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Skillful Leaders

Skillful Living

Proverbs 16:1-33

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Sebastian Junger in his best-selling book *Tribe* talks about the difference between community in the ancient world and tribes vs. modern day 21st century Western culture. In the ancient world, people came together in tribes in order to survive. It was about protection; it was about provision. There was a clear sense *if we're not in this together, we will not survive*. That's very different from life in 21st century America. We think of community as maybe a group of people gathering in a coffee shop sharing life stories or a small group in our homes, but if we were to be honest, there isn't this deep sense that we need each other or we're not going to make it. In the ancient world in these tribes, the most punishable crimes were crimes against the community—things like greed, things like stealing. Crimes of selfishness were actually punishable by death because there was such a serious sense that if you do damage to the community, we're not going to make it together. You think how different that is in 21st century America. We prize this rugged individualism. We're autonomous to ourselves; we're individuals. We're in it for *me*. There's a clear sense of it's *me* and *my* world and *my* values, and we don't really have a sense of our need for one another. It's kind of a collection of individuals together. In the language of Sherry Turkle's book *Alone Together*, we are nothing more typically than a collection of individuals. In some ways we've actually turned selfishness into something of a virtue. Perhaps that's why it's very common today to see in research studies that one of the most pressing emotional struggles that people in our culture feel is this deep sense of loneliness.

So here's the deal. It is virtually impossible to create a community of flourishing when you have nothing more than merely a collection of selfish individuals. It's not that it's harder; it's virtually impossible—which raises the question, *"What is necessary for change?"* We could probably talk about a lot of things, but there's one thing we know for sure. Real change, even in pockets of flourishing, will not be possible without leaders. That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs, Chapter 16.

We're working our way through the Book of Proverbs, taking a chapter at a time, and parts of each chapter. I thought it might be interesting in chapter 16 to take a section that is specifically targeted to kings—targeted to leaders—kind of a unique section in Proverbs. And since we spent two years going through 1 and 2 Samuel, talking a lot about leadership, I thought it might be interesting to see what Proverbs says about leadership. Through our study of Samuel, we talked about leadership in the most general of terms. Leadership is influence and any serious Christ-follower that wants to influence someone else for Christ, is a leader. So with that same definition, we want to see what Proverbs has to say, remembering that this is written by Solomon, the son of David. So we do have a fairly good understanding of the context into which it is written. We pick it up in verse 10:

> **A divine decision is in the lips of the king;**
> **His mouth should not err in judgment.** (*NASB, Proverbs 16:10)

First, a little bit about the terminology. The **divine** is referring basically to an *inspired judgment*, an *inspired verdict*. The word **decision** I think is a little too mild for the Hebrew word. It's not just talking about a decision; it's a *verdict*. The king, acting in his official role needs to, in essence, be

inspired by God because he's representing God in the decisions he makes. The second part of that proverb, **His mouth should not err in judgment**, literally means *go astray*.

So you remember we talked two weeks ago about: "*There is a way that seems right to a man, but the end is misery, but the way of life is the path of God."* Therefore, what this proverb is saying is in Israel God was the King, but God ruled through a human king. It was the responsibility of the human king to rightly represent the vision, the values, the truth of God. Therefore, when the king acted, the king should act consistently with the value system of God. That's who he represented; that's why God established him as king.

So the proverb is saying that when the king acts, the king acts on behalf of God. So it should be an inspired verdict, and it is a very serious thing when the king drifts off the path. Therefore, in the same way you think about whatever influence you have at school, on the team, at work, in your neighborhood, in your family—wherever you find yourself—part of your responsibility as a Christ-follower is to rightly represent the value system of God, to rightly represent the truth of Christ, to rightly represent God's vision for *shalom* in our world. Verse 11:

> **A just balance and scales belong to the LORD;**
> **All the weights of the bag are His concern.**

Now this is a little more difficult for us to understand in a modern culture, but it's talking about the scales that were about the only way used to do commerce. For us, when something is five dollars, we can give somebody a five-dollar bill. In the ancient world it was a variety of coins, a variety of weights. They all had different weights to them so they would have to weigh them: *There's this much weight; therefore it has this much value*. The problem was that the scales were consistently rigged. This wasn't something that happened now and then; it happened all the time. It was a huge problem, so people were consistently cheated and disadvantaged. Basically what would happen is that the rich owned the scales. The rich had what people needed; therefore when they would do commerce and buy and sell, they would do so through a rigged system so that the rich got richer, the poor got poorer, and there was virtually nothing the poor could do. They had no one to go to, no one to talk to. They just suffered more and more at the hands of the rich.

