A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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*“The Worth of a Good Name”*

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Proverbs 22

The book of Proverbs is a collection of pithy sayings about how to live a good life. There are sayings about friendship, about being willing to work hard and the dangers of sloth; there are sayings about telling the truth and not listening to liars, crooks, and swindlers. It’s a little bit like the book Everything I Needed to Know I learned in Kindergarten, if the subject matter were a bit more mature than kindergarten. Proverbs is generally taken to be teachings on life from an older guide to young people who are just beginning to enter the real world. The book is about wisdom.

Wisdom is the theme of the book, which opens with its purpose: “To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth—let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

So that’s how it opens. We read in chapter 22, wisdom about how a good name is to be chosen rather than great riches. A good name is the outward sign of inward wisdom. A good name isn’t fame or reputation, though a good reputation may follow. A person who has a good name is a person who lives their lives guided by sacred wisdom. This is a about our priorities. What do you want most out of life? How you answer that question, no matter how you answer it, will drive your decisions and actions. A good name: a life of wise living, is better than even great riches. Can you believe that? Can you live on that promise? Proverbs comes in many forms and addresses many subjects. In this morning’s readings from chapter 22, the wisdom is about riches and poverty, injustice and justice, generosity and blessedness. It’s about money.

If there’s any subject about which people have a lack of wisdom it’s money. We chase it; we waste it; we desire it; we sometimes squander it too easily. Sometimes, we hold on to it too tightly; we worry about leaving too little to our children. We don’t give nearly enough of it away generously. We work for it and work and work and work, some people out of greed, but most people out of fear. Fear of not having enough of it when we need it. There’s very few of us for whom money is just a scoreboard. For most of us, money will turn into what we’ll eat, what we’ll drive, what will keep us dry, and what will educate our children someday, pay medical bills when we retire, and allow a little bit of freedom. Some people work for it; others beg for it; some play games for it; just about everyone is pretty foolish about it in one way or another. Just about everyone all the time wants more and thinks they need more than they currently have.

If this were just one part of our complex lives it would be one thing that could be dealt with occasionally on the list of everything else in our lives. But the reality for most people is that this swamps everything. It goes down deep, all the way, ordering and disordering literally everything else. Why do marriages break up? There are several major reasons. Money is one of the most common. What causes the most stress in people? Money, or the lack of it. This is true whether a person is relatively well to do or relatively without means. This is the issue that keeps us up at night.

You’ve heard it said before that the two subjects Jesus talked about the most were the Kingdom of God and money. I believe that’s true. He taught quite a bit about money and all the issues around it: greed, stinginess, hoarding, worry, and generosity from those least expected.

In Proverbs, we have dynamite wisdom that can help reorient us out of the obsession and remind us of what life is really all about: “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.” While there are many scriptures about the dangers of money, I don’t think this is one of them. Riches, silver and gold aren’t said here to be bad. They’re not said to be good, not bad either. It’s just neutral, except that the author of Proverbs knows how large they loom in our eyes, how attractive riches, silver, gold are to most people.

You know what’s better than all the silver and gold you can amass? Living well. You know what the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor have in common? The Lord is the maker of them all. We’re all in this together. We’re all creatures sharing in common a Creator. You didn’t make yourself, rich one. You’re not a god. You’re a creature of God. And so are you, poor one. Your lack of wealth doesn’t diminish the truth that you are a creature of God, too. The man sleeping in air conditioned comfort and the man sleeping on the park bench may not have much in common, but they have this: they are both children of God. No matter how much you amass or how much you do without, you, like all those around you, are creatures of a good and loving God. Your life is not measured in what you have, but in who you are, and that is measured in large part in how you treat those around you.

It means the rich have no more claim to divine favor than the poor. Believe it or not, that was actually a radical declaration from Proverbs. It’s a claim I would expect to read from Jesus who told stories like the Good Samaritan…or the prophets, like Amos, who railed against corrupt powers…or Ecclesiastes, which shrugs at all human self-importance as folly…or Job which totally challenges everything people thought about riches and poverty and righteousness. But I didn’t expect it in Proverbs: the rich have no more claim to divine favor that the poor.

I mean, that’s challenging what people commonly thought. If you were rich it meant you were a good person. It was sufficient evidence that God favored you. If you were poor, well, lots of luck. We’ll leave some gleanings in the field for you. What is more, Proverbs is traditionally thought to be written by Solomon who was rich and reads like a school of wisdom about how to get along in life as it is. What I’m saying is that Proverbs is not an occupy Wall Street kind of book. It’s more like “you might want to be careful when investing in Wall Street” kind of book, but it’s almost revolutionary here at this point. The rich and poor are the same in God’s eyes and ought to be in ours as well.

