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Righteous or Wicked?

Skillful Living

Proverbs 28:1-28

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God has made us as people in His image in order to experience a flourishing relationship with Him and with one another. That was God's vision for the world. But sin entered the picture and has done great violence to flourishing. We feel it every day in our culture. But God is so committed to this vision He actually gave up His own Son to shed His blood on a cross in payment for our sins, that we might know forgiveness, that we might stand right before a holy God and, once again, our souls might flourish. Now, the ultimate hope of the gospel is the promise that one day God will usher in a new heaven and a new earth, and it will be everything that our souls long for today. But the reality is, right now, today, we live out this faith in Christ in a broken, sin-cursed world—and we feel that. So, how do we live out our faith in a way that we, at least, create pockets of flourishing that give people a glimpse of the world as God intended it to be, as part of our witness, our testimony of the message of the gospel? Well, the answer is, "It takes a great deal of skill." This has been the theme in the Book of Proverbs—what it looks like to live life skillfully. Now to do that, you have to have a clear sense of the righteous and the wicked—who they are and how life flows down the path of the righteous and the wicked. This has been a major theme in the Book of Proverbs. So that's what I want to talk about again today. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs 28. This is the last time we'll be in Proverbs this summer; we're going to do some other things in the next few weeks.

Proverbs 28 is really difficult to organize. It's a little bit disjointed, but we're going to try to run all of it through this grid of perspective of whether you're traveling the *path of the righteous* or the *path of the wicked*. Again, it's important to define our terms correctly. So when we're talking about the righteous, it's not necessarily the same as Paul's definition, for example, in the book of Romans. The righteous in poetic literature, the righteous in Proverbs, is talking about those who choose to travel God's path. Right from Genesis 3 on, there's been this consistent message of two paths: a path of life and a path of destruction, a path of righteousness and the path, basically, of being our own god. The path of the righteous is brokenness, a humility before God—that God's way is the right way. It's the way of flourishing. It's a path where it's more about us than it is about me. It's about the flourishing of the community. And, if necessary, I will even disadvantage myself to advantage the community, because we're all in this together. That's the mindset that's necessary if we're going to flourish together.

The path of the wicked is not just those who do really evil things. If, when you hear wicked, you think like: murderer, kidnapper, or thief, most people immediately say, "Well, that's not me!" But wicked in Proverbs is a reference to those that are selfish, are self-centered, greedy, to those that are individualistic, to those who are in it for themselves. "It's not us; it's me, and if necessary I will disadvantage others to advantage myself." As long as you have people with that mindset, there is virtually no chance for flourishing. It doesn't matter whether you're talking about a family, whether you're talking about a school, whether you're talking about a neighborhood, a community or a nation, there's no possibility of flourishing when that's our orientation. So a lot of life and life's perspectives are determined by whether you're traveling the path of the righteous or the path of the wicked.

Now, one of the ways we've seen this again and again in the Book of Proverbs is this understanding that you ultimately live in the culture you create. I think, if you interviewed most people on the street, they would say that they are troubled and frustrated by things in the culture in which we live. But most people fail to understand *their* contribution to the very things in the culture that so frustrate them. We create a culture that, then we have to live in, and then we don't like it. That's the basic idea. So, a couple of proverbs that talk about that are, for example, verse 2:

By the transgression of a land many are its princes, (*NASB, Proverbs 28:2a)

So the **land** here, poetically, is personified. It's referring to the people and the land—our culture. When the majority of people are transgressors, meaning transgressing God's path of righteousness, Jesus said, "*Wide is the path that leads to destruction. Many will travel it."* The majority of people in our culture are oriented around the path of wickedness. That's their worldview; that's how they live their lives. That's what the proverb is talking about. They're transgressing God's vision for the world. When that happens, what's necessary? **Many are its princes**—that Hebrew word basically could be translated *government officials.* It's basically the idea that when you have a land full of people who are individuals, who are selfish, who are greedy, who are more concerned about themselves than they are about everyone else, when you have people that will disadvantage others to advantage themselves, it becomes the law of the jungle. It becomes the survival of the fittest. It becomes every man, every woman, for themselves. And so, basically what it creates is chaos and everything begins to break down. Therefore, what is necessary to maintain order is more and more government—more laws, more rules or guidelines, more policies, more ways to keep people under control because, essentially, they're out of control.

