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Money, Work, and the Neighbor's Wife

Skillful Living

Proverbs 6

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I mentioned a couple of weeks ago one of the challenges in Proverbs is that it often feels really kind of random. They're talking about a problem with anger, then a problem with your tongue, then a problem with money and so it just seems kind of like a miscellaneous gathering of proverbs. Some people solve that by just pulling out all the verses that deal with anger and all the verses that deal with money and trying to study them topically. We are doing it differently than that. We're just taking the book as it's written because I think it's written that way for a reason. I don't think life is so compartmentalized that you're doing great in every area of life but have one little area where you're struggling. Life just doesn't work that way. If you have a problem in one area, it's bleeding into other areas. Life just isn't as compartmentalized as sometimes we tend to think.

Back in the early 1990s, there was a lot of debate in our culture about whether or not what you do in private has any relevance to what you do in public. The reason we were having that discussion had to do with President Clinton's sexual affair with Monica Lewinsky, and there was a lot of conversation about what he's doing in private, and does that affect then his judgment and what he does in public? I remember when those discussions were going on I was quite shocked by how many people felt like what was going on in private is private; it has no relevance to what he's doing in public. I couldn't disagree with that more. I think who you are in private is who you are, and without question it dramatically affects what you do in public, your ability to fulfill whatever job description, whatever role you fulfill in public. For example, if a man will cheat on his wife and lie, I have absolutely no doubt that same man would not hesitate to cheat and lie to a customer, to a client, to an employee, to an employer because that's ultimately who that person is. So who we are in private bleeds out in so many ways to who we are in public, and that's the way the proverbs are written.

So this morning we talk about your money, about your work, and we talk about your neighbor's wife. So if you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs, Chapter 6. We pick it up in verse 1:

> **My son, if you have become surety for your neighbor,**
> **Have given a pledge for a stranger,**
> ***If* you have been snared with the words of your mouth,**
> **Have been caught with the words of your mouth,**
> **Do this then, my son, and deliver yourself;** (*NASB, Proverbs 6:1-3a)

So let's just stop there and try to clear up, "What are we talking about?" Over the years I've heard a lot of speakers—primarily they tend to be financial people—take a lot of these statements out of Proverbs and just apply them to a modern-day culture as if there isn't any difference between the ancient world and the modern world. The text is actually talking about basically being a cosigner, offering some sort of a pledge for somebody to get a loan.

So, let's kind of sort out modern and ancient. In the modern-day world there are credible lenders—so a bank, a lending agency—and they are willing to lend you a certain amount of money under

certain conditions that are all clearly spelled out for a reasonable rate in order for you to purchase something. At the end of the day, let's say borrowing money for a house. Most of us don't have that big of a chunk of money sitting in our bank account, so in order to own a home, you go to a lending agency and they offer you money at a reasonable rate. They lay out all the conditions. All that is heavily regulated, and you agree to those conditions. That basically is a business transaction where, if done correctly, everybody wins. I get a house; I pay the rate; it's a fair rate; the bank makes their money and, in essence, everybody wins in that scenario.

There are also times where for one reason or another I may want to cosign for somebody. I believe somebody to be responsible; I understand the conditions; I understand my responsibility in it, and I choose to do that. I don't think there's anything in the Bible that prohibits lending, that prohibits borrowing, that even prohibits cosigning if it's done wisely.

What was happening in the ancient world was they didn't have banks; they didn't have lending agencies. They didn't have social organizations; they didn't have government programs to take care of people. It was just a very different world. So, for example, in the Hebrew culture if someone was out of money and destitute, then the Hebrew culture believed that those who had means would lend that person money, but it was not a business transaction. It was an act of compassion. There was no interest that was charged, but it was understood that that person would be responsible to pay back that loan. It was more about *shalom*. It was more about us together as a community making it.