So what verse eleven is saying is it was the job of the king to make sure that there was true justice in the land. That was part of a necessary culture for flourishing. If we go all the way back to Proverbs chapter 1, verse 3, we were introduced to a couple of terms that I said back then would reappear over and over and over again in the Book of Proverbs—some of the foundational concepts for there to be true *shalom* or *flourishing*.

One was the term *tzadik*—the righteous—someone who has a vision and a passion for God's vision for flourishing to such a degree that that person will even disadvantage himself or herself in order to advantage the community, in order to create flourishing. It's a necessary element for shalom. We learned last week that shalom happens when the righteous are promoted, when the righteous do well, when the righteous succeed.

The other term that we learned was the Hebrew word *mishpat*, which is the term for justice. It carries the idea of true justice for everyone, regardless of the color of your skin, regardless of your socio-economic status, regardless of your gender. There was the expectation of honest and true justice for everyone.

Those two concepts are absolutely foundational or there will never be flourishing in the land. So verse 11 is saying it was the job of the king to make sure there was true justice in the land so that even the poor had opportunity to succeed and were not consistently disadvantaged. Verse 12:

It is an abomination for kings to commit wicked acts,
For a throne is established on righteousness.

Righteousness is this idea of flourishing. It's this idea of community, of the world as God intended it to be. That's why God gave kings power—to act on His behalf to create that. When it says, **It is an abomination...** I'm going to use the word, *it is disgusting*. It has a little bit more of a familiar ring in the 21st century culture. It is disgusting to God when God puts people in positions of authority and influence and they use it to advantage themselves to the demise of the community. Again, remember the word **wicked** is not just a bunch of evil, nasty things. It is the idea of selfishness, of greed; it's the idea that, "I'm in it for myself, and I will advantage myself in any way possible, even if it disadvantages the greater community."

This is very interesting to think about. God established kings on the throne to represent Him and His vision for the world, and He is absolutely disgusted with them when they use it for their own personal advantage. That's why God reacted so strongly when David used his power and position to commit adultery with Bathsheba.

It's this core idea that every person in the room has been created on purpose, for a purpose. Whether someone has a thriving relationship with Christ or someone is pagan to the core, it is still equally true that they have been created on purpose, for a purpose. They have been given life; they have been given opportunity. They have been given talents; they have been given gifts. They have been given everything they need in order to fulfill their purpose, and all of us are established in various ways, in various places in the community. God has given you life. God has given you talent. God has given you skill. God has given you opportunity. God has given you the ability to function today right where He has you, in order to create at least glimpses of shalom, at least a taste of the world as God intended it to be. But God is absolutely disgusted when you take what you have been given and use it for your own selfish personal advantage. For you to take God's magnificent gift and use it in such a destructive, selfish way is an abomination to God.

Now I think we would all agree this is a huge problem in our country. You have people in virtually every walk of life who are extraordinarily gifted and talented. People have tremendous influence in the financial world, in the world of government and politics, the world of church, the world of athletics, media, art and entertainment, education—in virtually every center of our culture. And yet our communities are flooded with people who use what God has given them for their own personal gain, to advantage themselves, doing great damage to the community, preventing people from flourishing as God intended. That's kind of the heartbeat of verse twelve. We can't fix everyone else but we can look at where God has placed me. What are my talents; what are my abilities; what are my opportunities? Where has God placed me? Whether it's in a home, a business, a school, on a team, in a neighborhood, what am I doing with what God has given me? Am I using it for my own selfish advantage or am I actually stewarding what God has given me to create pockets of shalom, where there might be at least some small possibility of flourishing in this world? This gets us to one of the biggest problems we face, verse 13:

Righteous lips are the delight of kings,
And he who speaks right is loved.

We talked about this last week. It's one of the most talked about subjects in Proverbs—what comes out of my mouth, what comes off my lips. We have tremendous power with the words we say. We can either give people a taste of the *Tree of Life* through words of healing and kindness, compassion and encouragement, or we can virtually shatter the life of another human being through careless and reckless words. What it's saying in verse 13 is: **Righteous lips**, the lips of the *tzadik*, the lips that bring life and encouragement and healing, they **are the delight of kings. And he who speaks right is loved.**

This turns a little bit from the behavior of the king to what the king actually celebrates. If the king is established by God, if the king has a passion for shalom, if the king really wants to see flourishing in the land, then what does the king delight in? What is his value system? The king delights in the **righteous lips** that bring encouragement and compassion and life and healing to the land. That's what He loves. There are two parts to that: The king must model that, and the king must delight in that. So again, like last week, think about the words that come out of my mouth. Are they words of life? Are they words of healing and compassion and encouragement, or are they words of devastation? Are they words that do damage to shalom and flourishing in the people around us? Like last week, I think this is a very helpful grid for assessing people in our world. Again, God doesn't divide between Republican and Democrat, between black and white, between the rich and the poor, conservative and liberal. He divides by the wicked and the righteous, and it creates a helpful grid for assessing: Is this person about righteousness, or is this person about wickedness? Does this person want conflict? Is this person in it to advantage himself/herself, to just push an agenda, or is this a person who genuinely wants flourishing in the land?

