

The Plan

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[0 : 00] Well, as Dan said at the outset of the service, this is Reformation Sunday, and he also noted before the service when we were backstage saying, well, Anglicans don't make a very big deal about this, do we?

But it is, lo and behold, the day, the 500th anniversary of the Reformation that brought Protestantism into the world began on October 31, 1517.

Martin Luther had 95 theses on the topic of indulgences, indulgences you could buy and reduce your time in purgatory, and he thought that was a bad idea, and the rest is history, as they say.

But it is an event to be studied, to be considered, and marked in various ways, and we, in the Anglican tradition, are the inheritors of that Protestant heritage.

Therefore, I begin with a prayer, which was Martin Luther's prayer, that he prayed as he came up to preach. So join me in this prayer.

[1 : 04] Eternal God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, give us your Holy Spirit, who writes the preached word into our hearts. May we receive and believe it, and be cheered and comforted by it in eternity.

Glorify your word in our hearts, and make it so bright and warm that we may find pleasure in it. Through your Holy Spirit, think what is right, and by your power, fulfill the word.

For the sake of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen. I find that quite a wonderful prayer. I will now resist the temptation to tell you how it incorporates many aspects of Reformation theology, and just get on with the sermon, which is from Proverbs chapter 16.

If you're visiting with us, we're in a series on the book of Proverbs under the heading, Wise Up. And today's sermon continues on telling us what it is to be wise.

We're in the very middle of the book of Proverbs. Smack dab in the middle, as my mother would put it. Chapter 15 turning to 16 is the midpoint. And the putting together of the book of Proverbs was far from accidental.

[2 : 21] It was quite deliberate. So there is a particular construction of this book. And I want you to look at the very end of chapter 15. Having a Bible open would probably be a good exercise for this morning.

The very end of chapter 15, verse 33, is really important. It's the midpoint. And in a lot of ways, the book comes up to this point of the very end of chapter 15, the beginning of 16, and then diminishes from then.

So all things are leading to this midpoint. And the midpoint says, the fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom, and humility comes before honor.

And in so many ways, that is the whole point of the book right there. The fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom. The fear of the Lord is reverence and awe before who God is, is instruction, is the school, literally.

It is the place where we learn the meaning of wisdom. Wisdom is to be found in the fear of the Lord, and the fear of the Lord issues in wisdom. And notice what that wisdom is first and foremost said to be characterized by humility.

[3 : 28] Humility. How about that? A countercultural value if ever there was one. So the fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom. That's where this book is going, and that's, in a sense, the framework around the whole book.

And what we look at today is more of what that sort of wisdom means. What does this wisdom look like? How does it get operationalized in ordinary life?

Because this is a passage in chapter 16, as so much of Proverbs is, that's really all about the everyday, mundane, nitty-gritty, ordinary stuff of life.

If anyone thinks the Bible is all very rarefied and up there in the clouds somewhere, this is a nitty-gritty book. And this is a nitty-gritty sermon today. Because it has to do with all of those mundane things of life and what we're doing with them, especially planning.

And I'll say more about that in a minute. So just in the interest of time, I'm going to focus our attention on the first nine verses. And they hang together as a unit in a rather remarkable kind of way that I want to show you.

[4 : 35] But as a professor, I'm here to give you some homework to do. I'm allowed to do that. I do that regularly. I meet people on the street, and I give them homework. It's just something I do.

So verses 10 and onwards, you're going to have to read twice today before you go to bed. That's your homework. Right? So I'm not going to talk about anything beyond verse 9, but that's your homework.

You can take it to heart. But I am going to talk a lot about what's going on in the first nine verses. The main heading being godly wisdom refers everything, directs everything we do to the Lord.

That's the point that is coming through here loud and clear. So if you look at those first nine verses, verses 1 to 7 and then verse 9 all have something in common.

That one thing in common is missing from verse 8. Do you see what it is? It's a reference to Yahweh. It's a reference to the Lord in the translation that we have in our pew Bibles.

[5 : 42] Yahweh is the Hebrew there, the proper name for the God of Israel. God reveals himself as the Lord, as Yahweh. And so in all of those verses except verse 8, and I'll argue that in verse 8 it's actually implicitly there.

It's just shot through this whole passage to refer us over and over and over again to the Lord, to Yahweh. This is calling us to a Yahweh-centered life, to a God-centered life.

That's what this is really all about, to take all of our mundane, ordinary life and actually bring it before the Lord as an offering. That's where this is going.

So from that basic orientation, you can see that a God-centered, Yahweh-oriented life and making all of the mundane things of life referred to and oriented and directed to the Lord is not exactly what our culture tells us is the way to live.

