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Less Talk...More Action

Skillful Living

Proverbs 11:1-31

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Several years ago Patti and I were in Brazil on a mission's trip and it was just the two of us at a bus station. There was a Brazilian there that came over and was talking to me. He seemed somewhat agitated, and he had a lot to say. The problem is I don't speak Portuguese, and so I was trying to communicate to him, "I don't understand; you know, I don't speak Portuguese." Finally he stopped, looked at me like maybe he understood, and then started over. It sounded like the same spiel, only this time at a much higher volume. Apparently he figured out if he just said the same thing louder I'll understand him. What he failed to understand is I don't have a hearing problem. We have a language problem which seems to me may be part of the problem we're having between the Church and the culture.

About forty years ago the Church kind of made a turn in America and became much more political, and over the last forty years I think everyone would agree, we've lost significant ground. So some may say that's the best strategy, but at some point you have to look at it and say it doesn't seem to be working. We're losing ground at an accelerated rate. Some would say the solution is we need to keep saying the same things; we just need to say them louder, which would imply apparently the culture has a hearing problem. I would suggest to you they hear us loud and clear, but they are rejecting what we have to say. It's not a hearing problem; it's a language problem. In other words, the message of the gospel is a truth-based message, and we're proclaiming that into a culture that has abandoned truth. So to them, it makes no sense. So what is the language that they would understand? That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs, Chapter 11. We're just kind of working our way through the book of Proverbs, taking a chapter at a time, picking select verses out of each chapter that kind of capture the main theme or themes of the chapter.

All the way back in chapter three we were told that Lady Wisdom is all about *skillful living* and that all the paths of Lady Wisdom lead to peace. Peace is the Hebrew word *shalom*. It's really helpful to understand the whole point of the book of Proverbs—it's not skillful living for me all alone as an individual. It's how *we* skillfully live together as a community. The idea of *shalom* goes way beyond our concept of peace. It carries the idea of flourishing—mutual flourishing. It basically is what God intended all the way back in Genesis chapter two, that God intended paradise to be a place of mutual flourishing, but sin has entered the picture and has begun to do damage and violence to the concept of *shalom*. The Hebrew word carries a little bit of an idea of a fabric. If you think about it, a fabric is thousands of threads woven together, and each of those threads has thousands of intersecting points. All together it makes a fabric, and that's kind of the concept of *shalom*. Our lives intersect with one another in hundreds of ways, creating this fabric, this opportunity for mutual flourishing.

So according to the book of Proverbs, the enemy of *shalom* are the wicked. Again, defining *wicked* correctly is really important. If we define *wicked* as just evil people doing really evil things, most people dismiss it and say, "Well that's not me." But *wicked*, according to the book of Proverbs, is basically someone who is selfish, greedy, self-centered, independent, best defined as those who are willing to disadvantage the community in order to advantage themselves.

So you think about it: If you have a collection of individuals in a community and everyone's in it for themselves, there is no possible way that community can flourish. The community will ultimately self destruct; it will cannibalize itself. The alternative is the *righteous*, or the Hebrew *tzadik*, basically someone who understands God's vision. This is what God intended all the way back in the beginning, and part of our assignment as Christians is to begin to create pockets of flourishing, pockets of *shalom* in order to give people a glimpse of the world as God intended it to be. It's also a glimpse of the world to come.

