

Wisdom and Character

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[0 : 00] Okay, well, if you have your Bibles with you, do turn back to Proverbs chapter 11 and 12. That's what we'll be going through, some of those Proverbs tonight.

So be handy if you had it in front of you. Okay, well, let me begin firstly by clearing up a mistake from last week. You remember my introduction, if you heard last week, about spotting fakes? Well, it turns out that I'm really good at spotting fakes, but I'm hopeless when it comes to spotting the real thing. You see, the flowers which I suggested behind me that were fake were actually real. It turns out that actually after months of lockdown, there was a wedding that took place just before last Sunday, and so the flowers were actually real. So now this week, I actually bothered to look closely, and those are real still, although a different set of flowers, and those are fake.

Okay, so hopefully I got that right this time. But on to this week as we continue in Proverbs. Now, many of you will know that thanks to the pandemic, I've been doing a bit more bike riding.

[1 : 11] And the one good thing about being in lockdown, you know, not many, but one of the good things, is that I've been able to see parts of Melbourne, all within 5K of my home, that I would normally not do with my car, in my car.

And so, you know, what I've done is I've gone on Google, I've studied the bike trails around my house, and considered all the places that I could go. But what I've learnt as well is that the routes on the map can be misleading.

You see, sometimes the best way to get from A to B may not be the shortest or straightest route, or easiest route. Why? Because the map doesn't really show you, does it, topography.

For example, that there might be a really steep hill between points A and B. I found that out, particularly with one of those trails near Hartwell Station, where there's a short but impossibly steep path from the road, Turak Road, up to where the track crossing was.

Well, that's similar in some ways to the whole notion of wisdom leading to success. Now, hopefully, over the last weeks, I've convinced you that the way to success in life is not to marry someone who is.

[2 : 35] Sorry, Steph. But to embrace wisdom and to reject folly. More specifically, that embracing God's wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord.

But this might lead some of us to believe that what that means is that wisdom leads you straight to success, as I've got in the next slide.

There's a direct arrow from wisdom to success. But actually, if you reflect on the Proverbs that you read carefully, or just the whole book in general, what's actually more true is that this path we take from wisdom to success is one which we may call character, which is what I've got on the next slide.

Character, you see, is rather like that longer route we take from A to B in order to avoid the steep hill. So, yes, wisdom does lead to success, but it's via character development.

In order to be successful in life, wisdom first transforms your character, and then we see the fruit of that character eventually in success.

[3 : 46] Or, to put it in the words of my first point, wisdom shapes character that leads to success. Now, how do we tell this from the Proverbs? Well, by noticing that, as we look at the individual sayings, Proverbs doesn't just compare the wise and the foolish, but more often than not, they also compare the righteous and the wicked.

You may have noticed just then, when a journal read through some of the selected Proverbs. So, take Proverbs 11, verse 5, for example. It says, It's not always the words righteous or wicked that is used, but some variant of them, perhaps.

But they get at the same thing. The righteous are the ones who embrace wisdom and consistently do what she says, while the wicked choose folly and does what she says.

And that consistency of obedience is what builds character. Character is developed through consistency. Now, have you heard, for example, people saying, Jeff has been acting out of character lately?

I'm not saying that that's happened, but imagine someone saying that. What do they mean by that? Well, they mean that we expect Jeff to act consistently with his character, right?

[5 : 24] And when he doesn't, we say he's out of character. So, if someone is honest, we expect them to tell the truth all the time. If someone is kind, then he speaks gently, or she speaks gently.

Or if they are proud, we'll be able to see it in their actions. And so on and so forth. And so, for a person to choose wisdom and follow her, means that over time they will develop character consistent with that way of wisdom.

If you go back to Proverbs 11, verse 3, it's described like this. The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.

Here, the character of the upright or righteous is described as having integrity. That suggests consistency. They don't say one thing, then do another.

How they treat their friends, whom they like, It's the same as how they treat strangers, whom they don't really know. It all stems from integrity to character.

[6 : 29] On the other hand, the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity. That means they are double-minded. They say one thing, but do another. They change their behavior, depending on what suits them.

