imitate them. Follow their example.

II. Wisdom's Divine Roots, vv. 32-35

Well, why all the commands about how to get along with neighbors and avoid quarrels? The answer lies in the character of God. Once again, the reason that we ought to be generous, pay our debts, avoid the sin of peevishness and holding grudges, refuse to quarrel or envy, is because God is the way He is. Solomon highlights 8 character qualities of our Heavenly Father.

A. God abominates the devious, v. 32a

First of all, He abominates the devious. God cannot stand the person who speaks and lives a lie. It's a lie to say "I'll be happy to give it to you tomorrow" when you no more want to give it tomorrow than you want to give it today. It's a lie to say that you can't pay your debts this month because you were forced to buy that new sound system, that new gun, that new electronic toy, or whatever it was. It's a lie to file a lawsuit alleging damage when no damage has been done. It's a lie to think that the violent man's condition is better than yours and that he is to be envied.

So don't tell lies and don't believe lies, and more than anything, don't believe lies you tell yourself! Brothers and sisters, those things are abominations to the Lord. An abomination is something God abhors and reacts against. He is not merely a spectator, but a righteous judge. If I can say it with respect, we might describe God as "triggered" by a devious person. But the whole point is that His reaction is perfectly right and justified. He is not "set off" on an irrational tirade; He is simply responding rightly and justly to the evil that's before Him.

Do you think of deviousness in these terms? Is it an abomination to you? If not, then you need to spend more time with your Father, catching His attitude and learning to imitate it.

B. God takes the upright into his confidence, v. 32b

But as a contrast to God's attitude against the people of the lie, His attitude toward the upright is totally different. He confides in them. He shares secrets with them! Do you want to know what God is really thinking? Live uprightly. Keep the commands of wisdom in vv. 27-31. Shun envy and lying.

Now, does God literally come down and say, "Let me share a secret with you?" Are upright people everywhere privy to God's secrets? Do they know why He elected a scoundrel like Saul of Tarsus and didn't save a decent guy like King Saul? Is that what the text is saying? No. It's talking about a deep relationship, one in which you understand your Heavenly Father and know Him well. We have the mind of Christ; our intimacy with God is in principle unlimited. That doesn't mean that He's going to share with us why He made North America that shape, or why there are so many divisions in the church today. But it does mean that we can come to understand our Father and think like He does. Do you want that?

After all, think about the wicked. Are they in God's confidence? Do they even take the trouble to read the Bible and listen to sermons? Do they have any interest in His secrets? No. They don't care to know anything about Him. But if you are His, you can know who He is.

C. God curses the house of the wicked, v. 33a

We see also that God curses the house of the wicked. If you don't believe it, talk to the law enforcement officers in this church about how they're booking into jail the grandkids of the people they were booking into jail thirty years ago. The household of the wicked, with its wicked practices, meets God's resistance and even His curse. Now, sometimes, of course, the wicked flourish anyway. They leave their abundance to their children. They continue on in their wickedness generation after generation. But ultimately, in an eternal perspective, the wicked are cursed. This may be more or less visible in this life, but it will be obvious in the life to come.

D. God blesses the abode of the righteous, v. 33b

But God blesses the abode of the righteous. Do you want a blessed home? Then follow God. Strive to obey Him, and seek His forgiveness when you don't. Accept His gift of legal righteousness in justification and His work with you in the ethical righteousness of sanctification.

I could tell you stories of how blessed my parents' home is. Of course, some righteous people have terrible lives. No question. This is still the chapter in which we read about chastening as a mark of God's love. But brothers and sisters, in general, in the final analysis, the dwelling place of the righteous is blessed. That may not mean earthly wealth or freedom from pain. But it does mean the blessing of love, joy, peace, and all the fruits of the Spirit. It means friendship with God, knowing His secrets. The rewards of righteousness are enormous!

E. God scorns the scorners, v. 34a

But just as our God curses the wicked's homes, so He scorns the scorners. He isn't bothered by the way they try to mock Him. They are the recipients of His contempt. He writes them off.

Do you want to encounter that kind of resistance? Do you want God to stop listening to you and start ignoring you? Then go ahead and be a scorner. Go ahead and mock Him and other people.

F. God shows favor to the humble, v. 34b

But if you want His favor, His help, His blessing, then be humble. Look in the mirror of the word and gain an accurate estimate of yourself. This verse is quoted twice in the New Testament. It tells us something fundamental about our God. He doesn't have the time of day for those who trust in themselves that they are righteous and despise others. But He has limitless grace and help for those who know their own need and who apply to Him for help. Again, this is not moralism. This is not saying that you can earn your way into Heaven by being humble enough. It's saying that as God's child, you are called to please Him by humility, rather than angering Him by the pride that scorns Him and other people.

Do you enjoy mocking and scorning others? Beware. It is a sin that brings God's hand against you. Yes, sometimes other people are silly and dumb. But be careful who you're laughing at. God mocks mockers. His blessing is for those who see other people doing something dumb and instead of pointing and laughing say, in all sincerity, "There but for the grace of God go I."

Humility brings God's favor; contempt brings His contempt.

G. God glorifies the wise, v. 35a

Finally, the last verse informs us that God gives an inheritance of glory to the wise. This mention of an inheritance ultimately points us to the death of Jesus Christ the testator, who died and left us everything in His will. He left His glory to everyone who trusts Him and listens to His wisdom. Do you want the glory of Heaven? Do you want to share with Christ in His glory? Then seek wisdom! Wisdom itself will tell you that you aren't earning glory, but rather that you are inheriting it from the truly glorious Son of God.

H. God disgraces fools, v. 35b

But fools will get only shame. That's the only lifting up they will have.

So what will it be? The daily practices, rooted in the character of God, that mark out a child of God? Or the lying, envious folly that marks out unbelievers? Brothers and sisters, the choice is clear. Let's seek the wisdom that's found in Jesus Christ. Let's live as the people who cannot take their eyes off Him. Let's humbly seek His help and His wisdom rather than always thinking that we know better. Let's glorify Him, and live in light of the blessing we have now and the inheritance of glory that awaits. Amen.