But anytime you have an arrangement like that, there will always be people who will take advantage—that's just the way people are. So there are people who would take the loan but would not repay it; and they would take another loan from someone else, and they would not repay it; and eventually there was no one who would loan them money because they were just working the system, taking advantage of people. So then into the picture comes what we would call today a loan shark. This was someone who was willing to loan that person money but at a ridiculous interest rate with the understanding that, "If you do not pay it back, I get everything you own, and oftentimes, I get you. You now become my slave." And so in desperate times, someone would agree to that—usually couldn't pay the interest rate, would lose everything they have and basically be sold into slavery.

So imagine you're one of these people who has worked the system. Nobody else will give you a loan, but the loan shark is street smart enough to know, "I could loan you that money at a ridiculous interest rate, but you don't have anything. So if you can't pay me back, you have nothing to offer me, so I'm going to make you cosign. You have to have somebody else that cosigns; then I'll give you the money." So that's what's happening in this particular text. That person who's been reckless and irresponsible now can't even get a loan from the loan shark so, "I need somebody to cosign in order for the loan shark to give me a loan," and so the father is saying to the son, "*Whatever you do, don't do that. These are people that are working the system. These are people that will take advantage of you. If you do that, you will end up losing everything that you have."* That's basically the background of the warning there. So then that becomes obvious starting in verse 3:

Do this then, my son, and deliver yourself;
Since you have come into the hand of your neighbor
(**hand** would be like shaking hands; we've signed the contract),
Go, humble yourself,

(That word **humble** is a very graphic Hebrew term. It basically means, "Allow yourself to be trampled on." In other words, "Lay prostrate before somebody and let them trample on you. Do whatever is necessary to get out of this deal.")

Go, humble yourself, and importune your neighbor.
Give no sleep to your eyes,
Nor slumber to your eyelids;
Deliver yourself like a gazelle from *the hunter's* hand
And like a bird from the hand of the fowler. (Vs. 3-5)

Basically, you're the **gazelle**. The **hunter's** coming after you. You'd better do whatever you can do to get out of this deal fast, or you're about to lose everything that you have. That's the basic idea of verses 1 through 5. I think it's just a reminder in our culture that we need to be *skillful* with what we have. There are people around us that legitimately have needs and, for reasons often beyond their control, the needs are very acute at a certain time and we think, "Is this an area where I want to step in and help?" That's very different than enabling somebody to live a careless, reckless, irresponsible life, and that's the idea. You need to be skillful and decide when is the right time to step in, and when am I actually just enabling bad behavior and in a sense contributing to somebody's destruction? Now starting in verse 6 I think, then, the writer of Proverbs is describing the reckless, irresponsible person. He says:

Go to the ant, O sluggard, (Vs. 6a)

That word **sluggard** is an interesting Hebrew word. It's only used in the book of Proverbs, but it's used a lot in the book of Proverbs. It's a word that basically means somebody that's lazy. It means somebody that's reckless and irresponsible, somebody that mooches off others and takes advantage of others and basically will do whatever's necessary to work the system in order to profit personally.

Go to the ant, O sluggard,
Observe her ways and be wise,
Which, having no chief,
Officer or ruler,
Prepares her food in the summer
***And* gathers her provision in the harvest.** (Vs. 6-8)

There are several places in Proverbs where the ants are used as like a model of *shalom*, like a model of efficiency and community. Entomologists tell us the ants are quite remarkable in their social order. They really don't have a boss. They don't have a queen. They don't have any of that. They just all seem to mutually get it, and they spend their summers working really hard to accumulate so they survive the winters. So again and again, the writer of Proverbs says, "*Look to the ants because they seem to have an understanding of this concept of working together for the greater good*," and challenges then the **sluggard** to learn from the **ant**. Verse 9:

How long will you lie down, O sluggard?
When will you arise from your sleep?
"A little sleep, a little slumber,
A little folding of the hands to rest" —
Your poverty will come in like a vagabond
(we would probably say like a *homeless person*)
And your need like an armed man. (Vs. 9-11)

The second part of that verse in my opinion is unfortunately translated. It's not talking about the sluggard being robbed and that is why he's out of money. It's talking about basically being a beggar. Literally the Hebrew is "someone with a shield," which could be translated "someone with a cup," like a beggar. Basically the text is just saying, "*The sluggard who works the system, who is lazy, who sleeps all day, who is relying on kind of working the system to survive, eventually ends up with nothing."* I think this is the person that's got himself into trouble, that's looking for a cosigner—that's referenced in verses 1 through 5.