So the righteous could be defined as those who are committed to the vision of *shalom* to such a degree that they're even willing to disadvantage themselves at times in order to advantage the community. So through the book of Proverbs there is this constant conflict or contrast between the wicked and the righteous, the destruction of the wicked and the repairing by the righteous. All of that then creates a strategy. It creates a language that we can speak, that may be the language that people will listen to in 21st century America. So in chapter eleven there are examples of the damage done by the wicked. Verse one:

> **A false balance is an abomination to the LORD,**
> **But a just weight is His delight.**
> **When pride comes, then comes dishonor,**
> **But with the humble is wisdom.**
> **The integrity of the upright will guide them,**
> **But the crookedness of the treacherous will destroy them.** (*NASB, Proverbs 11:1-3)

The idea of a **false balance** is basically talking about cheating someone in the marketplace. It's the idea of a merchant having a balance, which is how they calculated value. When you're going to pay for something, you put your coins on one side of the scale. There's another side of the scale that has weights and it weighs the weight of those coins and that determines the value. But what was extremely common in the ancient world was the scales were rigged, either rigged through the weight of the coins or rigged in some way so it didn't reflect accurately. So it was always a struggle to know whether you were being cheated or not. So that's what the proverb is talking about.

The contrast to that would be **just weight**, the second part of verse one, in other words an accurate weight—that there is fairness; there is truth. When someone is cheating, they are advantaging themselves by disadvantaging others. That is the mode of operation of the wicked. So think of it this way: When the wicked prevail, when the wicked by and large win the day in the culture, what results is many individuals, each in it for themselves, are willing to cheat anybody they can in order to advantage themselves. So over the last several decades, anyone who is in business, in health care, in education, in so many of these fields, would say that they are being buried by laws and regulations and policies. A lot of people feel like they spend more time doing all this paperwork than they do actually carrying out their business. Why is that?

Over the last forty years we have become much more secular as a culture. At the same time, the government, the laws, the policies, the regulations, have increased dramatically. We want to blame the government, but the government is responding to what's happening in the culture. And what's happening is everybody's in it for themselves, so everybody's going to work an angle. Everybody's going to cheat the system. Everybody is going to do whatever is possible to gain for themselves. And so what you end up with is this culture that becomes so restrictive, it becomes so suffocating that you lose your freedom; you lose your safety; you lose your protection; you lose your value. You lose everything that made the community flourish. That's the ultimate end, the fruit of the wicked.

The alternative then is the way of the righteous. The text says in verse three that it's **the integrity of the upright** that guides them. They don't need all these laws; they don't need all these policies. They don't need all of these regulations because there's an internal sense of integrity. I'm not in this to advantage myself by disadvantaging others. I'm in this to seek to create this vision of *shalom*. I want us to all flourish together, and so there's this internal moral compass that guides them to do the right thing.

So it opens with this idea that the more the wicked prevail, the less freedom, the less trust, the less honesty, the less life we can experience together. But when the righteous prevail, there is a freedom; there is a flourishing; there is a safety and protection that goes with that. So you have this consistent contrast. This is the benefit of the righteous prevailing; this is the consequence of the wicked prevailing, which again begins to set up a strategy to create a language that people will listen to. Verse 4:

> **Riches do not profit in the day of wrath,**
> **But righteousness delivers from death**.

Basically the idea is that people cheat because they are selfish, because they are greedy, because they want more. But, at the end of the day, that money can do nothing in the Day of Judgment. But it also carries the idea that the money can't fix a culture that's cannibalizing itself. There is this consistent message that the wicked ultimately are tearing apart the fabric of *shalom*—but it's the fabric that holds them up. So again and again we're told that the wicked ultimately victimize themselves, because you can't do damage to the net that holds you up without you yourself being destroyed in the process. So that's the idea. Verse 5:

> **The righteousness of the blameless will smooth his way,**
> **But the wicked will fall by his own wickedness.**
> **The righteousness of the upright will deliver them,**
> **But the treacherous will be caught by t*heir own* greed.** (vs. 5, 6)

So as you read through the rest of this chapter, and so common in the book of Proverbs, look for that consistent message that the wicked ultimately destroy themselves. You can't do damage to the fabric of *shalom* without doing damage ultimately to yourself because you live in the culture, the community that you've created. And then the righteous are charged with the vision of restoring *shalom*.

All of that then goes down to verse 10. Verse 10, I think, gives us the strategy, gives us the language that we can speak in order to be heard.

