

Wisdom at work: honesty is the best policy

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[0 : 00] I'm going to try and it got a bit out of hand last time I think it was a bit long so I'm just going to try and cut down on the number of proverbs we look at this time. I think I'll move that out of the way actually I won't actually need that.

So here's an English proverb up on the slide there trust in God and keep your gunpowder dry. I think it allegedly dates from the English Civil War and it's suggesting of course that if you're a soldier you should be trusting in God but on the other hand if you don't look after your weaponry and your musket fails to fire and because of that you get captured or injured or something then you can hardly blame God for that because you weren't doing what you should have done. So we're going to look at what proverbs says about wisdom at work but I think before we do that we just need to ask this question because Jesus teaching on wealth in passages such as Luke 12 has often resulted in Christians actually thinking there's something rather dirty about business and profit.

But if you look closely at verses 30 and 31 of that Luke reading what he says is the following for the pagan world runs after all such things and your father knows that you need them but seek the kingdom and these things will be given to you as well.

It's not that we don't need these things we don't need stuff as I might put it. Our father knows that we do need such things. That's what Jesus says he says he even feeds the ravens.

[1 : 47] Now of course he does feed the ravens but it doesn't mean to say they don't work at it. If you study birds of course they put a great deal of effort into building their nests and feeding their young. It's not the working at it that's the problem I think as Jesus sees it.

It's where we put our trust and where we put our focus. And after all he tells us to sell our possessions and give to the poor but if you haven't accumulated them in the first place how are you going to do that?

If you haven't earned the money how can you give it to the poor? And I think the point is there's a difference between worrying about such things by making them into idols into the things that we trust in and working for them.

And of course we're all scared now by the terrible teachings of the prosperity gospel. But I don't think we should think the answer is a kind of Franciscan vow of poverty.

Because there are many other passages in the Bible that talk about work and possessions and things like that. 2 Thessalonians 3 verse 10 for example.

[2 : 53] There's another saying or proverb here. Even when we were with you we gave you this rule. If a man will not work he shall not eat. Paul is not encouraging laziness or idleness.

He says if you want to eat you better get to work and earn your living. Oh another Old Testament reading. Ecclesiastes 5 verses 18 to 20 said Then I realize that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him for this is his lot.

Moreover when God gives any man wealth and possessions and enables him to enjoy them to accept his lot and be happy in his work this is a gift of God.

He seldom reflects on the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart. The difference here of course is that this is a gift of God not like the man in the parable who said I've earned all this I don't need God I've enough to keep me going for the and I'll just take it I'll just turn aside.

The rich fool put his possessions in place of God here in Ecclesiastes the teacher is recommending gratitude to God for his gifts which is an entirely different mindset I would suggest to you.

[4 : 22] The rich fool does reflect on the days of his life in fact it says and says now I can take it easy the teacher recommends keeping busy with gladness of heart.

In fact I would suggest to you that the Bible's view of work is in fact to include it in the kingdom. We were talking when David came down about how the tensions between the kingdom as it exists in this world now and as it does in the future as it were.

But the scripture says in Revelation 21-24 for instance the nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it.

So in a sense if we're working we're working for the kingdom now. So let's look and see what Proverbs says against the world of work about the world of work just as it does about the family it brings fresh old but fresh for us perhaps thinking to the world of work.

So what I actually want to do really is focus just on on four Proverbs here are phrases from each of those four Proverbs accurate weights accurate weights are the Lord's delight from the strength of an ox comes an abundant harvest I don't know if you've thought about that before but we're going to think about that the blessing crowns him who is willing to sell now that's an interesting phrase and really by way of conclusion then we'll look at the many other plans in a man's heart so that's what that's how I want to do it look at really just four Proverbs I will quote one or two more and they're on the handout there for you to look at and at the end of the handout are lots more Proverbs and about work which I won't have time to look at but I've collected some so accurate weights are his delight perhaps not a thing you'd immediately expect to find in the scripture the full Proverb is the following the Lord abhors dishonest scales but accurate weights are his delight and in fact variations of this Proverb occur several times it's obviously regarded as important so perhaps we need to think about what it's actually saying well firstly of course and obviously it's a warning against dishonesty isn't it in our trading using different weights for buying or selling is what it's suggesting we shouldn't be doing or sticking your thumb on the scales when you measure out your corn or whatever it is you're selling it's an easy way to cheat your customer and the Lord hates this and there's a Proverb actually that reminds us that buyers can cheat as well which says it's no good it's no good says the buyer then off he goes and boasts about his purchase you would have observed this if you ever watch things like the Antique Roadshow or the Antiques programs it's no good look it's cracked it's chipped and then he goes to the auctioneer and says look I've got this fantastic piece of it it's very true that one isn't it but the buyer can cheat as well so it's certainly a Proverb that warns us against dishonesty and that's why I call this perhaps honesty as the best policy but I'd suggest to you it actually says much more than that because it says that accurate weights are his delight not that they're just you know he's just in favour of them you know that we shouldn't have dodgy scales he says accurate weights are his delight and as we've been going through Proverbs you probably notice that this idea of delight of desire what is delightful and desirable is actually a very important thing and