The Bible has a very strong work ethic. You see this again and again. It's based on the fact that work is not a result of sin and *the Fall*. Work is a result of being made in the image of God. There was work to do before sin ever entered into the picture, and there will be work in eternity. Work is good and it's right and it's noble. It's part of what gives life meaning and purpose. God never intended for somebody to sleep their days away and just waste their life on mooching and working the system and taking advantage of others. There's meant to be this mutual commitment to *shalom*—that we all work together; we all do our part in order for a community to function. When Paul was writing to the Thessalonians, he said, "If somebody doesn't work, then don't let them eat." That's a pretty strong statement—basically saying if somebody's just lazy and working the system, they may have to learn a lesson the hard way. Let them go without food until they're eventually rightly motivated.

To understand just because something is legal doesn't mean something is morally right. I don't know where we're going as a culture. We seem very confused on the nobility of work right now as a culture. But just because you can legally work the system and get something for nothing, doesn't make it morally right before God. If you are physically able, God expects you to have a purpose, to contribute, to work, to do your part. It's a very high biblical value.

A few years ago I was having a conversation with a young lady, late teens/early 20's, and she was just kind of telling me a story about somebody at work that figured out that she could actually quit her job, stay at home, work the system, and make more money—so that's what she did. She quit her job, and she just works the system, sleeps till noon, is basically what the proverb is calling a sluggard, and actually ended up with more money than if she was working. And this young lady that I was talking to thought that was kind of funny and so I asked her, "Where do you think the money comes from that she's getting paid to stay home and sleep till noon every day?" "Well, it's from the government." I said, "Well, the government doesn't have money. The government's money is the people's money, so you need to understand: Every time you get your paycheck, which isn't very big, and you look at that little line that tells you, 'These are the taxes that were taken out of your paycheck,' it's that money that is going to pay her to stay home and spend all day as a sluggard at home." I don't think I used that term, but in the spirit of Proverbs (laughter)…and all of a sudden she didn't think it was so funny anymore.

The reality is there are people in our communities that through no fault of their own do need help. You notice in verse 11 the word **poverty**. It's kind of a unique Hebrew word, and it's only used in the book of Proverbs. It's a word that basically means *to be destitute, to be homeless, to be all out of resources*. The typical Hebrew word used for the poor, that's used throughout the Old Testament, is a word that carries much more the idea of someone who is oppressed, someone who is disadvantaged, someone through no fault of their own has ended up in a place where they are struggling to survive. And the biblical value in both the Old and New Testaments would be that we as God's people have a moral responsibility to take care of those people. We need to make sure that they're cared for, that they're fed, that they're housed, that their needs are met. What he's talking

about here in the proverb is someone who is fully capable of working, fully capable of taking care of himself or herself but chooses not to. They're lazy; they're a sluggard; they just work the system. They mooch off everybody else, and that's a whole different discussion. Verse 12:

A worthless person, a wicked man, (Vs. 12a)

The grammar of that verse would say that's the same person, so we're back to the definition of **wicked**. We've talked about this. In poetic literature it's not just somebody that murders or somebody that rapes or steals, but the wicked is defined as *someone who disadvantages others in order to advantage himself or herself*. That's a perfect description of the **sluggard**—somebody that's just working the system in order to personally gain.