It's described as duplicitous. Now, the same goes for verse 5, which we read earlier. Here, the righteousness of the blameless make their paths straight. Again, straight is a picture of consistency, isn't it?

Not deviating to the right or left. Conversely, the wicked are brought down by their own wickedness. And although it's not spelt out how, it's implied that that's because they are opposite to the righteous.

They are brought down because their paths are crooked. Now, it's worth noting that when the Bible talks about the righteous, it's not talking about sinless people, people who never put a foot wrong. We know from the Bible that no one is perfect. All have sinned. We all fall short of God's standard. Instead, the reference to the blameless here refers to someone whose character is godly.

[7 : 35] It refers to someone whose inclination is to do right. And if they happen to slip up, then their righteous character prompts them to own up to it, to make amends, to seek forgiveness, to accept correction, these sort of things.

In other words, they try to do right, and if they don't, they respond by making right. And over time, this way of living produces righteous character.

It's humbling for those who are simple, who just started on it, because initially, it may seem like you are spending more time making right than doing right.

But if you think about it, it's no different, is it, with anything else in life that you want to try and achieve. For example, how do you get good at tennis? For instance, how does Roger Federer acquire that fantastic topspin backhand?

Down the line. Always just clearing the net. I mean, he makes it look really simple and easy, doesn't he, when he plays on center court. But the fact is, he took hours and hours of practice.

[8 : 48] At the start, when he was young, he probably hit them long more often than in, into the net rather than over it. But nowadays, after those hours and hours of practice, he can probably do it with his eyes closed, and still place it exactly where he wants it.

And that's the same with us as well. When we begin on the way of wisdom, and our character isn't formed just yet, then we're likely to get it wrong quite often at first.

It might feel then like this wisdom thing isn't working, or Satan might tempt you to give up, because it's not worth it. But when that happens, don't.

Because character comes when we embrace the process of discipline and accept correction.

Hence, in the other set of Proverbs, the second lot that John read, in verse 1 of chapter 12, that begins like this, Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but whoever hates correction is stupid.

Building character means accepting correction, rather than expecting perfection. Now, in our reading from Hebrews tonight, the writer makes it explicit, doesn't he?

[10:02] How this process of discipline and correction results in character, which then leads to success. So, quoting from Proverbs 3, verse 11 and 12, actually, which we looked at a few weeks ago, Hebrews 12 says this, Yes, God disciplines us, but it's because he loves us.

It's for our own good. It says in verse 10, Why? In order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful.

But what happens later on? It produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. That harvest of righteousness is another way to describe success.

And if we come back to Proverbs again, we see it described here as well. Again, I've only picked a small selection of Proverbs tonight. But if you continue to read the rest of the Proverbs, you'll find that they're representative of the Proverbs as a whole.

Which brings us to our second point on the next slide. The success determined by the character that wisdom produces isn't how the world usually views success.

[11:29] It's not the ones that, you know, Steph was reading out or explaining earlier on. I mean, just take a look at the US elections at the moment.

Everyone only has one measure of success, don't they? It's to win the election. Anything else is a failure, isn't it? But if you're a Christian and you're running for the presidency, what would you use as a yardstick for your success?

Would it be more important for you to have integrity, have it intact, even if you lose the election? Or will you win at whatever cost to your character?

When Trump and Biden stand before God one day, what do you think will be more important to God? Do you think God would even care that any of them became US presidents?

Well, look with me then at how the Proverbs describe success. Say, in verse 6 of chapter 11, which we looked at before, the righteousness of the upright delivers them, but the unfaithful are trapped by evil desires.

[12:45] Or verse 8, the righteous person is rescued from trouble and it falls on the wicked instead. Or verse 3 of chapter 12, No one can be established through wickedness, but the righteous cannot be uprooted.

Do you begin to see a picture of success here in the Proverbs compared to the failure for the wicked? There is, first of all, an implication, isn't there, that for the righteous, success may not come all at once, immediately.

Instead, the chosen path of the righteous may initially expose them to trouble or adversity or trials.

And yet, what the Proverbs promise is that the righteous is ultimately delivered from them.

They're rescued from trouble, it says. In the long run, they are established, cannot be uprooted.

Then their success or good position at that time cannot be taken from them.