> **When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices**. (Vs. 10a)

In other words, when the *tzadik*, when the righteous prevail—when they have their way, when they are thriving in the culture, when they begin to restore the fabric of *shalom*—there's something about that that appeals to the soul of others. In other words, as people made in the image of God, there's something deep within us that longs for safety, longs for protection. It longs for acceptance and love and mercy and grace and belonging. There's something in our soul that says, "I just want to live in a place where we can thrive and flourish together."

People may be very confused as to how to get there. People that are selfish and greedy believe ultimately that will satisfy their soul, but again and again, Proverbs says that won't work. It comes

up empty. You just destroy the culture you're living in. But what if there was a different way? What if the righteous introduced a concept of *shalom,* that there *is* a way that we can do this together...that we can create these pockets where we flourish together and everyone wins? Whether you're black or white, whether you're rich or poor, whether you're Republican or Democrat, isn't there some way we can come together and have this sense that we all can flourish together? That's the vision that God intended. We heard last week in Proverbs 10 that it's a vision that is filled with hope. The vision of the wicked is ultimately destruction. There's no hope and there's no future and people feel that. It's all coming unraveled. But the vision of *shalom* is filled with hope. There is another way! We can do this together and we can create a culture where we all flourish. What the text says is: when the righteous have their way, **the city rejoices** because people feel that. "That's what my soul wants, what my soul longs for." There's a sense in which this is a better way.

The idea of rejoicing is a Hebrew word that was primarily used to describe military victory. As a matter of fact, this is the only time in the Old Testament this word is used outside of the framework of a military victory. In the ancient world, when your armies went out to battle, everything was at stake. If they lose the battle, this isn't like a football game where they come back and you say, "You know, we'll get them next time." This is for keeps. If the army loses, life as you know it has come to an end. You're either going to be slaughtered or you're going to be sold into slavery. But your chance at life is over. That's the word that's used to describe when the army wins. There is this sense of victory, this rejoicing, because we're all in this together. Live or die, we're in it together.

The vision of chapter ten carried the idea that even though people feel the culture unraveling and have all these concerns and worries and wonder what is the solution, when they start to experience pockets of flourishing, something speaks to their soul and says, "This seems like a better way; this seems like a better path," then you begin to create a context where the gospel makes sense, where there's a sense in which we can have meaningful discussions about God and gospel and what Jesus has done to save us. Ultimately, the only way that there will be true and lasting change is if people have a meaningful encounter with the resurrected Christ; they experience genuine true conversion. And that requires meaningful conversations around the gospel, which means there has to be some sort of a language—a common language to speak. When the righteous cause the city to flourish, the city will rejoice!

Some of you businessmen, some of you businesswomen, when you're out there in the marketplace, that world just makes sense to you. You're wired for that; you thrive out there. It makes sense. But when you step into the church, you're sometimes struggling to figure out, "I just don't know where I fit in the Kingdom. I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing." I have a suggestion for you: Go out there and flourish. Go out there and prosper. Go out there and succeed! Flourishing businesses are honoring to God, but do it with a heart toward *shalom*. Don't do it with a heart toward greed, a heart toward selfishness or significance or ego, or stockpiling—where you see how much you can accumulate and buy. We have enough of that. That's what's causing the culture to collapse! But when the righteous flourish, they have a vision for *shalom* and understand: This is my stewardship; God's given me these talents; God's given me these opportunities; God's given me these resources, and this is my stewardship, this is my part of the garden to help the garden flourish, to restore *shalom* in a community.

Every single one of us intersects in hundreds of ways out into the community. Basically, about one out of every fifty people in the city of Lincoln belongs to Lincoln Berean. We penetrate every corner of the city. If we did so with a vision for *shalom*, for flourishing, "How can I serve you?