A worthless person, a wicked man,
Is the one who walks with a perverse mouth,
Who winks with his eyes, who signals with his feet,
Who points with his fingers; (Vs. 12-13)

Basically it's describing what we would call a con man or a con woman, somebody who's a smooth talker, somebody that's kind of shifty, somebody—the idea of fingers, we would say crosses his fingers—who makes promises they don't intend to keep. It's just working the system. Verse 14:

Who *with* perversity in his heart continually devises (or schemes) **evil,**
Who spreads strife.

Part of the game plan of people that work the system is they always keep things in conflict. There's always a level of disarray and conflict. That's part of how they work the system. Somehow *they're* always the victim.

Therefore his calamity will come suddenly;
Instantly he will be broken and there will be no healing. (Vs. 15)

So basically the text is saying, at the end of the day, that person brings **calamity** on himself or herself. You put the first two discussions together, and basically it's saying that if we're physically able, we should do our part. We should not be counted among the sluggards who selfishly work the system and begin to unravel and break down *shalom*. But it's also saying that we should be very skillful with the resources we have, to know when it's appropriate as an act of compassion to help people and to know when you're enabling bad behavior. You're not actually helping someone when you're enabling irresponsible behavior. You're actually contributing to their demise or their destruction. So that's kind of taking those first two discussions and putting them together. Verses 16 through 19 are a very familiar part of the Proverbs:

There are six things which the LORD hates,
Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him:

That's just kind of a poetic way of saying this isn't meant to be an exhaustive list. Here's just some examples—starts from the eyes, works all the way down to the feet.

Haughty eyes,

Basically, eyes filled with pride. If your mode of operation in life is to disadvantage others in order to advantage yourself, somehow, someway, you've convinced yourself you're entitled to that. That's the idea of **haughty eyes**. Somehow, I believe I am entitled to that.

...a lying tongue,

The Hebrew is really strong here. It's the idea that you lie, that you deceive as a way of life. This is just now how you live your life—whatever's necessary to get what you want.

And hands that shed innocent blood,
A heart that devises wicked plans (or schemes)**,**
Feet that run rapidly to evil,

So you start at the eyes, work your way all the way down to the feet. Verse 19:

A false witness *who* utters lies,
And one who spreads strife among brothers.

So basically it's just kind of a summary of the discussion of the sluggard and the con man or the con woman. Verse 20 then:

My son, observe the commandment of your father
And do not forsake the teaching of your mother;
Bind them continually on your heart;
Tie them around your neck.
When you walk about, they will guide you;
When you sleep, they will watch over you;
And when you awake, they will talk to you.
For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching is light;
And reproofs for discipline are the way of life, (Vs. 20-23)

Now this is very Proverbs 4-ish, and these reminders come up throughout the Proverbs—that the key to skillful living is to understand and believe the truth, so that it becomes part of you. You live it; you breathe it; you walk around with it. This is what you need to live skillfully in a very confusing world. In this particular conversation, verse 24:

To keep you from the evil woman,
From the smooth tongue of the adulteress.

Now again, remember this is a father talking to his son, so the seductress obviously is a woman, but it's just an imagery. At the end of the day, it represents any sexual immorality outside of God's design. In other words, God's design is one man, one woman, in a lifelong one-flesh sexual relationship. Any sex outside of that boundary is included in this idea of adulteress or seductress or the idea of sexual immorality. Verse 25:

Do not desire her beauty in your heart,
Nor let her capture you with her eyelids.

I just want to talk about those two verses for a couple of minutes because basically the idea is that she has made herself look very beautiful, very attractive. She is intending to tempt you, to seduce you in order to destroy you. That's kind of the meaning behind those two verses.

There is no question that we live in a sexually-pornified culture. We talked about this a lot last week. This is put forth by the enemy. Ephesians told us that the god of this world is Satan himself. He's a liar; he's a deceiver, and his number one mission is to destroy you. It may well be that his primary weapon of choice in 21st century America is a sexually-toxic culture, a pornified culture. He is destroying millions and millions and millions of lives through this strategy.