On the other hand, you get the sense that the wicked may initially appear to be winning. Their schemes may be working, it seems. Their trickery, giving them the upper hand.

[13:58] But in the long run, what happens instead is that they are trapped by their evil desires. Verse 6. Or they fall into trouble. Verse 8. It's the opposite of the righteous, isn't it?

The wicked think they're sitting pretty until they fall into trouble through their own wickedness. And then they cannot be established. They're ruined.

That is the picture of success that the Bible gives us. Not one of instant wins or easy victories, but one where slowly but surely a righteous person's position is established and unmovable, even though initially they might look anything but successful.

Now what gives us such confidence that this is going to be the case? That even though the righteous may suffer, they will eventually come up on top. And that's encouragement for us to keep persevering because even though we might be suffering, we will one day come up on top.

Well, we find that in Proverbs 12, verse 2. For there it says, good people obtain favor from the Lord, but He condemns those who devise wicked schemes.

[15:21] In short, no one can resist God and His sovereign will. It's a bit like gravity. No one escapes the gravitational pull of the earth, do they?

With their own physical power. That is, if you jump into a plane, you can jump or rocket, you can get out of it. But in your own strength, you can't escape its pull, can you? There may be some who are stronger and therefore may be able to jump higher, but eventually everyone gets pulled back to earth.

And that's the same with God's will and sovereignty. Wicked people may for a time appear to go scot-free and be out of the reach of God's will, as it were. But ultimately, God's righteous judgment catches up with them.

The gravitational pull of God's sovereignty brings them back to judgment and to His reckoning. On the other hand, if from the get-go we're willing to submit to God's will and wisdom, then we're assured of success eventually.

Success comes because God is sovereign and His desire is to reward those who do right, to prosper those who submit to His wisdom.

[16:30] wisdom, wisdom which shapes their character into righteousness. God favors those whose character is righteous because they submit to God's will.

They live according to God's design. And so God's favor on people like that will eventually result in success.

It may not be the success that the world craves or defines as success. success. It may not even be the success that you initially thought for yourself.

Remember how in the very first week I talked about having our own agendas and life goals and desires? Well, a measure of success shouldn't be against those things.

But rather, it should be against what God has desired and planned for you and which He will achieve in you if you pursue His wisdom.

[17:30] Because ultimately that relates to your character, doesn't it? That wisdom shapes your character. And more specifically, it relates to shaping your character so that you become like His Son, Jesus Christ.

Christ. Now, I could spend a bit more time going through each proverb in detail, but I thought what I'll do with the remaining time is to show you the best example of this at work.

Wisdom, character, success. And that, we find, in no other than the person of Jesus, don't we? And so, the final point for tonight, which I've got on the slide, is to do a case study of Christ's wisdom, character, which ultimately led to His success.

Now, let me start by saying that the Bible teaches that Jesus is sinless. He's the eternal Son of the living God and so He's without sin. But we also need to know that He's human and fully so.

And so, it's also right to say that Jesus grew as any human would. Now, it may surprise some people to hear this, but it means that He grew in wisdom and character as well.

[18:45] Thanks to Luke, we actually get a wonderful glimpse of this in Jesus' early life. So, if you look, for example, at Luke 2, verse 40, we read that of the baby Jesus, that the child grew and became strong.

He was filled with wisdom and the grace of God was with him. And then, right in the very next section, we get Jesus when He was 12 and find Him making the trip to the temple for the first time. and what we're demonstrating is this growth in His wisdom. So, He was sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, and astonishing everyone by His understanding.

His mom comes and He's there, comes and tells, where have you been? And He's like, I've been here trying to learn, He says. But then He dutifully, obediently accompanies them home. And then, right at the end in chapter 2 and verse 52, Luke reviews explicitly, and he says that Jesus grew in wisdom and stature.

That means He developed in the way that Proverbs described. He learned wisdom, He put it into practice, He developed in stature or character. Elsewhere in Hebrews, there's also another reference to this.

[19:58] So, if you look at Hebrews 5, verse 8 on the next screen, we see that in verse 8, Son, though He was, He learned obedience from what He suffered and once made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him.