What would it mean for you to flourish? How can we do this together?" it creates pockets of flourishing that then create platforms for presenting the message of the gospel.
So that's basically what verse 10 is saying. This would be a very practical goal for us—that we would have a goal that people in our city would say, "I don't know much about those Bereans; I don't know what they believe; I don't even know what that crazy word Berean means. But I do tell you this: This city is better because they are here." That should be the goal that creates a platform by which we can express: this is why we do what we do. This is the heartbeat of the gospel.

The proverb then goes on to talk about that in different ways. I just want to highlight a couple verses. Verse 17:

> **The merciful man does himself good,**
> **But the cruel man does himself harm.**

Basically what that is saying is you ultimately live in the culture you create. So if you create a culture of mercy and grace, you will receive mercy and grace in your hour of need. But if you create a culture of cruelty, that's what you will receive in your hour of need. Ultimately, you have to live in the culture you create. That's the whole idea of this strategy, that everybody has to live in this culture, and if the wicked are slowly destroying the culture, it makes opportunity for an alternative that feeds and speaks to people's starving souls. Verse 19:

> **He who is steadfast in righteousness *will attain* to life**, (and life is the life of flourishing)
> **And He who pursues evil *will bring down* his own death.**

So that kind of a message is repeated again and again. Verse 24:

> **There is one who scatters, and yet increases all the more,**
> (That's the righteous; scattering is generosity; it's sowing seed.
> And it seems like the more you sow, the more you get back.
> That creates a flourishing within the community.)
> **And there is one who withholds what is justly due, *and yet it results* only in want.**

This is again the person who is cheating someone else. They are not willing to pay them or give them what they have coming, and ultimately you destroy the culture. You go down with it. We cannibalize ourselves. Verse 25:

> **The generous man will be prosperous,**
> **And he who waters will himself be watered.**
> **He who withholds grain, the people will curse him,**
> **But the blessing will be on the head of him who sells *it*.** (vs. 25-26)

Basically it's the idea people would store—the rich would store grain typically under their house, and when people were in desperate need, some of them wouldn't sell because as long as they held out, the price would go higher and higher and higher. In the meantime, people were literally starving to death, and eventually when it gets desperate enough, they would sell at a high rate. It would be the idea of those whom God has blessed, those whom God has called to be stewards of what you have received—how you've prospered, what you've gained—to just continually spend it on yourself and stockpile it year after year after year. While there is such a desperate need for *shalom* within the city is a reflection of the greedy. "I'm going to advantage myself and in the process it will disadvantage others." But the righteous are generous. Verse 27:

He who diligently seeks good seeks favor,
But he who seeks evil, evil will come to him.
He who trusts in riches will fall,
But the righteous will flourish like the green leaf. (vs. 27, 28)

Verse 30:

The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life,
And he who is wise wins souls.

It basically converts people to the way of righteousness, affirming again the strategy is to create pockets of flourishing that are going to speak to people's souls that are dry and thirsty and looking for something different, looking for something more. And as they begin to get a taste of this new way, they will rethink their belief system, their world view, and possibly even open their hearts to a meaningful discussion about the Jesus that has so radically changed you.

So, in the midst of all of this, there is one big danger. What is the primary weapon of the wicked to tear down *shalom*? The answer is in verse 11:

By the blessing of the upright (or the righteous) **a city is exalted,**
(So when the righteous prosper, the city benefits.)
But by the mouth of the wicked it is torn down.

Just like chapter ten, there is a high emphasis on the damage done by **the mouth** to tear down *shalom*. This is such a big deal in the book of Proverbs that it is the most discussed topic under the umbrella of wisdom in the entire book of Proverbs. It would be fair to say you have no possibility of *skillful living* unless your mouth is under control. It is with the mouth that *shalom* is destroyed. As we talked about last week, think about that as it relates to our culture, as it relates to our politics, as it relates to celebrities, as it relates to so much in our culture, to social media. Why do we talk that way? Verse 12:

He who despises his neighbor lacks sense,
But a man of understanding keeps silent.