[8 : 37] God says that these that these when I trade when people trade like this when merchants trade fairly and honestly taking a pride in what they do there's actually something delightful and beneficial about it certainly it has no there's no idea that there's something dirty about profit or business or trade as such in fact on the contrary when people trade honestly and for mutual benefit then it's delightful and we can remind ourselves what Proverbs says about wisdom herself it says then I was the craftsman at his side I was filled with delight day after day rejoicing always in his presence the craftsman expects to be paid for good work of course but in a sense that's not his first motivation is it he takes delight in what he has created why because it benefits not just himself but his community as a whole he's creating something that has worth in itself not just its return in gold and I would suggest you don't need to be a carpenter or a builder or something like that to be a craftsman in this sense although we do have a builder with us tonight and

I'm sure he would consider himself a craftsman but you don't need to be a builder or a carpenter the merchant who trades honestly to benefit both buyer and seller is doing something that God approves of David was reminding us about Adam Smith who said that capitalism is based on self interest well yeah kind of but I don't think Solomon Proverbs would quite recognize that yes of course as you trade you expect to make a profit but you're selling something hopefully that is a benefit to the person you're selling it to and if it isn't then you really shouldn't be doing it a merchant who trades honestly as I said is doing something that God approves of and even delights in the Lord delights in honest scales now here's a question you can think about can you be a hedge fund manager and still be a craftsman in this sense

I'm not sure I'm going to give you a simple answer to that but I'd suggest that perhaps you can you know you don't have to live by the values of risk and even if you work in the financial world in the city you don't have to live by the values of risk in that sense you can use capital for the benefit of industry for the benefit of people there's nothing dirty about money itself it's the love of money and greed that is the root of all kinds of evil but increasingly once people forget that what do we find once people forget that the Lord delights in honest weights we get it all goes downhill doesn't it so instead of craftsmen we get cowboy builders we get merchants who exploit their employees and customers alike by selling shoddy goods as cheaply as possible just to amass a quick buck bankers find there's more profit in manipulating the economy and cheating the competition than there is in using their wealth to encourage fair and profitable trade accurate weights are his delight the free market may be a good thing in itself communism can certainly deny the worker his fair wage just as effectively as capitalism can and it can encourage laziness and jealousy as well but as Christians we can't afford to take the term capitalism too literally we don't believe in capital in that sense we don't worship it as so much of the world around us does and I remind you of what Paul says in 1 Timothy the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil some people eager for money have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs so if we do trade the Lord delights if we trade honestly but not if we love money and are only interested in exploiting one another and making money at the expense of one another and the second proverb I'd like to look at is this one from the strength of an ox comes an abundant abundant harvest so you may not have thought of that before but think of that perhaps now the full proverb is Proverbs 14 verse 4 and it says where there are no oxen the manger is empty but from the strength of an ox comes an abundant harvest so what is that telling us it's telling us that if you are going to trade if you are going to be in business then do it sensibly have a business plan get the right kit if you're planning to be a farmer buy a good tractor

I mean that's what the proverb is getting at isn't it an ox was the tractor of the ancient farmer some places it still is a tractor of course is going to require money and fuel if you have an ox it will eat food itself of course and you may begrudge it that food but he says if you haven't got an ox then your manger will certainly be empty because you won't be able to grow anything so think about how your business will work is what he's saying I think plan it properly do it right let's say a bad workman blames his tools but a true craftsman invest in the best tools he can afford and perhaps we live in an economy which is increasingly knowledge based so perhaps we could say invest in an education because remember we're told that wisdom offers better returns than gold there's another proverb! that's along the same lines that says finish your outdoor work and get your fields ready after that build your house if you spend all the time painting your house and buying interior decorations then you won't have any money to pay for it won't you?