So think in terms of politics—a dangerous subject. But let's think in terms of our politicians in Washington, D.C. Would you say the overwhelming majority that consistently get behind a microphone and talk are giving evidence that what they're passionate about is flourishing in the land? Or are they more likely advantaging themselves...about power and significance...about an agenda, about winning? But at what cost? This is the danger of a subject like this. All the Republicans think, "*I know exactly what you mean, Pastor Clark; it's those Democrats!" (laughter)* And all the Democrats are thinking, "*I know exactly what you're saying; it's those crazy Republicans!* Let me offer a suggestion. In my judgment, the majority of politicians in Washington who consistently get behind a microphone are there to advantage themselves, and they do great damage to our communities. You say, "That's rather judgmental!" I say, "It's not!" Just listen to what they say. Assess it for yourself. Do you hear words of healing? Do you hear words of peace? Do you hear words of flourishing? Do you hear words of life? Do you hear words that feel like it's a taste of the *Tree of Life*? Or are they words of destruction...anger...devastation? Are they words of conflict that are devastating our communities? Sometimes I think if I hear one more politician get behind a microphone and utter words of devastation, I think I'm going to throw up. I need to delight in what God delights in, and I need to be disgusted by what disgusts God. If you are so loyal to your party, you can't see this. You need to go back to the Book of Proverbs and remind yourself again that God is disgusted with anyone that uses their power and position to create conflict and devastation in our streets. There are real people in our communities whose lives are being devastated by this recklessness. At some point, if we don't change something, there are real people whose lives are going to be devastated in significant ways. Words shatter human lives, but this isn't just our politicians. It's in our preachers. It's in our media, our entertainment, our athletes, our comedians, our musicians. We need to create a grid and listen. Things that are being said that devastate our communities are not funny. It's not entertainment. It's not news. At some point you have to create a grid and say, "If that disgusts God, it disgusts me." And we need to learn to delight in the words that bring peace and life and healing and shalom. Who is going to lead the

way if it's not us? Five thousand people strong, out into our community, seriously passionate about shalom, could absolutely change this community.

Proverbs talks a lot about words in the mouth, even in chapter 16. Some examples of that, verse 21:

The wise in heart will be called understanding,
And sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness.

This is what we talked about last week. When deep in your heart you get it, you have understanding that what is in your heart will affect what comes out of your mouth. If you have a mouth problem, it's because you have a heart problem. That's where it has to change. And when the heart is right—when you get it—what comes out of my mouth is **sweetness**, and it's actually **persuasive**. We remind ourselves as Christians, our responsibility is not just to get something said. It is to get something heard. You can't think just because you stand on a street corner and say something loudly, you have accomplished something. We who have experienced life change through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, have a commission to rightly present the message in such a way that it is persuasive, that it is desirable, that people want to hear what we have to say. That takes a high level of skill! Verse 23:

The heart of the wise instructs his mouth (Exactly what we said last week.)
And adds persuasiveness to his lips.

Verse 24:

Pleasant words are a honeycomb,
Sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.

Verses 26 and 27 have to be taken together:

A worker's appetite works for him,
For his hunger urges him on.
(What this is saying is in the ancient world if you were hungry, you were motivated to work, because you had to work in order to get paid, in order to eat. It was like a driving force within you and that creates a metaphor for verse 27):
But a worthless man digs up evil,
(The appetite in this person is worthless and has no interest in God's vision for the world.)
While his words are like scorching fire.
(This is the person who has something messed up deep in his or her heart. It's like an appetite drives us to eat; there's something in there that drives people to say words that scorch the people around them, doing significant damage. It's like this appetite within them that cannot be satisfied.) Verse 28:

A perverse (that's twisted...a twisted person) **man spreads strife,**
And a slanderer separates intimate friends.

Someone who is twisted inside, who has no real sense of God's vision for the world, just continually creates conflict. So let me say a couple of things related to this. We hit it pretty hard last week, pretty hard this week.

There are some of you in the room this morning—you have a problem with your mouth. But you know that. You knew that last week, and you feel it deeply. It bothered you last week; it bothered you all week. It bothers you this morning. There's something deep in your heart that says, "I know that's my problem, and I need to change. I need to do better; I don't want to be that way." For you we say, "That's awesome! You're learning; you're growing; you're changing. You're becoming more like Jesus. We want to encourage you and celebrate you. Something significant is happening. Good for you!"