This is a counter-cultural message if there ever was one. This God-centered way of living and referring everything, even the mundane things of life, would seem, from a secular, humanist kind of perspective, quite foolish.

[6 : 58] Life is just life. Work is work. A job is job. Money is money. Get on with it, will you? What's this God-talk stuff all about? That's not important. And besides, what is important is all of what we can see and taste and touch and buy and sell.

That's what's really important, isn't it? So just live on that horizontal horizon. Get on with the job. And maybe even eat, drink, and be merry. That's what our world tells us.

That's what our culture tells us. It's live in that horizontal horizon just as best you can, getting on with it. It's your job. That's what human beings do. Forget this vertical dimension, as I'll call it, but just live on a horizontal level.

Just get used to it. That's the way things are. And besides, if you actually get caught up with this God stuff, you're making a big mistake. That's not the way of wisdom. It's the way of foolishness.

Why are you doing that? Don't be mistaken. Go for the happy life of a godless materialist world and just get on with it. How many times every day is that what the world tells us?

[8 : 05] It does have an impact on us, you know. We're all part of that culture. We all hear those messages every day. Live in the horizontal. Be happy with what there is around us.

Get on the best you can. And part of this whole rendition as well, of course, is that, well, this God stuff, it just makes for a lesser life. It makes for a boring life.

It makes for constraint and restraint, not freedom, right? A life of shackles and not freedom. A boring life, not fun.

Grim duty and gritting your teeth and no joy and happiness and no cupcakes. That's what the world tells us, right?

That a God-centered life is no fun and it's no good and you shouldn't want it. That's what the world tells us over and over and over again and there's nothing actually new about that. Now, a lot of things in our culture have changed in the last few hundred years, but actually this is the ancient story as well and the book of Proverbs is all about the same point because sometimes we think we're in a different situation and no one has ever faced these challenges before.

[9 : 11] No, wrong. Proverbs tells us over and over, this is the pressure of our world, of a fallen sinful world. It will always tell you, live on the horizontal, get used to it, eat, drink, and be merry, and don't think about this vertical dimension.

Don't think about it. Just put it out of your mind. Don't bother with that. And if you did, it's going to be a big mistake. That's throughout the whole book of Proverbs and it's actually throughout Scripture over and over and over again.

There are no new things really under the sun. So into that world speaks the book of Proverbs. Into that world, into this be happy with the horizontal comes these first nine verses.

And the message for us is don't listen to that be happy with the horizontal and don't think you're actually in charge of your life. Orient and direct everything in all areas of life to the Lord.

That's why the Lord is there over and over and over again, verse by verse, in this passage. So let's look at it in some detail. This is a passage about human plans.

[10 : 19] Verses 1 and 3 and 9 quite explicitly refer to human planning. And we all make plans, don't we?

Planning is a natural, ordinary, just run-of-the-mill thing of life. Of course we all have to make plans. You plan what you are going to, you know, what route you are going to take and what mode of transportation you are going to use to get to church this morning.

Most of you have a plan for lunch. Some of you are wondering now, what is my plan for lunch? Are you going to Grandma's house for lunch? Are you meeting your friends and going down the road to a restaurant?

Are you going home and prowling around the refrigerator and seeing what leftovers happen to be there? What's your plan for lunch? We just plan things. It's ordinary. And that's sort of what Proverbs is saying.

It's a part of life, isn't it? The question is, how do we see it and what do we do with it? The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord.

[11 : 22] Hmm. What's going on there? Well, the planning part isn't the hard thing for us to understand so much. It's really what this means to us as a planning people, that our plans originate with us.

They come from us. They are the products of our heart, it says. The heart, this is the great Hebrew word for heart. It's a very simple word, but it's the core of who we are. It's your imagination.

It's your will. It's your mind. It's who you are. And it's out of that core of who we are as human beings. We plan things, even what we're going to have for lunch or our retirement or our way of life or whatever it might be.

But the point that Proverbs is making here is that all of those kinds of ordinary plans, necessary as some of them are, are just the product of the human mind and the human imagination.

They come from us. They originate from us. And they're ours. They come from us as our source. And then, but.

[12 : 26] It's marvelous. In verses 1 and 2 and in verse 9, the second half of those verses all has this little word, but. The but is carrying a lot of theological weight in this passage.

The but is weighty. Right? The but is to say, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord. So we do our planning and we get on with this horizontal level of life that we're so used to.

It's our realm after all. But the answer of the tongue is from the Lord. And what's going on here is kind of an interruption of our sense of self-sufficiency.

