

This week is the last week of our series from the book of Proverbs. I hope that this series from Proverbs that Pastor Mike has done and perked your interest in Proverbs and that you will keep reading it. We don't spend much time in this wonderful book of wisdom. And since one of the things we learned in this series is that God created with wisdom, we can be sure that wisdom is something that matters to God and matters in our relationships with God and each other. So this week we look at Proverbs 22 and see how this wisdom can benefit us.

Proverbs 22: 1-16

A good name is more desirable than great riches;
to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.

²Rich and poor have this in common:

The LORD is the Maker of them all.

³The prudent see danger and take refuge,
but the simple keep going and pay the penalty.

⁴Humility is the fear of the LORD;
its wages are riches and honor and life.

⁵In the paths of the wicked are snares and pitfalls,
but those who would preserve their life stay far from them.

⁶Start children off on the way they should go,
and even when they are old they will not turn from it.

⁷The rich rule over the poor,
and the borrower is slave to the lender.

⁸Whoever sows injustice reaps calamity,
and the rod they wield in fury will be broken.

⁹The generous will themselves be blessed,
for they share their food with the poor.

¹⁰Drive out the mocker, and out goes strife;
quarrels and insults are ended.

¹¹One who loves a pure heart and who speaks with grace
will have the king for a friend.

¹²The eyes of the LORD keep watch over knowledge,
but he frustrates the words of the unfaithful.

¹³The sluggard says, "There's a lion outside!
I'll be killed in the public square!"

¹⁴The mouth of an adulterous woman is a deep pit;
a man who is under the LORD's wrath falls into it.

¹⁵Folly is bound up in the heart of a child,
but the rod of discipline will drive it far away.

¹⁶ One who oppresses the poor to increase his wealth
and one who gives gifts to the rich—both come to poverty.

So the first verse in this passage says a lot. It speaks to the issue of integrity which will come up a few times. Verse 1 says “A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.” A good name. Now is this saying that reputation is everything? No. It is saying that having a good name, being known for integrity, is better than doing what is dishonorable to gain money. In other words, a saying that you have all heard, money isn’t everything.

As many of you know last month I was working at a camp on the east coast for two weeks. This is a camp founded over 75 years ago by an ordained Presbyterian who worked as a marine chaplain. When he bought the almost 300 acres for the camp and somehow paid it off after the war, several people commented that his children would have a nice inheritance. And he always answered with this: “the camp belongs to God. I want my children to inherit a good name.” He wanted people to think integrity when they heard his name. That was what he wanted to leave his children. And the riches? The value of the land? Which would be astronomical today? That was to be used for ministry always. A good name is more desirable than great riches. Now keep in mind that this does not say that riches and silver and gold are bad. It does not say that. What it does say is that wealth is not worth sacrificing your integrity for. If gaining great riches requires doing what is dishonorable or what is wrong, you are better off doing the right thing that gaining the wealth. This is a good message in our society. So many companies operate on doing whatever necessary to make the most money. Even if it means hiding taxable money overseas or paying their employees low wages or damaging the environment. Our free market society operates on the assumption that making money is the most important goal. This proverb reminds us that wealth should not become more important than integrity.

Although proverbs are often a collection of short sayings, this does not mean that they do not go together with a larger meaning or purpose. You probably noticed that there were some themes that came up multiple times in this passage that I just read. One that comes up several times is the issue of wealth. It comes up right at the beginning. And after warning against wealth becoming the priority, the next thing this proverb does is level the playing field. In verse 2 it says “Rich and poor have this in common: The LORD is the Maker of them all.” In other words, you are in the same place when it comes to God, money or no money. God made you both, God is sovereign over both, and money cannot get you further with God like it can with people. I think it is interesting that there is no qualification of rich or poor as being good or bad. This is not a good or bad statement. It is a reminder that no matter who you are, you are created by God.