We, as a culture, talk that way because we *despise our neighbor*. Now the word *despise* carries the idea of superiority—this idea that I'm superior. There's this condescending tone. "I'm right; you're wrong. I'm good; you're evil. I'm on the right side; you're on the wrong side." So there's this sense of superiority that causes us to talk that way, that unravels *shalom*. Notice what it says up above in verse 9:

With his mouth the godless man destroys his neighbor,
But through knowledge the righteous will be delivered.

One of the challenges in living in a culture where people despise their neighbor, where people are convinced that their position, their idea, their belief system, is smarter, it's more intelligent, it's more informed, there is this condescending tone to anyone that disagrees with them. I don't think any of us would disagree with that; we experience it every day. The challenge is it's easy for us as Christians to get drawn into the same behavior. Listen to a group of Christians talk about the people they disagree with politically. There is a condescending tone. "We're good; they're bad. We're right; they're wrong. We're good; they're evil."

One of the things that we have to recapture is the reality that the only thing that makes us different is the grace of God. It says in the second half of verse 12 **...but a man of understanding keeps silent**. It says in the second half of verse 9 **...through knowledge the righteous will be delivered** from this behavior.

Basically, it looks like this: I was nothing more than a sinner, a misfit and a loser. I had nothing to offer God. But on the basis of God's goodness and His grace and His mercy, through the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, God has offered me forgiveness of sin and a relationship with Him. That is, according to the New Testament, a radical conversion. Now I see the world differently. I have the Holy Spirit dwelling within me to see the world as God intended it to be, to get a glimpse of *shalom*, to actually be counted among the righteous and to live that way. But the only reason I have that is because Jesus has radically changed me on the basis of His grace. If I honestly believe that, I have no basis to be condescending. I have no basis to think I'm smarter, that I get it better than they get it, that somehow I'm a level above the rest. That's not true, so the idea of knowledge and understanding is saying: if we really believe the truth, then we should not be drawn into that same toxic, destructive behavior. The text says in verse 12: *rather the man of understanding remains silent*.

The ancient Near East actually had what they referred to as the *Silent Man*, and it was pictured as a strong tree in the middle of a meadow that wasn't really blown about by all the winds. It was strong and it was sturdy. They had a great value on those that could remain silent in the midst of chaotic and destructive times, understanding as we talked about last week, the importance of not getting sucked in to the angry, toxic, destructive words of the culture. We need to separate ourselves out of that. We don't need to talk louder. It's not a hearing problem. We need to speak a different language. What is the language that the culture will listen to?

Because the wicked prevail, people are feeling *shalom* unraveled. You hear people talking about it all the time. What we can offer them are these pockets of *shalom*, these places of mutual flourishing, these places that feel like they have what their soul is longing for, to begin to create platforms where we can share the message of Jesus.

So think of it this way: Every person in the room this morning represents a thread, and you are a thread that is woven through the fabric of *shalom*. That thread intersects hundreds of other threads to make the fabric. So think about your world—every place where your life intersects the lives of others. In every one of those intersections, you have the option to do destruction with your mouth or to begin to create pockets of flourishing by choosing to love and to serve and to care and to create ways in which people can flourish in such a way that it appeals to their dry and thirsty soul. They may actually say, "I think this is what I'm looking for," which opens up the possibility for meaningful conversations.

If people in the city of Lincoln are going to say, "I don't really get those Bereans; I don't get what they believe. But I do know the city is better because they are here," what is needed is *Less Talk and More Action!*

> *Our Father, we celebrate again the wisdom that You give us as Your people, to better understand how to live in confusing times. God, may each one of us, each thread in this room, be a thread that begins to repair the torn fabric of* shalom *in our city, in such a way that the name of Christ will be exalted, in such a way that others will come to know the Savior who has so radically changed us. Lord, this is our prayer. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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