An interruption with our sense of control over our plans. But you're really not in charge, says the Lord. The answer of the tongue is from the Lord.

Eugene Peterson has a paraphrase of this in the message. Mortals make elaborate plans, but God has the last word. I like that a lot.

[13 : 27] That really is the point. God has the last word. We can plan, but what God says is what actually happens. So these plans emerge out of our own imaginations, but what matters is what the Lord has in mind and what the Lord says.

And the Lord says it shall be so. We can make our plans, but we delude ourselves if we suppose we're in control and we can impose our will on this horizontal level of life and make everything turn out the way we wish.

In fact, what? The Lord is the one who is in control. God is God and we are not. And that's not to discourage our planning.

You do have to have a plan for what you're going to do for lunch, I suppose. But it's to see those plans with humility. It's to see those plans in light of who God is. And it's to see the need to refer all of those plans Godward.

Bruce Welke, my teacher and someone many of you know, the great Old Testament scholar, says this, But remember that phrase, that's from the King James.

[14 : 49] They design what they'll do and say, but the Lord decrees what will endure and form part of his eternal purposes. God is God and you are not.

Verse 2, All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the Spirit. This is along the same lines, and that weighty, theologically loaded butt is there.

All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes. In other words, we ascribe to ourselves right intentions and pure motivations. We're not aware of our blind spots and our faults and our failings.

In our own eyes, all that we do is quite wonderful and well-intended. But. But. But. But the Lord weighs the Spirit.

What does that mean? What it means is the Lord sees through all of our rationalizations, all of our self-justifying behaviors, and all of our self-deceptions.

[15 : 47] The Lord sees through all of that, and he weighs the Spirit. He weighs what's inside of us. He is actually the one that can see the human heart and understands the human heart and knows just how self-deceived we really are.

We may think ourselves as pure and holy and totally well-intended, but actually the Lord sees how self-centered we are, how fractured we are, how self-deceived we really are.

We're not as pure and holy as we think. So the Lord weighs the Spirit. And this is, again, a call to humility. Remind yourself, dear folks, it's saying, you are not God, and you are not as pure as you think you are, and you are not as pure as the Holy One of Israel.

So as we get caught up in all of our plans, and as we get caught up in justifying ourselves and the way that we're living our lives here in the horizontal realm, what do we do with these theologically loaded butts that put us in our place and humble us?

What are we to do with all of that? Well, do you just wave the white flag and say, well, so be it? Eat, drink, and be merry? Do you just say, whatever happens, happens?

[17 : 02] Let's watch some TV. Is it resignation? Is it depression? Is it despair? How are you supposed to respond to this?

No, we're not God, and we actually don't have a control upon the world, and we're not as pure as we think we are, and we're going to make a mess of these plans left to ourselves. So how do you respond to that?

Verse 3. Verse 3 is a stunning response, and it's just marvelous. Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established.

The reference to work here, commit your work to the Lord, is not your work per se, in the sense that your 9 to 5 job is your work, for instance.

This isn't narrowing the sense of work. It's actually, it's much bigger sense of work here. This is your everyday life. This is everything you do. Your work is all of your life on this horizontal domain, actually.

[18 : 05] That's really what it is. This doesn't limit, this actually expands the idea of our lives. Commit your work to the Lord. Take this horizontal orientation of life, and redirect it vertically to who God is, and to what he has done, and recognize the horizontal of life is to be lived in reference to the vertical of life, and to be lived in light of who Yahweh is.

Commit your deeds, your works, your efforts, your energy, your activities, whatever word you want to put in there, to the Lord, to give everything in life a new orientation, submitting ourselves to him.

Commit your work to the Lord. It's an active and not passive thing. It's a matter of being deliberate, and not accidental. Intentional and not casual.

It's moving from independence to dependence. From self-sufficiency to God-sufficiency. From a self-focus to a God-focus.

From self-control and self-direction to God's control and God's direction, you see? Commit your way to the Lord.

[19 : 25] Commit your work to the Lord. Commit your life to the Lord, we might say. It's a call to conversion. We have to live life on this horizontal level.

We have to make certain plans. We can't control the universe. We're not as pure and holy as we think we are. We're self-deceived. We're needy, humbled creatures before this mighty God.

And what does that mighty God invite us to do but commit our way to Him? Commit ourselves into His care and into His keeping. It's a call to conversion.

Then what happens? Your plans will be established, it says. I don't think that that means that necessarily everything at this horizontal level that we seek to put in place is going to turn out fantastically well and always rosy.

The book of Proverbs, let alone the rest of the Bible, does not have a sort of health and wealth and prosperity gospel to it. That's not the real gospel. Godly people suffer many difficulties throughout life of many kinds.

