August 6/7, 2016

A Guiding Light

Skillful Living

Proverbs 12:1-28

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All of us as people made in the image of God have within us this desire. It's a longing for something more—not just the longing for something different—it's a longing for something more. This isn't new. Go back two thousand years, the Greek philosophers used to talk about four central passions: desire, joy, fear, and greed. Desire was just what we were talking about. There is something common within us as humans that seems to have this desire or longing for something more. Joy was basically those moments when people experience some degree of that, some glimpse of that—there's some kind of unexplainable joy that comes from that. C.S. Lewis, in his book *Surprised by Joy*, talks about that, as an atheist, what he was noticing was there were moments in life where he experienced some kind of joy that seemed to be connected to something beyond what his natural worldview could explain. It transcended his worldview and seemed to connect him with something more, which caused him to begin a journey that ultimately ended in his decision to surrender his life to Christ. The writer of Proverbs is also the writer of Ecclesiastes. In Ecclesiastes he says, "God has put eternity in our hearts." It's basically saying the same thing: It feels like we were made for something more. There's kind of this homesick longing within our hearts that's common to us all. If that's true, then I do believe that creates a common language we speak which can be a powerful language to introduce people to Christ. I think in times of great prosperity and security and everything seems like it's clicking, it's maybe a language that isn't as powerful. But when people have a sense of dread, a sense of fear—a sense where it seems like things are kind of coming unraveled, such as our culture today—it's a very powerful language because people feel it deeply.

We talked last week about creating pockets of *shalom: When we win the city*, Proverbs 11 says, *the city will rejoice*. It's not a hostile takeover. We win the city by creating pockets of flourishing that people respond to because their souls say, "I think this is what my soul is longing for." And that gives us platforms from which we present the claims of Christ. So the logical question would be, "But how do we do that?" That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs, Chapter 12. If you're visiting with us, we are working our way through the book of Proverbs; we have this week and next week and that will be it for this summer. We're just trying to pick out the big themes in the book of Proverbs which has been kind of difficult, but basically I want to give you four very practical things to think about in order to create flourishing *shalom* in the areas of relationships of our lives.

The first one is: *we have to be teachable*. Look at verse 1:

> **Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge,**
> **But he who hates reproof is stupid.**

Look again at verse 15.

> **The way of a fool is right in his own eyes,**
> **But a wise man is he who listens to counsel.**

To understand God's vision of *shalom* is to understand that's God's reality. God has created moral laws and social laws and spiritual laws and when my beliefs and behavior align with that, that's where life is found. But the fool—and this is our friend the "know-it-all" fool—thinks that somehow reality will change to accommodate his or her belief system. The know-it-all fool already knows everything. "I don't have to be taught; I don't have to be corrected; and I don't want to be judged because I am right." What the proverb says is, "If you think that reality is going to change to accommodate your belief system, you are a fool; you're just stupid." It doesn't work that way. As we said a couple of weeks ago, reality is what you run into when you are wrong. At the end of the day, reality always wins. Therefore, the goal should be for me to keep changing my belief system and my behavior to be in alignment with God's reality because that's truth. That's where life is found. There's nobody in the room that has this figured out. There's nobody that's got it all right. I constantly have to be corrected, have to be taught, and have to make adjustments. There may be areas where I am a little off; there may be areas where I am way off. But if I'm serious about flourishing and *shalom* and serious about righteousness, then I have to be humbled and surrendered and know I have to be taught. I have to be corrected; at times I have to be reproved in order to get in alignment with God's way. So that's the first one.

The second one is: *to have a biblical view of work, a biblical work ethic*. We talked about this just a little bit before, because it comes up quite a bit in the book of Proverbs. Work is good; work is noble; work gives life meaning and purpose. We work because we are people made in the image of God. We don't work because of *The Fall*. In Genesis 2, before there was ever sin, Adam and Eve worked. They tended to the garden. That was part of flourishing. If you read the last couple of chapters of the Bible, in the new heaven and the new earth we will work because work is good and its right and it's noble. Genesis 3 tells us because of *the fall*, work has become more difficult but it's still good and right. But if you're numbered among the wicked—and again, according to Proverbs the wicked aren't those who are out doing evil things; they're just those who are selfish, self-centered and greedy; everything is about "me"; I'm in it for myself—if that's you, then you move to one extreme or the other when it relates to work.