Just to give you some frame of reference, the pornography industry just in America alone is $13 billion a year. Worldwide it is $97 billion a year. Now just think about that—that is absolutely staggering! Try to imagine how many people this $97 billion industry has taken in, used and abused, and spit out in the name of pornography and making money. I would suggest to you that there is no greater social injustice in the world today than sexual immorality.

I appreciate the fact that a lot of people today are really into social justice. I think that's a good thing, but it's very important to understand: If you're out talking about all the social injustices in the world and come home and are involved in sexual immorality, you're rather the hypocrite, because on one hand you're speaking about all this social injustice; on the other hand you are contributing to probably the greatest force of social injustice in the world.

Do you understand that the pornographers are strategically coming after your children? This isn't an accident. This is very much on purpose. They fill the internet with words and phrases so that innocent children when looking for something on the internet hit a porn site. This isn't an accident. It's by design. Their understanding is if we can get your child, we have you, and we can make more money before we destroy you.

Statistics show that 50% of children that accidentally come upon some sort of graphic pornography on the internet will never forget that image for the rest of their lives. Statistics also, studies are showing that if you just take what children and teenagers up to the age of seventeen—children and teenagers up to the age of seventeen—what they are searching for on purpose on the internet, the fourth leading search by children and teenagers up to the age of seventeen is sex. Number five is pornography. If you are a parent or a grandparent, you need to understand they are coming after your children hard. This is an absolute war. The number one consumer of a 97 billion dollar industry are those between the ages of twelve and seventeen. Studies show that before their brains are even close to being formed normally, this pornography is so dramatically altering the formulation of their brain, there are lots of question as to whether those brains will ever form correctly.

I understand in a very uncertain world we can be frightened by ISIS. We can be frightened by disease. We can be frightened by terrorists, but I would suggest to you as parents and grandparents, the number one concern for your children is this sexually-pornified culture, and you'd better take it seriously because *they* are taking it very seriously. They make everything look so alluring and so attractive, but at the end of the day, the enemy wants you destroyed. The text goes on, verse 26:

> **For on account of a harlot *one is reduced* to a loaf of bread,**
> **And an adulteress hunts for the precious life.**

Verse 26 is rather confusing, but in an ancient culture the writer of Proverbs is simply drawing a distinction between the consequences. He's not saying visiting a harlot is a good thing, but what he is saying is if you go and visit a prostitute, it costs you about the equivalent of a loaf of bread—probably end of story. But if you sleep with your neighbor's wife, her husband, your neighbor, will hunt you down and make your life miserable—consequences possibly for the rest of your life. That's the idea of verse 26. Verse 27:

> **Can a man take fire in his bosom**
> **And his clothes not be burned?**
> **Or can a man walk on hot coals**
> **And his feet not be scorched?** (Vs. 27-28)

I talked about this last week—that just as there are natural laws in the universe such as gravity, there are moral laws in the universe. These aren't just God's rules that you can somehow summarily change or ignore. They are laws—they are moral laws! You can believe whatever you want about gravity, but if you go up and jump off the building, gravity wins. You can convince yourself you can beat the system, that you can operate outside of God's moral laws and somehow make that work in your favor, but you are fooling yourself. You cannot break God's moral laws without consequence. That's what the text just said. You can't sleep with your neighbor's wife without serious consequence. So he says, "Do you actually think you can take burning coals and put them on your lap (lap obviously has sexual overtones) and somehow that's not going to burn you? Do you think you can walk barefoot across burning coals and somehow your feet aren't going to get burned?" In other words, you can't beat the system.