[20 : 33] This isn't making us immune to life's difficulties or problems. No, what it means is that when you allow yourself and put yourself into the vertical dimension of life and refer the horizontal dimension always to that vertical reality of who God is, what it means is that our plans become caught up in God's purposes.

And that we seek to do what God's purposes are rather than what we want. We realign ourselves to what God's purposes are, which is where you find yourself then in verse 4.

From verse 4 to verse 8, we have a picture of who God is and we have a picture of what a godly, wise life is. That's what's going on in this passage. It's really quite marvelous.

So we're put in our place, we're humbled, we're called to a conversion, we're called to commit ourselves to the Lord. And then why? On what basis? On what basis?

Because we know who the Lord is. The Lord has made everything for its purpose. The Lord is the creator God. He's the maker of this world. He knows the horizontal better than you and I do.

[21 : 42] And the confession of faith of the people of Israel and us, and we have already said it in the creed, is that there is a maker of the universe. And we know who he is, Father, Son, and Spirit.

The purposes of that maker are right and good. The purposes of that maker are reliable. God has made everything for a purpose, all of this horizontal realm, and even the likes of you and me.

Even the wicked for the day of trouble. There's an appointed judgment of the wicked, and there's a vindication of the righteous. That's God's design, and that's the way that he has made the universe.

You can commit your way to the Lord because this Lord is the creator God. This is Yahweh, and Yahweh is the one whose purposes are perfect and whose ways are true, and you can trust him.

Verse 5, Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the Lord. That, of course, is the negative way of making the positive point about the value of humility.

[22 : 47] The humble in heart are the ones whom the Lord loves. The Lord has made everything for a purpose. Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the Lord.

That abomination literally is hatred. The Lord hates those who are arrogant. Why? Because that is contrary to his character and his design and purpose for the world. Those who are humble in heart recognize who this God is and bow before his purpose and design for the world.

Be assured, he will not go unpunished. There is justice in the universe. We can trust him. And this picture of humility is at the heart of this picture of wisdom.

Wisdom is defined as humility and humility is defined as wisdom. They're really virtually interchangeable in Proverbs. It's quite stunning, really. And then what does it go on to say?

This humility that is pleasing to the Lord is also found in expression of love and faithfulness. Verse 6, by steadfast love and faithfulness, iniquity is atoned for.

[23 : 58] Isn't that just marvelous? Those are the great Hebrew words, marvelously, theologically loaded Hebrew words. Chesed and emet.

Chesed, the steadfast love of the Lord, never ceases. Emet is the righteousness and faithfulness that marks his people. By steadfast love and faithfulness, iniquity is atoned for.

Love covers a multitude of sins. This is a picture of the character of the godly, wise person who orients every area of life vertically to who Yahweh is.

What characterizes their life is the qualities of Yahweh himself. And what we know of Yahweh himself is that he is the one who shows steadfast love and faithfulness.

And those who orient their lives to him take on his character and bear witness to who he is by showing steadfast love and faithfulness in the world.

[24 : 56] That's the way of wisdom. By fear of the Lord, one turns away from evil. This reference vertically to who God is, to recognizing his design and his purposes and his steadfast love which never ceases, turns us from evil and turns us to that which is good and that which is righteous.

We become like him in his goodness and righteousness and turning from evil. When a man's ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies be at peace with him.

This is a picture of this godly life. What do you see here? Peace. This is a life of peace and not of strife and turmoil. It's a marvelous picture and this is the great and rich and beautiful word that marks the Old Testament so often.

Shalom. Right relationship. Restoration of God's purposes according to his design. The one who walks in this godly way of humble wisdom is the one whose life is marked with peace.

Those ways please the Lord and it's a way of peace, even peace with enemies. Interesting. It's not just Jesus who talks about loving your enemies.

[26 : 13] It's a biblical pattern from the beginning. Be at peace even with your enemies. If there's anything about our horizontal world, it's the world of conflict and strife. And in the midst of the world of conflict and strife, there's a different way of life available for those who orient themselves to Yahweh.

It's a way of peace. There's a different way of life. This is a picture of godly wisdom. Verse 8, Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice.

There's no explicit reference to Yahweh here. It's the only verse of these ones we're looking at. You see, there's no Lord in this verse. What does that mean that somehow it's just randomly stuck in here?

There are some commentators I was reading who couldn't make any head or tail of this verse at all. Like, what is it doing here? It must have been a mistake. Nope, not a mistake. Everything that we're talking about has to do with this, right?