One extreme would be you see work purely as a way of making money. It's about money; it's about title and power. It's about prestige, about trying to be significant. It's about trying to make my own way—about proving to somebody that I am somebody, that I matter—and I'll do that through my work. So it's about how much money I can make—my house, my car, my stuff—it's about all of that. If that's your mindset, I guarantee you, you will consistently disadvantage the community to advantage yourself, because that is your worldview.

The other extreme from that would be those that basically don't care. They think work is just a necessary evil. "I work because I have to. I don't like it; I'll do as little as possible in order to get by, and if I can figure out a way to beat the system and stay home and have somebody else pay my bills, I will even do that." You are disadvantaging the community in order to advantage yourself. The Bible numbers you among the wicked if that's what you choose to do because you are destroying *shalom*. You are destroying the ability to flourish together, to see your work as something that is good, noble, something that is purposeful. It's your part of tending to the garden, of making your contribution to help create *shalom* in the city.

Now again, remember that work is not just what you get paid for. It's a stay-at-home mom; it's coaching the little league team; it's serving in the community. It's all of that but it certainly includes what you get paid for. If some of you think your work has no meaning or purpose, you just need to back up and think about: What is my contribution to *shalom*? Who are the lives I touch? What are

my interactions? What are my opportunities to be a light and demonstrate this biblical work ethic? I would suggest to you because the majority of people in our culture are either at one or the other of those two extremes that I mentioned, if you operate every day with a biblical view of work, people will notice. It will create a light in the darkness. So you have a few of those verses. Verse 9:

Better is he who is lightly esteemed and has a servant
Than he who honors himself and lacks bread.

Basically that proverb is saying the average person who just goes out there, works hard, does his part or her part to contribute to *shalom* and the flourishing of the city and is responsible, and in this case has a servant, wasn't reflective of being wealthy; it was just more reflective of being responsible. Maybe in today's language we would say to such a degree that you even have an employee; you take care of yourself and help take care of some others. Contrasted with that in the second part of verse nine is someone who's in it to honor them self, someone who's after their significance, trying to be a big shot. It's all about money and power and wealth and houses and cars and credit cards and debt and, at the end of the day, it's kind of a self-centered, greedy lifestyle, and they can't even pay their bills. We have a similar contrast in verse 11:

He who tills his land will have plenty of bread,
But he who pursues worthless *things* lacks sense.

So the one who goes out, works hard, contributes to *shalom* is contrasted with someone who is in it to get rich quick, to get the latest deal in order to just get money. There is in no sense of the meaning and the purpose and the contribution to shalom. There are a couple of similar verses later in the proverb, verse 24:

The hands of the diligent will rule,
But the slack *hand* or the lazy will be put to forced labor.

And again in verse 27:

A lazy man does not roast his prey,
But the precious possession of a man *is* diligence.

Verse 27 is creating a metaphor. The lazy person, at the end of the day, has nothing to roast over the fire because he didn't go out and get anything. So you have nothing versus the diligent person that has basically everything that he or she needs. So that is the consistent message in the book of Proverbs and it's a very practical way every day that we can contribute to creating *shalom*.

The third is *true compassion and justice*. We hear a lot about compassion; we hear a lot today about social justice. But I am talking about true compassion and true justice. Look at verse 2:

A good man will obtain favor from the LORD,
But he will condemn a man who devises evil.
A man will not be established by wickedness,
But the roots of the righteous will not be moved. (Vs. 2-3)
(Verse 5):
The thoughts of the righteous are just,
But the counsels of the wicked are deceitful.

In verse 5 that word **just** is the Hebrew word *mishpat*. It's a very important word in the book of Proverbs. It basically means giving someone what they rightly have coming, their rightful due regardless of race, social-economics or gender. It's *true* justice. Now what you notice in verses 2, 3, and 5 is ultimately God is the judge and God ultimately is in charge of justice which implies, at the end of the day, there is a standard. God's justice does not waver to accommodate everyone's belief system. There is an absolute so there are absolute truths. There are moral laws and social laws and spiritual laws and, at the end of the day, those don't change. So here's the deal: For all the talk in our culture about compassion and justice, it is virtually impossible to have true compassion and true justice without absolute truth. Otherwise everyone is making up their own definition of right and wrong. Everyone is making up their own definition of what is moral and what is not moral, what's good and evil. We are all making up our own definitions of what is just and what is unjust. I think there are thousands upon thousands of people in our communities and they genuinely, sincerely want justice. They see things happening in our culture that deeply concern them. I think they are very sincere about that. But the truth is we are not even getting close to that value. Why is that? It's because we have dismissed absolute truth; therefore we have dismissed moral laws. As long as that prevails, there is virtually no chance for justice. There has to be a common understanding: "This is truth"; "This is morally right"; "This is morally wrong"; "These are social laws that we all agree to," in order to actually have justice, in order for there to be true compassion. Look at verse 10:

> **A righteous man has regard for the life of his animal,**
> **But *even* the compassion of the wicked is cruel.**

In the ancient world animals weren't like pets. It's not talking about your dog or your cat. Animals were either there to be consumed or to give wool, or to do work, something like that. There were no animal rights people in the ancient world. You could do anything you wanted to your animal, and people did. In the 1 Samuel series I asked the question, "If you could get away with anything, what would you do?" This is very much in that same vein because in the ancient world they could do whatever they wanted to their animals and no one would say anything. What verse 10 is saying, is someone who truly desires *shalom*, that's what is in his or her heart; that is what they want. They want flourishing in the city. There's such a genuine heart of compassion that even the animals are treated with compassion. That's contrasted in verse 10 with even the best attempt at compassion by the wicked ends up being cruel. Now what does the proverb mean by that? Again the **wicked** is not talking about those that are out there doing evil things. It's talking about those that are selfish, those that are self-centered, those that are in it for themselves—those that are ultimately going to disadvantage the community if necessary in order to advantage themselves. Their compassion isn't really true compassion. They are just too self-centered for that. Their compassion is wanting for themselves—a feeling—I want to feel better about myself. I want people to think better of me. At the end of the day their acts of compassion are more about themselves than they actually are about the people who need help. I think this is very common in our culture. I think you have lots of people that want to feel better about themselves. They want that good feeling. They want people around them to think, "I'm really a good person," so they find themselves some area where they can reach out with a level of compassion in order to get that feeling. But it's limited and restricted, because once I get that feeling, that's all I'm looking for. To have genuine compassion for people in need is hard and it's messy and it's a huge commitment. That's why the proverb says even the compassion of the wicked is ultimately cruel because if I'm ultimately doing that in order to somehow advantage myself, I'm actually using disadvantaging the most needy among us to somehow advantage myself. And that is ultimately an act of cruelty. You have a similar statement to that in verse 20:

Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil,
But counselors of peace have joy.

Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil and that is contrasted with the shalom in the second part of the verse. Basically what that is saying is that I may present myself as being a person of compassion, a person who cares, a person who is concerned about injustice and unfairness and things that are right, but at the end of the day what I am really about is advancing my cause. I'm about an agenda. I'm about myself and my career and my notoriety. This is my chance to get in the spotlight and make a name for myself. Ultimately what I'm doing is: I am disadvantaging those in need in order to advantage myself and my cause. It isn't true compassion or justice.

The atheist German philosopher Nietzsche has some good things to say and he had some really bad things to say. One of the things that Nietzsche had right is, "By and large people are about power and control. Religion is about power and control. Government is about power and control. A lot of the market place is about power and control." I think he was right about that. You think about, then, people who present themselves as being all about justice, but really they want to advance their cause. It's about using others for power and control to ultimately get my way. That's what the proverb is talking about. What's contrasted are the **counselors of peace have joy**. The word **peace** is our Hebrew word *shalom* that we have been talking about—this idea of mutual flourishing, "Hey, we are all in this together. We all either flourish together or we all go down together," but you ultimately live in the culture you create. The counselors of *shalom* are basically saying the righteous are those who are not pushing any agenda other than they just genuinely want flourishing, and when they create a context where people can flourish, there is joy; there is satisfaction; there's this glimpse that satisfies something deep within our souls that says, "This is the way it is supposed to be."

So the fourth and last: We've talked about the *need to be teachable*, about *a biblical view of work*, about *true compassion and justice*, and the last is a topic that we have talked about quite a bit because it comes up quite a bit in Proverbs, and that is *what comes out of my mouth*. You say, "You know, Bryan, you've really talked about that quite a bit already." I agree but it's talked about more than any other subject in the book of Proverbs under the umbrella of *skillful living*. If you can't control your mouth, you have virtually no chance at *skillful living*. So what this proverb talks about is the power of words to destroy and the power of words to heal—*powerful* both ways. Verse 6:

The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood,
But the mouth of the upright will deliver them.