Now, what does it mean that Jesus had to be made perfect? I mean, wasn't He perfect from the beginning? Yes, He was, in the sense that whatever He did and said, He never sinned.

He never had to make right, as it were. But there's also a sense in which He had to undergo testing and suffering. He had to show through experience, as it were, through living life, that He was indeed sinless.

That's the sense in which the writer says that Son, though He was, divine and sinless, though He was, He had to learn obedience through testing and suffering so that He had to be, so that that would show Him to be perfect.

It's a bit like sitting for exams, which I know many of you are doing at the moment. You may be a genius mathematician, but you still need to sit the exam, don't you?

[21 : 05] Pass the test with full marks, no mistakes, before you can prove your perfection. And so that's the same for Jesus. The testing that He underwent in the wilderness, that wasn't just pretend temptations, those were real temptations that Jesus had to face.

That's the same with everything else in His entire life. As He faced the challenges of earthly living, having to deal with the threats of the Jews, the demands of the people to heal, all of those things, these were all tests of His wisdom and character.

And so you could go back to Proverbs, couldn't you? And everywhere where there's the word righteous or wise or similar, you can actually replace it with Jesus' name, and it would make sense. So go back to chapter 11, verse 3, the integrity of Jesus guides Him. Or verse 5, the righteousness of Jesus makes His path straight. Or verse 6, His righteousness delivers Him.

Or verse 8, His righteousness rescued Him from trouble. Or verse 11, through the blessing of Jesus, a city is exalted. More than a city actually, the whole world. And so on.

[22 : 14] So Jesus, you see, is the perfect example of the righteous person in Proverbs. And if you wanted a picture of the wicked, well, there is also a comparison in the Gospels, isn't there?

Because you need no look further than the chief priests and the teachers of the law as a counterpoint to Jesus' own life. And again, we see it play out, didn't we, in history?

Because who were the ones that were sort of successful at first? They were chief priests, weren't they? They thought they succeeded in putting Jesus, this heretic, or this false teacher, on the cross. Their schemes and their evil desires appear to have paid off. But what does Proverbs chapter 12 and verse 2 predict? Good people obtain favor from the Lord, but he condemns those who devise wicked schemes.

And that's what happened, didn't it? He was favored by the Lord, Jesus was favored by his Father. The very thing that the Jews thought was his failure, the cross, turned out to be his crowning success, and the very thing that seemed to be the success of the chief priest, the cross, condemned and brought them failure, didn't they?

[23 : 34] Now brothers and sisters, I don't know if Proverbs tonight has challenged your picture of success, or what you have set your hearts on doing in life, or achieving.

It's easy to be seduced, isn't it, by the world's view of success. We're bombarded with it on social media, in advertising, at our university, at our jobs.

Sometimes they're so overt that they're blatant, but a lot of times they're very subtle, aren't they? Almost subconsciously feeding into your anxiety and your desires.

And I know many of you already can see this deception, but then you may ask, what do I replace it with? If that's not the picture of success that I should have, what does success to God look like? Is it success in the church? Is it to be the best theologian and know the Bible back to front? I think, sadly, even those are subject to pride and temptation, aren't they?

[24 : 41] No, instead, I think this is the picture that we should have. Not a picture in our minds of success, but rather a picture of what godly character should be like.

That is, have a picture of Jesus' character in mind as you live your life, and then make that your goal in life. Not so much the success that will come afterwards, because that's for God to determine.

If we concentrate on building godly, Christ-like character, then we can leave the success for God to work out. And as Proverbs promises, that success will come.

It may not be the success that you thought or imagined, but it will be the success that God wants you to have. And it may not be something that the world will even praise you for, but that doesn't matter, because the success that God wants for you is the success that really matters.

So let me pray as we ask God to show us how to walk that way, to embrace his wisdom so that we might develop character and allow God to bring us success in our lives.

[25 : 53] Let's pray. Father, thank you that we don't need to be sinless and perfect to find favor in you. Thank you that we have found that in your son's sacrifice as the sinless human, this pleasing offering that we can claim for ourselves to offer to you.

Help us instead of striving for success in the way the world describes it, to strive for godly character instead. Help us to be like Jesus, for we pray it in his name.

Amen.