However, this does not mean that there is no responsibility that comes along with wealth. Wealth is tricky, even dangerous which is why Jesus warns so strongly against pursuing it in the New Testament. This proverb warned us that it is not worth it to sacrifice your name for money. Verse 2 reminded us that we are all under God, rich or poor. But then this proverb does spell out responsibility with wealth. In verses 7-9 we find this: “The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is slave to the lender.” What that basically is doing is pointing out that if you are rich, you have power of those who have less than you. And then it says “Whoever sows injustice reaps calamity, and the rod they wield in fury will be broken. The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor.” We have these antitheses, very common in the book of Proverbs and very common in this style of poetry. These antithetical or opposite sayings about what you can do with this power your wealth gives you. You can wield your power unfairly which will be a disaster, or you can be generous which will be a blessing to you and the other person. These are very contemporary warnings aren’t they? We have all seen power and wealth used unfairly and how painful that is. We have also, many of you, seen what a blessing it is to be generous. For now I will leave you to think about this on a personal level. But before we are done this morning we are also going to look at what this means on a corporate or communal level.

So one of the themes in this proverb is wealth, how it affects us when it comes to God and how it affects our relationships with each other. Another theme in this proverb is teaching or training. And we come to verse 6 which says “Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.” There is also verse 15 which says “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far away.” There is this responsibility to teach and train children. Anyone here who is a parent knows what this responsibility is like. However, verse 6 has been a source of guilt for a lot of people. And I want to argue that this should not be a source of guilt. These verses do not mean that if your child departs from faith that you have failed as a parent or grandparent. That is not what this means. First of all, we have to remember that proverbs are not promises. These are not cause and effect statements about our covenant relationship with God. They are advice for Godly living. So this verse means that how you raise your children does matter. There is responsibility in it. But it does not promise that if you do it responsibly that all will be roses and your child will have a perfect life of faith.

Take for example the story of Joseph and Potiphar. Potiphar’s wife tries to seduce Joseph. Apparently he was good eye candy. And what does Joseph do? He does what he was taught to do when raised in a good Jewish home. He resists her. He does the right thing. And does it all end up roses? No. He ends up in prison for doing the right thing. He is not immediately

rewarded for his right behavior. And the proverbs are the same way. They will teach you right behavior, but they are no promise that it will always go your way. So remember that, proverbs are not promises.

But another reason I know verse 6 does not mean that parents are failures if their children struggle is because of what is in the rest of this passage. There are other verses here, other proverbs in this same grouping, that point to the responsibility of an individual to respond with wisdom. The burden is not all on the end of the teacher or parent. Verse 3 says this “The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty.” So there is a responsibility to be prudent. There is also this hilarious proverb about the sluggard in verse 13: “The sluggard says, “There’s a lion outside! I’ll be killed in the public square!” This person is so lazy and so wanting to avoid work that they say there could be a lion that could eat on my way, so I’ll stay home. Pretty funny proverb. And again it is putting responsibility on an individual to do the right thing.

So we have the issue of wealth, we have the responsibility of teaching and training children, and we have the responsibility of a person to do wise things like avoid danger and go to work. And as I said earlier, these things are all good to take to heart on an individual level, but these proverbs were given to the people of Israel who were asked to live as a community of God’s people. These instructions were not given to people living in American individualism. All of these proverbs can and should be looked at corporately. What I mean is that they are for a community. What do they mean when meant to be instructions for a community? A community like a church? In American culture we tend to think about things as they relate to us as individuals. We don’t think in community. Don’t get me wrong, it is ok to be concerned for yourself as an individual and determined to be your best. But as one commentator put it, self-determination and self-indulgence are not the same thing. When we cross the line to self-indulgence, we have moved away from being in community as we are meant to be. So what do these proverbs mean for a community?