Very similar verse 13:

An evil man is ensnared by the transgression of his lips,
But the righteous will escape from trouble.

Both of those verses use a trap metaphor—like going out and setting a trap and baiting the trap. It's basically this idea that the wicked bait the trap; they are just waiting for someone to step in it in order for them to pounce. The fool falls for it. The fool gets drawn into this toxic war of words that destroys the *shalom* in a community. The second proverb was saying, but ultimately when the fool does that, they end of stepping in their own trap, because you ultimately live in the culture you create. We either all go down, or we all flourish together. There are certain people that it feels like they are always right on the edge of going off, and you just know that. Think with me: Aren't there certain people that you know, if you take them into any social context there's a pretty good chance someone is going to say something, and they are going to go off and create uncomfortable conflict.

And you always know they are just right on the edge of that. These are people that just seem to thrive on this. It's almost like they draw energy from this conflict. What the proverb says is that the righteous aren't like that. "I'm not stepping in that trap. I'm not taking the bait; I'm not going to do that." We need to be more skilled than to fall for that in whatever environment we are in. Wouldn't it be equally true that we all know people that we could take into any social environment and you have a high level of confidence that no matter what is said there, they're not going to go off at the mouth? They are just too skilled to fall for that. There are certain people where there is conflict everywhere they go—conflict at home, at work, in the neighborhood, in their small group. There's just conflict everywhere. That's what the proverb is talking about. Verse 14:

A man will be satisfied with good by the fruit of his words,
And the deeds of a man's hand will return to him.

Basically the reminder is that we all live in the culture that we create. If what comes out of my mouth is *shalom*, that's typically what is returned to me. I live in the culture that I create. Verse 16:

A fool's anger is known at once,
But a prudent man conceals or covers his honor.

Basically we are talking about a **fool** who has a quick fuse, is always this close to going off. The fool has a problem with his or her temper—the reason he or she is a fool is because you ultimately create a culture that will destroy you. Now I thought about this, this week and I think my statement is accurate. I don't believe over my lifetime I have ever known anyone with a temper problem who was happy. I don't think I have. The reason is because someone who can't control his or her temper ultimately lives in the culture they've created and it's a miserable way to live. There is conflict at home, in the marriage, with your kids, in the neighborhood. There's conflict at church, in your small group, at work—there's conflict everywhere. It's a miserable way to live, and I don't think I've ever met anyone with a temper problem who is happy. So it's the way of the fool. The **prudent man** conceals or covers dishonor. Dishonor means something that is offensive. It means something that is not only offensive but might be a put down, an attack, or something like that. The prudent person—the righteous, the person who lives skillfully, even if there's something that's offensive, even if there's some sort of attack or an insult—they're too skillful to get sucked into that and contribute to the breakdown of shalom.

So think of it this way: All of us as Christians are called to be a light out into the darkness which means we are called to be among people who don't believe what we believe, that don't think what we think, that don't share our values. They are often going to say things that are offensive. They are often going to say things that are insulting. They are often going to attack and oftentimes attack you personally. If you can't be in that environment without going off at the mouth, you stand virtually no chance of doing your part to fulfill the *Great Commission*. You have to have more skill than that. Whether it's face to face or whether it's on social media, you have to have enough skill not to get sucked into that. What if I choose not to respond to somebody's insult today, and a week from now I am able to enter into a meaningful conversation with that same person to begin a journey to talk about Jesus? That is what the proverb is talking about. Verse 17:

He who speaks truth tells what is right,
But a false witness, deceit.

Verse 17 is courtroom language. It's simply talking about a righteous witness tells the truth simply because it's right but the false witness lies in order to somehow advantage himself, herself, or a cause. We've talked about this already. It is the reminder that truth has to matter. We live in a culture that has said there is no absolute truth. Therefore we've devalued truth; therefore we are no longer offended by the lie and everybody shrugs their shoulders, and, "That's just the way it is." But at the end of the day, without truth there is virtually no possibility for flourishing...no possibility for justice...no possibility for compassion. Just like in a marriage, there is just no possibility for flourishing when the two partners won't speak truth. I don't know that the culture at large gets this, but we are the people of God. The one who dwells within us defines Himself as the *Way, the Truth, and the Life*. We have to be people of truth. We have to demand it from ourselves, from our spouses, from our kids, from our pastors, from our churches, from our leaders, from our politicians. We cannot accept anything less; people need to tell the truth!

