

November 6, 2016

TEXT: Proverbs 19: 1, 4, 6-7, 17, 21–22

TITLE: TED Talks: Economic Wisdom

By Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Proverbs are the antithesis of sermons. One is an extended talk on a theme; the other is a quick summary of an idea. Proverbs are like the punch line of a joke—explaining them only ruins them. What more needs to be said about sayings like: Look before you leap. Two wrongs don't make a right. Never elect an idiot to national office. That is part of the reason why no one ever preaches from the book of Proverbs. The chapters are made up of short, two line sayings that are designed to be self-explanatory. There's no storyline with action and characters. There's only a series of quotes to give us wisdom and teach us about faith.

So when I look at chapter 19 of the book of Proverbs, I imagine it to be part of a deck of cards that has been dealt to me. And just as in Bridge or Hearts you sort out the cards in your hand according to suits, we rearrange the verses in the chapters of proverbs and organize them around themes. There are still things we can learn from the other proverbs in our hand, but our first task is to cluster them together so that we can hear what they teach about wealth and basic economics.

Chapter 19 has five proverbs on this topic beginning with verse 1, which says: *Better to be poor walking in integrity than one perverse of speech who is a fool.* This same idea appears at least four other places in Proverbs. In chapter 16: *Better is a little with righteousness than large income with injustice;* chapter 17: *Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife;* and in chapter 28: *Better to be poor and walk in integrity than to be crooked in one's ways and rich.* You get the point. The bible rarely talks about money as a thing by itself. It always talks about money in terms of how it is used—or how it affects the character of the person who has the money. The bible doesn't care about money as much as it cares about the hand that holds the money and the heart that guides how the money is spent.

Money talk is what I call a “two-handed conversation.” You can never just talk about money itself; you always talk about money and how it is being used—money and where it came from—money and how it affects a person's character for good or for bad. That's why the Proverbs I quoted all linked the idea of money with the virtue of integrity. Better to be poor and walking in integrity than a fool who's perverse in speech, in a house full of strife, living as a crooked rich man. Money can't buy everything—we know that to be true. We know there are things—honor, justice, integrity—that should not be sacrificed on the altar of wealth. We know that, even if we don't always live that out. So what other wisdom is available from Proverbs on this topic?

The next cards from chapter 19 are verses 4 and 7: *Wealth brings many friends, but the poor are left friendless. If the poor are hated even by their kin, how much more are they shunned by their friends!* If having a lot of money is of little value without integrity, the opposite corollary is the sad fact that those without money are often friendless and

shunned by others. We all know that to be true too. The quickest way to introduce problems into a family or awkwardness into a relationship is to loan someone money - or to be in need of money and trying to decide who to ask for help. The lack of money leads to isolation. It can break apart a family or a community, so in that sense it is sinful, for it diminishes us as individual children of God and as the collective body of Christ.

Look, lots of people make bad choices with their money—and none of us can save everyone who has fallen onto hard times. But remember how money is a two-handed conversation topic. While the lack of money may be the issue at hand, the other hand asks about how did things get to a place where the person is without funds to start with? Is it because of unequal education opportunities or lack of a living wage? Is it because of racism or sexism or the lure of addiction with no resources available for recovery? Honestly, it takes a lot of work to keep an entire section of any community in poverty and isolated from everyone else.

I recently read about Forsyth County, Georgia—the county just northeast of Fulton County, where Atlanta is. Forsyth County has its own sad history of racism, going back to an event in 1912 in which a lynch mob killed some black teenagers and then went on a rampage involving dynamite, arson and sheer terror until every single African American was chased out of that county. No persons of color in that entire county. That fact is striking because Forsyth County continued to maintain that absolute segregation through the 1940s and 1950s, through the Civil Rights years and the 1970s—screaming “Keep Forsyth white!” to nonviolent protesters in 1987, until finally the sprawl around Atlanta forced Forsyth’s racist history to be broken with black homeowners coming in the 1990s. I share this information to stress how much effort it takes to intentionally segregate any place over a number of years, and how much work it takes to willingly isolate ourselves from others.

Being poor in America often involves both bad personal choices and bad, intentional actions done by all of us—actions and policies designed to isolate, designed to decline to provide help for those struggling, often from no fault of their own. The people in Forsyth County told themselves that boil weevils and a few bad Klansmen kept their county segregated; and likewise we too often believe the poor themselves are totally to blame for their condition. It takes a lot of effort to isolate, segregate and maintain economic injustice.

Again, seeking guidance, we pull out another card from Proverbs chapter 19: verse 17 and read, *Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord and will be repaid in full.* That proverb too is self-explanatory. The only way to break the cycle of poverty and segregation is to reach out, show kindness, work for justice. It involves another two-handed conversation about economics: how is the lack of money and resources harming this child of God and what are the larger issues involved in this unjust economic crisis that touches all our lives?

In addition to the four verses we’ve already read, there is also verse 22, which names a Christian virtue that offers true healing and hope for us and for the poor: *What is desirable in a person is loyalty, for it is better to be poor than a liar.* What’s desirable is

loyalty. When I think of loyalty, I think first of dogs, then of Boy Scouts. We don't talk much about loyalty anymore in the church, which is a shame. To be loyal is to be true-hearted, devoted, just, and trustworthy. It means you're a person who is reliable, who keeps your promises. To piggyback on the earlier proverbs, to be loyal is to be a person of integrity, a person who breaks isolation through caring connections, a person who lends and heals and helps. And why? Because a loyal person is faithful.

Too often sermons stay in the lofty realm of the abstract. Yes, we should care for the poor. Yes, we should be people of integrity. We should be honorable, fair to all, and just. But what does that mean in daily life, especially when it comes to wealth and economics? Scripture consistently pulls the conversation back down to reality. If you have money in one hand, the other hand asks to consider how are you spending it right here and now. Did your wealth come solely by your efforts or was it aided by gender and race privileges, family inheritances, living in the right zip code, or blind luck? Do your spending habits build up others or only serve yourself? Is it done rightly or foolishly? Put more simply: Are your economics—Pittsburgh's economics and America's economics – loyal to God's children?

Next to verse 22 about "what is desirable in a person is loyalty" is a card, so to speak, addressing another topic, but one that is appropriate to end on. Verse 21: *The human mind may devise many plans, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established.* That verse has a simpler proverb form—Humans propose, but God disposes. All human actions take place on a stage for which God writes the overall script. God's will shapes the entire drama. God's priorities outrank our priorities, our tendencies toward greed, selfishness, and segregation. That is why true economic wisdom is faith wisdom—seeking what serves the Lord as we gather on the Lord's day, share the Lord's meal, walk by faith as economic creatures out and about in the Lord's creation. Whatever money accumulates in one hand, the other hand asks "How is this resource in your possession serving the Lord? Are you being loyal, faithful with what you're doing financially?"

The author John Fowles wrote an entire book of short proverbs, of which one says: "Wealth in itself and rich people in themselves are innocent. But wealth and rich people surrounded by poverty and poor people are guilty." (John Fowles, *Aristos*) That's a proverb that doesn't need much explanation, but it exemplifies the two-handed conversation we always have when the subject is money. All that we have comes from the Lord. All that we do is as a servant of Christ. In our spending, our choices, our values—are we being wise, faithful and loyal?

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