[15 : 42] will you? in fact will you not have any money to pay for it you won't have anything to eat either he's saying so yeah give due attention to your business once you have a plan execute it properly because trying to wallow in luxury and building your house is a good way to get poor quick people talk today about work-life balance and I think probably is a subject we should be talking about perhaps we certainly shouldn't be workaholics who give all our attention to work and no time for our family or certainly no time for the Lord that's just creating another idol isn't it it's making our work an idol instead of money and the proverb doesn't say that we shouldn't build a house on the contrary he's saying if we gave due attention to the demands of our employment that's what is going to provide the resources to do the building of the house if our business goes bust and we get fired from our job we'll have to sell the house anyway won't we so proverbs is telling us that it's not unspiritual to be well organised as I once heard somebody say there is sometimes a feeling that it is isn't there but that proverb trust in

God and keep your powder dry is the way that I think we should be thinking so from the strength of an ox from having the right kit doing the job properly comes an abundant harvest thirdly and this is rather an interesting one I think blessing crowns him who is willing to sell and the whole proverb is a bit longer well in fact it's several proverbs strung together on a similar topic as you can see one man gives freely yet gains even more another withholds unduly but comes to poverty a generous man will prosper he who refreshes others will be refreshed people curse the man who holds grain but blessing crowns him who is willing to sell global globalization international trade has got a bit of a bad name of late among those who actually care for the economies of the third world countries and developing countries but

I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing in itself if we've got something of value to trade with those who need it then it's good to make the trade and notice what this proverb says it doesn't say give it away what it does say is don't corner the market don't shove up the price force up the price by refusing to sell until people are desperate don't manipulate the market in other words is what it's saying and there is always a temptation to do that isn't it if somebody is in real need of something and that's why it's perhaps about grain here staple food if somebody is in real need and you exploit that situation by pushing up the price and ripping them off as we say then that is something that we should really not be in favour of and if that's what the free market means then we should most definitely not be in favour of it a fair price for a fair product is what trade should be alright and if we're going to err we should err on the side of selling it cheaper than perhaps the market value if people really need it as I believe to be fair some global companies do

I believe some of the drug companies actually sell their drugs cheaper in Africa and Asia and other places and if they do that then we should certainly we should lord that we should praise that and say that is the thing to do but the problems arise with globalisation I think when it becomes exploitation so we have a multinational company and it moves into an African village to set up farming on an industrial scale maybe they're going biofuels or something like that it doesn't matter what it is but they're a big company and they move into this village and the locals have to give up their subsistence farms land but yeah well okay I mean they were hardly living in luxury in their small subsistence farms were they but what are they promised in exchange they're promised schools and hospitals and employment and western wealth in exchange for giving up their land but of course the trouble is that's not what actually happens isn't it because the local government officials are supposed to collect taxes and ensure that this infrastructure is built but so often these officials don't care for their people they just want to make a quick buck themselves and so what happens is that the multinational company discovers it's a great deal cheaper to bribe an official than it is to build a hospital and so what happens is that the labourers find they've been robbed of their land and they've no choice but to sell themselves into what is effectively slavery because they can't get any food at all if they don't the law gives them no protection both the CEO of the multinational and the local civil servant have put the love of money in place of fair trade here so let's as we think about these things and I think we all do need to think about these things because these big companies do listen to what people say these campaigns do have some effect sometimes but let's make sure when we do it we're making sense it's not that we necessarily should be saying that the multinational shouldn't be moving into this village I mean it may be the right campaign to do but sometimes in fact if it was done properly people would be better off and more freer from famine and poverty but they need protection and we need to make sure that if this sort of thing does happen that it really is that the taxes are paid properly and used for the benefit of the community and that if the company probably should employ the local people and should do so on fair terms and offer them a better wage than they were getting before out from their own subsistence farms and the problem is with this globalization is that when it goes wrong they involve all of us in their guilt don't they because we all seek cheap deals we all go around the supermarkets and compare prices and go on the internet and see if I can get this a little bit cheaper if I buy it this way and so we clothe ourselves with the products of