Better is a little with righteousness. This way of godly wisdom and humility and living out a character that is real in the horizontal level of the world that reflects Yahweh's perfect character has to do with being righteous.

[27 : 23] Being right-related to God and to one another is what righteousness means. Better is a little at the material level with that sort of right relatedness in your life than a whole whack of stuff.

Great revenues with injustice. The way of injustice and unjust gain and piling up all kinds of material goods and loads of gold for yourself, all that piled up unjustly has nothing to do with the way of the Lord.

It has nothing to do with this godly wisdom. All of that material level and in a world where every day we're told count your pennies. Put a material value on everything.

Put a monetary value on everything. Reduce everything to the material. Right? Live horizontally dear people. It's all about money. I feel like I've got to say what does this mean to us?

Better is a little with righteousness. This reminds us of what our value should be and how to look at the material. as nowhere near as important as a godly life which pleases the Lord.

[28 : 30] It's not all about who has the most toys when you die. So that's a picture. It's a beautiful picture of this godly wise life lived in orientation and commitment to the Lord.

Those that commit themselves to the Lord will have a life that looks like that. The godly wise life that's lived out in the horizontal. That yes, goes on and makes plans and even plans for what to do to lunch.

But those have a different reference, a different orientation, a different direction. It's a different way of life in the here and now. Which brings us back to the place where we began essentially.

In verse 8, it's a parallel to verse 1. You see how this is kind of a bracketing of this whole section. The heart of man plans his way but the Lord establishes his steps.

Just in case we've missed the point, it drives it home again. Just in case we haven't been humbled enough, it reminds us again. The heart of man plans his way.

[29 : 33] Well, that's what we do, folks. We plan our way. We revert back to self-control and self-sufficiency and making our way as best we can according to our own wisdom.

That's the way we work. Back to it, folks. And then there's the theologically loaded but again. But the Lord establishes his steps. So if we haven't gotten the point already, we get it again.

Refer all things always in every realm back to Yahweh, back to the Lord. You may make your plans including what to do for lunch. But ultimately, it's referring them to the Lord that makes all the difference.

Now, what do we do with all of this, folks? I'm a person that likes to take control and make plans and be very self-sufficient, get on with the job in lots of ways.

Maybe you're like that too. We can come to church on Sunday and say, yes, God is God and we are not but by the time we get to the office on Monday, we're back in charge of our lives again.

[30 : 44] We're living very self-sufficient, self-controlled lives. We're in charge and this horizontal realm is our realm, isn't it? Let's get on with it. That's the nature of us as fallen human beings, I submit.

It's a lot easier for us to take control of our own lives and exercise an independent spirit rather than actually offering our lives to the Lord and living in a dependent spirit.

It's a lot easier to get on with just being a sinful creature when in fact we're invited in this text to commit our way to the Lord, to commit ourselves to the Lord, to commit our lives to the Lord.

So I think what this is doing is inviting us. It's a call to us to embrace an intentional and deliberate dependence. Godly wisdom directs everything we do to the Lord step by step by step day by day by day by day.

I've been thinking about a passage in the New Testament that sounds a lot like Proverbs. It could be in a sense kind of a commentary on this very text. I wonder whether the writer of James had this in mind.

[32 : 04] But as we close I just want to mention this text from James chapter 4. Maybe some of you have even been thinking about this and you know where I'm going here. James chapter 4 verse 13 if you want to look it up later.

Come now you who say today or tomorrow we'll go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit. Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring.

What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Talk about humbling us. That's all we are is a mist. We think we're something you're a mist.

Instead this is the big but here instead you ought to say if the Lord wills we will live and do this or that.

If the Lord wills. Not if I will. If the Lord wills we will live and do this or that. As it is you boast in your arrogance all such boasting is evil.

[33 : 10] We're back to humility and arrogance as the choices of our lives. The arrogance is our independent spirit and self-sufficiency. The humility is our dependence and our God-sufficiency.

So I think James has everything to teach us here. We are just a mist and we all need to learn to say day by day by day by day if the Lord lives we will live and do this or that.

So this is an invitation really to offer ourselves to the Lord to present ourselves to the Lord. Eugene Peterson's wonderful rendering in the beginning of Romans 12 here's what I want you to do God helping you take your everyday ordinary life your sleeping eating going to work and walking around life and place it before God as an offering.

Isn't that beautiful? That's the challenge here from verse 3 commit your way to the Lord commit your life to the Lord commit all of what you do to the Lord by offering it vertically by lifting it up and giving it over to the true and living God to Yahweh to Jesus Christ.

Godly wisdom directs everything we do to the Lord. Let's pray.