But there are others of you here this morning, you are virtually clueless. We're having this discussion about a mouth that scorches, and you have no idea we're talking about you. You think we're talking about somebody else. Even though when you open your mouth, out come shattering words, and you scorch the people around you. Your family knows it. The people at work know it. The people at church know it. The people in your neighborhood know it. Everybody seems to know it but you. You seem either unwilling or unable to face the fact you have a problem and it's doing significant damage, often to the people you care about the most. If something doesn't change, you're going to find yourself isolated, all alone and miserable—and likely you are going to blame everybody else. There's always a way to excuse it; there's always a way to justify it. Somehow life's been unfair and it isn't your fault. Proverbs would call you a *fool*.

The mouth is a powerful thing for good. You can actually give people a taste of the *Tree of Life*. For people that otherwise are hurting and struggling and desperately in need of some word of encouragement, that is a powerful moment. But you can use that same instrument to utterly devastate a human life. *Kings delight in the words of life,* and so should we. Verse 14:

> **The fury of a king is *like* messengers of death,**
> **But a wise man will appease it.**

Almost all Hebrew scholars agree that the **fury** talked about here is not quick-tempered anger, out-of-control fury. It's actually the appropriate wrath of a king. In other words, if the role of the king is to promote good and to punish evil, if the king is to celebrate righteousness and deal with wickedness, then there is an appropriate wrath, to deal with those who are determined to do violence to shalom.

So the idea here is, then, if you are wise, if you are skillful at living, then you should fall in line. Ultimately it's a picture of God, and if God is a God of wrath, which He certainly is, then God is a God who celebrates righteousness, but is angered by those who devastate shalom. If that's true, then I should travel the right path. What sense does it make to consistently fight God? That's a fight I can't win. Therefore, I fall in line; I walk God's path, believing that's ultimately where life is found. And finally, verse 15:

> **In the light of a king's face is life,**
> **And his favor is like a cloud with the spring rain.**

Actually I love the metaphors in that verse. What it's saying is when the king is a righteous king, the face of the king is like a sunrise. It is filled with hope for a new day. A king like that is like a rain cloud in the spring that brings gentle life-healing rain.

So just stop and think about this. If you understand God's vision for shalom, God's vision for flourishing, if that's what is in your heart, if that is what you desire, you want to be numbered

among the righteous, the *tzadik*. Then when you go to school, when you go to the team, when you go to work, when you go home, when you go to the neighborhood, when you go to class, when you go wherever you go, your appearance in that environment is like a sunrise. For people that are hurting and struggling and in pain and wondering if they can make it through one more day, suddenly the sun rises and there's this glimmer of hope that, "Maybe I can make it. Maybe there is hope. Maybe there is another way. Maybe there is something that will satisfy the dry and thirsty longing in my soul." Your very presence in that environment is like a sunrise to them. Or it's like a spring cloud full of rain to a dry and barren soil, and what you bring into that environment is life. What you bring is renewal. What you bring is a taste of the world as God intended it to be. Imagine five thousand people catching a vision for that and living that way every day in our community. It would virtually change our community.

How important is wisdom? Verse 16:

> **How much better it is to get wisdom than gold!**
> **And to get understanding is to be chosen above silver.**

Verse 19:

> **It is better to be humble in spirit with the lowly**
> **Than to divide the spoil with the proud.**

I'd rather be counted among the disadvantaged and the down-and-out and get it, than to be wildly successful and not get it. Verse 20:

> **He who gives attention to the word will find good,**
> **And blessed** (or happy) **is he who trusts in the LORD.**

And finally, familiar words, verse 25:

> **There is a way that seems right to a man,**
> **But its end is the way of death.**

We had these words two chapters ago, repeated again in this chapter...**There is a way that seems right.** Nobody gets up in the morning and says, "I think I will ruin my life today!" But people are isolated; people are selfish; people are greedy. People act like that because they have convinced themselves that surely this is the way of life. This is somehow going to deliver the goods. This is going to make me happy and satisfied. I will do everything necessary to advantage myself because I think that's the right way. *There is a way that seems right, but the end is utter misery.*

Life is found on God's path. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." The fear of the Lord is about submission, surrender, and recognizing God's path is the right path. Step one in experiencing what it means to live skillfully is to surrender—that God's path is the right path.

Throughout the Old and New Testament there are so many images that describe this, but one of the most vivid images is the image of the potter and the clay. God is the Potter; we are the clay. He centers us; He molds us; He shapes us; He forms us through the experiences of life, through His truth, and He makes us into something useful for Him. *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."*

Our Father, we celebrate this morning that You have not left us to grope in the darkness. You've actually given us a roadmap that is the path of life. God, we understand that when we surrender, You have to work us, You have to shape us, You have to develop us in order to mold us and make us into something useful for You. Lord, may we surrender ourselves to the hands of the Potter, that You might use us to make a difference in this world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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