So let me just be as blunt as I can be. Last weekend I gave you my best shot from Proverbs 5—to convince you that sexual immorality, any sexual behavior outside of God's boundary, will ultimately have serious negative consequences. You can't beat the system. And some of you here this morning, you listened, and this week you were right back at it. I don't know what to tell you. You obviously think somehow, someway, you're the first person in the history of the world that's going to beat the system—that you can operate outside of God's moral laws without consequence. I don't know what to tell you other than to tell you again: you can't do that. You can't make it work in your favor. You can't put burning coals in your lap without getting burned. Verse 29:

> **So is the one who goes in to his neighbor's wife;**
> **Whoever touches her will not go unpunished.**

I don't know what's unclear about that.

> **Men do not despise a thief if he steals**
> **To satisfy himself when he is hungry;**
> **But when he is found, he must repay sevenfold;**
> **He must give all the substance of his house.** (Vs. 30-31)

In other words, if somebody is starving to death and so they steal a loaf of bread in order to survive, people understand that. They don't say it's right, but they understand that. But the person that stole the bread still is required to repay seven times over, which would be the Hebrew law. That is contrasted with the neighbor—you slept with the neighbor's wife—the neighbor isn't going to see it the same way, but he is going to track you down for the rest of your life and make you pay. That's basically what the proverb is saying.

The one who commits adultery with a woman is lacking sense;
He who would destroy himself does it.
Wounds and disgrace he will find (that **wounds** is a term that talks about violence),
And his reproach will not be blotted out.
For jealousy enrages a man,
And he will not spare in the day of vengeance. (Vs. 32-34)

That word **vengeance** is not a Hebrew word that means he is taking vengeance himself, but rather it's a legal term. It's a courtroom term. It basically means he will prosecute to the full extent of the law. He will make you pay. Verse 35:

He will not accept any ransom,
Nor will he be satisfied though you give many gifts.

In the ancient culture, if you were guilty of sleeping with the neighbor's wife and it goes to court and all the way through to a conviction, most of the time you were executed. So that's kind of the background—no matter what you do, no matter how many times you say you're sorry, no matter how many gifts you give to your neighbor, he will not stop coming until he sees you dead. It's just talking about the consequences of stepping outside of God's boundary in a sexual relationship.

Basically, if you put all of chapter 6 together, it's talking about sexual immorality as someone who is willing to disadvantage someone else (we would say in today's language "use somebody else") in order to advantage myself. If I do that, then I'm probably likely to scheme and lie and cheat and play the role of the con man or the con woman. I'm probably likely to be a sluggard and mooch off other people and take advantage of the system, and if I do that, then I probably am not very skillful with my resources. My own personal experience would tell me that most people that I've known that struggle with sexual immorality also struggle with money. There is a deep connection that that reckless approach to life seems to bleed into those two areas in significant ways.

We talked about this last week. If you are single, there's a tendency to say, "Okay, what about me?" The solution is *not* to take a cold shower and hang in there. I frankly think that is terrible advice, and it doesn't work because it's contrary to the way God has actually made you. God has made you as a sexual person with a sexual drive, but to understand that your sexual drive is ultimately your longing for intimacy with God. Marriage offers a taste of that intimacy. As a single person, you skip the taste, and you go right to the source, and you find a deeply intimate, satisfying relationship with Jesus. I would suggest for all of us that it is critically important in a sexually-pornified culture to find a deeply intimate, meaningful relationship with Christ. If I can give my soul what it deeply longs for, it rightly equips me to walk in sexual purity in a sexually- pornified culture.

We as a church are seeking to do everything we can to step it up on this particular topic. This issue is coming like a tidal wave. There has never in the history of the world been a generation that has had so much access to life-destroying immorality in the palm of their hand, and we are seeing what is the tip of the iceberg of what is to come. Starting the week after Easter for five consecutive weeks, we are offering a class. There's information in your *Loop* and you'll also see at the end of this little promo clip. Five weeks! I would say it would be great for any man or any woman, for you as a struggler, if your spouse is struggling, for you as a parent, if you want to understand what the issues are and better help your children, your grandchildren, your work associate, your neighbor. It's for anybody that just wants to better understand this in order to help the people around you or for you yourself.

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