A couple years ago, I was at a conference, and there was a well-known pastor who was talking about being on a television show—I think it was ABC's Good Morning America—talking about traditional marriage and was on there with someone basically talking against traditional marriage. And he said as soon as the interview started, the other person just went off and cited all kinds of studies and statistics of the damage traditional marriage does to communities, people and children, and basically consumed the whole time and they went to a commercial. And that was it! They were ushered off and in the Green Room the pastor said he tried to politely say to this other person, "You know I want to keep learning; I want to keep growing. I'm not familiar with those studies and statistics. I would like to learn more about that. Could you help me find those studies?" The person didn't bat an eye. He just simply said, "Oh, none of that is true; I just made it all up. I will do whatever is necessary to win." I would suggest to you that happens all the time—and everybody goes with it and nobody really thinks that person is lying. We must be people of truth! Verse 18:

> **There is one who speaks rashly like the thrust of a sword,**
> **But the tongue of the wise brings healing.**

It's a very vivid imagery, that those who speak rashly, recklessly, hurtfully, is like taking a sword and piercing someone again, again and again and leaving them bleeding. Now we're all familiar with the saying "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." I don't know who made that up, but they were way off and they need to talk to the proverbs because the proverbs would say: sticks and stones may break my bones, but words pierce to my heart and leave me bleeding. There is so much damage whether it's in person or on social media that we can do to someone through our words. If we were to be truthful, there are some of you sitting here this morning and you are pierced and bleeding and it hurts deeply in your soul because of words someone spoke to you this week. It would be equally true that there are probably some here this morning that if the truth was known, there is someone somewhere out there in the community that is this morning pierced and bleeding, in pain over words that came out of your mouth this week. Again, whether it's in person or on social media, words have the ability to do significant damage to people. Isn't it true we can all think of words that were said to us a year ago, five years ago, ten years ago, thirty years ago that were hurtful and unkind and this morning there is still some bleeding that comes out of that scar when you think about it. Words are so powerful. But they are also powerful for healing, which is the second part of that proverb. **But the tongue of the wise brings healing**. If we don't get baited into those destructive conversations, but rather we are skillful enough to offer words of healing, it is equally powerful. Probably most of us, if not all of us in the room this morning remember things said a year ago, five years ago, ten years ago, thirty years ago that were words that brought healing and encouragement and life to our souls, and here we are

thirty years later and we still remember those words. I have no doubt there are many in the room this morning that this week you offered words of life and healing to somebody who desperately needed it. There is tremendous power in words. Several years ago there was a little encounter in the hallway. To be honest I don't even remember it. But the person I encountered told me this several months later. Apparently he came up to me and said, "I am new today and I'm sorry about the way I am dressed." And I said, "I think you look great, and I'm glad you are here this morning." That was the whole exchange right there. I did not know this person was homeless, wandered in our doors, and when I said, "I think you look great; I'm glad you're here," something triggered in his brain that said, "I don't have to live this way. I can live a different life," and it turned him. He got a job, got a house, and about a year later, I had the privilege of baptizing him on this stage. That was less than a thirty-second exchange that reminds us there is so much power in our words. Verse 19:

Truthful lips will be established forever,
But a lying tongue is only for the moment. Verse 22:
Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD,
But those who deal faithfully are His delight." Verse 25:
Anxiety in a man's heart weighs it down,
But a good word makes it glad."

I think there is no shortage of anxiety in our culture today which means when we offer good, encouraging, healing words, it is a powerful language in our culture. Why does all this matter so much? Verse 26:

The righteous is a guide to his neighbor,
But the way of the wicked leads them astray." Verse 28:
The way of righteousness is life,
And in *its* pathway there is no death."

The life that our souls long for is found in righteousness; it's found in flourishing; it's found in *shalom* which is ultimately then found in a relationship with Christ. But the wicked are determined to lead people astray, and the wicked are winning the culture. Why this matters is because we as the people of God have been called to represent the righteous, to at least create glimpses—pockets of flourishing in our cities. What a vision or a dream that one day we could actually win the city! Not a hostile takeover. We win the city and the city rejoices because people say, "I think this is what my soul is longing for," and it creates an opportunity to exalt Christ the Savior!

Our Father, we celebrate again that You have told us truth. You have given us the road map to be a guiding light to people living in the darkness of our culture. God, my prayer is that each of us would be passionate about our part in tending to the garden, of creating at least pockets of shalom that will create platforms presenting the hope that we have in Christ. Lord, that's my prayer, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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