[23 : 18] Bangladeshi sweatshops now of course if we stop doing that then these people would not only be poor they would be destitute and absolutely have no job at all and yet we should remember that we're not supposed to be exploiting the workers and that you know if we simply accept this without making a fuss about it without campaigning looking for fair trade labels and what's the closed one the ethical trade agreement I think it's called and making sure that these things are not just paid lip service but actually supported these things I'm sure that we should be supporting to try and keep out of avoid the guilt of buying you know profiting from other people's slave labour and we shouldn't be frightened to encourage unionisation and self-help groups

I would suggest in such situations and of course if we are in a position to take decisions ourselves if we do run a multinational company or any sort of trade that you know where there is a potential to exploit people then let's be absolutely clear that the purpose of trade is mutual benefit not maximum profit at all costs but fair trade yes but the one who is willing to sell to trade in a way which actually enhances both parties that is the sort of trade the lord delights in and actually proverbs warns us that in the end we won't get away with it certainly as Jesus said tonight to the in the parable tonight your soul will be required of you so certainly we won't get away with it in the kingdom when Jesus

says did you give a cup of cold water even to those who were in need but in fact proverbs suggestion you probably won't even get away with it in this world because you will be found out and somebody else will inherit your wealth that you've accumulated unfairly and dishonestly and that will be somebody who is kind to the poor so let's see if we can sum this up a bit if a man or woman is conducting business according to the fear of the lord if your money is not your god you'll not be afraid to use money for constructive purposes you'll trade fairly expecting a fair return for your labour but you'll have the mindset of the craftsman if you're a motor manufacturer you'll make cars not money and if you can produce a better car you will do it firstly because it is better you will expect a better return for a better product that's only fair but that's not your first motivation your aim is mutual benefit you'll sell quality goods at a fair price and if you're not a businessman yourself but if you're an employee then the same thing applies you'll give a fair day's work and you'll expect a fair day's pay it's not wrong to demand a fair day's pay and if you have to join a union to do that then that's

I think not wrong which for that you will give a fair day's work you'll exploit neither your employer nor your customer in fact if necessary you'll take a loss yourself to assist those who are in real need and above all you'll not attempt to cheat because to do so is to cheat God himself and to disown the very things that the Lord delights in and you'll always bear in mind that the Lord your heavenly father knows that you need these things you need food and clothing and other stuff and I don't think I say it's even wrong to say that perhaps more than just food and clothing we do you know we have houses and we put things in them and it's not necessarily wrong in itself I think but we need to remember that we should be doing these for the

Lord and that the Lord says sell your possessions and give to the poor not that we should be doing that every time all the time but that we should be part of our agenda to use our resources to help others and if we do make a the more profit we make the more that frees us to help others Paul says at one point I'm not suggesting you make yourself poor for the benefit of somebody else but rather that there is equality and fairness so it's the Lord's purpose that prevails and if you plan against him it's not going to work but on the other hand he says commit to the Lord whatever you do and your plans will succeed now I don't think this means necessarily that as long as you say a prayer at the beginning of whatever it is you're doing when you go out to sell your carpets or whatever it is you're doing as long as you say a prayer at the beginning you will sell more carpets

I don't think that's what it means I think it means that if you do things according to what the Lord wants you to do according organize plan the way that the Lord plans things then you will succeed not invariably unless this is a proverb as I say we know that in this fallen world things don't always work out as they should Nick McQuaker was quoting this proverb on Tuesday at the training course and he said I've certainly committed things to the Lord and then they've gone pear shaped but that is the way to go about it and even if our plans don't succeed in this world as I said we're still living according to the values and purposes of the kingdom and eventually all the wealth of the nations will be brought into the kingdom one more slide about reputation a good name is more desirable than great riches to be esteemed is better than silver or gold saying the same thing again really to be a good craftsman to be remembered as somebody who built something beautiful is better than to be remembered as somebody who made a lot of money out of it and perhaps even more than that to be esteemed by the Lord by God by Jesus as saying well done good and faithful servant that is surely better than silver or gold so some proverbs about work let's sing a hymn about this and this is the only hymn

[31 : 46] I could find that actually is directly about this subject I did spend some time looking it's 940 hymn by Charles Wesley and it says forth in thy name that's what the original says a ending a