Well, let’s go back to wealth for a minute. Verse 1 said “A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.” What does that mean for a church? It means that our integrity comes before means of income. It means that we will not do just anything to get people to come and give. We will do what God asks of us and trust that we will be able to pay the bills at the end of the day. Our integrity as a body of Christ comes first. And then remember verses 7-9? “The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is slave to the lender.” OK so remember that one reminds us that those with wealth are the ones who have power. Then verses 8 to 9: “Whoever sows injustice reaps calamity, and the rod they wield in fury will be broken. The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the

poor.” So what do these verses mean when considered for a whole community? “Whoever sows injustice reaps calamity.” How can or does a church or community sow injustice?

Well, we now need to think corporately. Think at the community level. If there are things in our community that are unjust, as a church we need to speak out about it. If there are laws that oppress the poor we need to seek to change them. We have a collective responsibility in our community. If there are injustices like racism, we have to actively speak out about that. We have to make sure that racism has no place in this community of believers, but we also have the responsibility to correct it where it is systemic in our community. It is not enough for me to say as an individual “well I didn’t oppress anyone today.” That is not what these proverbs are addressing. They are addressing a community that oppresses the poor. Do we have a community in which the poor are oppressed? Yes. So I, as part of the community, I have to take part of the responsibility for it and for changing it.

Now what about the other verse “the generous themselves will be blessed?” As a church are we generous? We are to some degree. There are some good things that come out of this community when it comes to serving and giving to the food pantry and so forth. I do not want to dismiss the good and generous things that happen here. I have been impressed with the generosity of many in this community and in this church. This church exceeds the generosity of some of the other churches I have been in. But there is one area in which I think we may not be generous enough and again, I am speaking corporately so I include myself in this. We are not generous enough with our time. People need our time. Whether it is taking the time to have a conversation about faith, or time to listen to someone who is going through a tough stretch in life, people need our time. And that is something I think we could be more generous with.

So there were the issues surrounding wealth and we have now looked at those in the context of community rather than just as individuals. Another thing we looked at was teaching and training children. Again, this is the job of all of us, not just parents. We as a church have a responsibility to help raise the children in our community. It is easy when you are a parent or grandparent and already involved in the ministries for our children and youth. But if you are not a parent of a current child or youth, this will take some effort. You will have to go out of your way to talk to them and get to know them. At fellowship time after this service I encourage you, if they stop running for a few moments, talk to them and get to know them. Engage our youth in a conversation. We have the coolest youth group. They are wonderful young people. Or host a youth Bible study at your home sometime. This is valuable time with young Christians. I encourage you if you are not a Sunday school teacher to consider it. That is a chance to get to know the kids in this church and have an impact on their faith. It is an amazing opportunity. Talk to Christin if you would like to do that.

Some of the verses in this passage that I have not covered in detail this morning are ones that address issues that Pastor Mike has talked about in the last few weeks of this series on Proverbs. There is verse 4 which is about the importance of humility before God. There is verse 10 which has the simple advice for avoiding quarrels. There is also verse 11 which reminds us to speak with grace to one another. All of these are lessons for living a life of faith together that we have considered in the month of August. And remember that all of these lessons are about living a life of faith in a community. These all apply to our life as a body of Christ together. But are we willing to learn them? Are we willing to examine how we use wealth and power and prayerfully be responsible for our community? Are we willing to watch our tongues and be careful about how we speak to each other? Are we willing to take seriously the teaching and training of both children and adults in ways that lead them to a relationship with God? And are we willing to be humble before God and gracious to each other? As I said earlier this morning, Proverbs are not promises. If you follow each of these proverbs to the letter it does not mean that you will have a perfect life. However, these teachings will lead you closer to God. They are meant to lead you to God. I don't know if you noticed the words Jesus left us in our responsive reading this morning. In John chapter 16 which is in your bulletins Jesus is talking to his disciples before his ascension and he tells them that it is time for him to stop teaching them in proverbs. That he has shared his teachings, that God has been revealed to them and that the time has come for them to believe in him. That is what all this teaching is designed to lead us to...a faith in Jesus Christ. So that is what we do as we come to this table this morning. (Sacrament of the Lord's Supper)