We need to hear this and remember it because everything else--literally everything else we see tells us otherwise. Christians are not immune. James addresses the early church who suffered this same problem. “Why are you showing favoritism?” he asks. A person with gold rings and fine clothes comes in and you immediately notice all of that and defer to him, “Please have a seat here in the place of honor.” While to the poor person you say, “sit there, no there, no way over there… or at my feet if you want.” Listen brothers and sisters, has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?

What does that mean? Does it mean that poverty is salvation and riches is damnation? Maybe not on the surface, or as a determinative category, but Scripture is full of warnings of the dangers of that thing we’re all chasing. It’s like scripture from the prophets to the proverbs to the gospels to the letters of the New Testament is blinking a caution light at us every time we head down the road of chasing riches in place of everything else that’s truly good. And we’re always heading down that road.

Frederich Buechner puts it this way, “The trouble with being rich is that since you can solve with your checkbook virtually all of the practical problems that bedevil ordinary people, you are left in your leisure with nothing but the great human problems to contend with: how to be happy, how to love and be loved, how to find meaning and purpose in your life.

In desperation the rich are continually tempted to believe that they can solve these problems too with their checkbooks, which is presumably what led Jesus to remark one day that for a rich man to get to Heaven is about as easy as for a Cadillac to get through a revolving door.”

We can’t solve all of life’s problems with a checkbook or a credit card, but we can cause problems for other people, big problems and the proverbs speak warnings about this as well. There is a tender place in God’s heart for vulnerable people and a desire in God’s will for those who are a little more secure to protect, provide, and share with those who have little buffer between their lives and the suffering of poverty. In Proverbs, like so many other biblical voices, the rich are warned, “do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate.” Proverbs 14.31 warns, “He who shows contempt for the poor shows contempt for their Maker.”

Buechner, quoting him again, reminds us of what life is like when we’re not obsessed with wealth, what life is really all about: “Have you wept at anything during the past year? Has your heart beat faster at the sight of young beauty? Have you thought seriously about the fact that someday you are going to die? More often than not, do you really listen when people are speaking to you, instead of just waiting for your turn to speak? Is there anybody you know in whose place, if one of you had to suffer great pain, you would volunteer yourself? If your answer to all or most of these questions is no, the chances are that you’re dead.”

We live in a dangerous, deadening, dead man walking time. The drive for consumption is revved up within us by the battery of media’s messages and so we forget what it might even feel like to not need to consume something more; we live in a time of increasing and hardening gap in wages, opportunities, income and wealth. And this is no accident but the result of a system designed to create these gaps. We have a beloved myth that any person can climb the rungs on the ladder of success, but for many, many people some of those handholds just aren’t there anymore. It’s a dangerous time because we might just give in and lose our vision of the kind of life God desires for all of us: a life of faith, hope, love, redeemed connectedness in the web of creaturehood in which the good of life isn’t what you can buy; its who you are and who you bless with your life.

John Katov, the founder of the Open Table Ministry, had an awakening when he was part of a clothing drive for homeless people in his city. Several organizations worked together which was great. Lots of coats were collected and along the way he got to know other community leaders he didn’t know. They traded business cards and made lunch plans. Then it hit him. When we do-gooders do good things, the poor man gets a coat, the rich man gets networking connections, human capital. He realized something important that would shape the rest of his life: what people need are not just more coats, more backpacks, or school supplies, or canned food. Those things are helpful to some extent sometimes for some people. But what people need, what we all need, is a return of the dignity of our shared creaturehood. We need one another, the rich and poor, to share with one another, our tables, our bread, our connections. Jesus didn’t imagine a church that would do things for the poor. He imagined a congregation of humanity in which we shared life together, and could see one another as God’s children. That’s the vision of the Kingdom of God.

If great riches, or any riches, are to be won at the expense of your good name, let them go.

If great riches are won at the neglect of those whose are hungry and suffering…

If great riches are maintained by the suffering of the poor…

If great riches are wrought from robbing the poor because they are poor or by crushing those who are already suffering,

What does it profit to gain great riches and lose your good name?

What does it profit to gain the whole world, and lose your soul?

Let us live soulfully, with love for all of God’s children, and work to create a community in which all people discover their creaturehood, their blessedness, the possibilities of living the full life God intended for each of us.