Now it's very interesting to think about this. Because people choose to be their own god, they choose to travel their own path because they believe in their hearts this is the way to freedom. What could be freer than to be my own god? But what happens is, it isn't the way of freedom. It turns into the way of bondage. What you have in our culture is: the more secular we have become, the bigger the government has become. Most people in whatever industry you name, they feel suffocated by the laws, the guidelines, the policies, the regulations, the paperwork. I hear this from so many people; they can barely function anymore because of all this. Why is this necessary? It's necessary because fundamentally we're out of control. People turn and blame the government, but what we fail to understand is the government is merely reacting to people that are out of control and seeking to disadvantage one another. The problem is a core spiritual issue. The majority are traveling a path that is transgressing God's vision for the world. Therefore, what ends up is bondage. So, what is the solution? The second part of the proverb:

But by a man (or woman) **of understanding *and* knowledge, so it endures.**

So it flourishes. The land flourishes; the people flourish. These are terms we've seen throughout the Book of Proverbs. Usually it's a threesome: wisdom, understanding, knowledge. Wisdom is the ability to see with discernment. It's a clear vision of God's vision for the world. Understanding is a very specific term that basically means taking that vision and implementing it—how to live it to turn it into reality. What does this look like at home...at school...in my neighborhood? What does this look like in my relationships? What does this look like in the community and the nation? That is understanding. Knowledge, then, is the accumulated effect of learning. In other words, over time I get better and better and better at it. So, the alternative to this bondage—this law of the jungle, this dog-eat-dog world—is when the majority of the people understand God's vision for the world.

They understand it; they implement it, and they get better at it. That's the recipe for flourishing in families, communities, businesses, and a nation.

One of the things that makes this very significant is to understand, at the end of the day, the answer will never be found in politics. It will never be found in government. Government's trying to suppress and control the mess, but it cannot fix the mess. The only thing that will fix the mess is revival—a genuine change in the human heart as we turn back toward God and choose to live according to God's vision for the world! It's not the government's job to bring revival; it is the church's job to bring revival. My opinion would be: when churches engage in politics, they become distracted from the very thing that will change the world and instead pour energy into that which can never change the world. In my opinion, that is a terrible tradeoff! The church needs to be busy about her job—to be proclaimers of the gospel—because until there's a genuine change in the human heart to go back to the path of righteousness, there will be no real change. Now, this comes up again in Verse 12:

> **When the righteous triumph, there is great glory,**
> **But when the wicked rise, men hide themselves.**

When the righteous triumph, when the righteous win the day, when the righteous prevail, the result is **there is great glory**; there is great celebration! We learned this in Proverbs 11. When the righteous prevail, the city rejoices. Why? Because everyone wins! When the people that are leading—the people that are prevailing—are traveling the path of righteousness, and they will even disadvantage themselves to advantage others, at the end, everybody wins! Now this is very helpful to process the world in which we live. Again, whether you're thinking about your home, your business, about the community or a school or a nation, the mission is for the righteous to prevail, the wicked to diminish. Look at what it says in verse 4. This is the tension point:

> **Those who forsake the law** (those who transgress it) **praise the wicked,**
> **But those who keep the law** (in other words, travel God's path of righteousness) **strive** (or contend) **with them.**

This is the tension in our culture. It's between the righteous and the wicked. If the wicked win the day, what verse 12 says is people **hide**. They don't celebrate; they hide. Why? Because the wicked will disadvantage others to advantage themselves, and because that's true, nobody's safe. Everybody's at risk. People go underground; people hide. It's the law of the jungle. Nobody quite knows who's next. It creates this chaotic, anxious, fearful culture that cannot rest. When the **righteous triumph**, there is great celebration because everyone wins.

Now, you're fully aware that we are a very divided nation, and the divide feels like it's getting greater and more and more angry. We tend to divide around politics and political parties, and Christians can really get sucked into all of this and often be more a part of the problem than the solution. But it's really helpful to realize, the grid is not political. I'm not ultimately for the Republicans. I'm not ultimately for the Democrats. I am for the righteous, and until the righteous prevail, there will be no real change. It's a very helpful grid. When you listen to leaders and politicians talk, ask yourself the question, "Is this about power and control and winning and crushing the other side, or is this about righteousness, creating a culture where everyone can flourish together?" I'm not loyal to the Republicans. I'm not loyal to the Democrats. I am for the righteous, and until the righteous prevail at home, at work, in our community and in our nation, there will not be flourishing. So that's the idea.

We ultimately live in the culture we create, and we have to have a clear sense of the difference between the righteous and the wicked. We celebrate the righteous; we contend against the wicked. One of the ways, then, this plays out and is talked about a lot in the Book of Proverbs is the tension between the rich and the poor. This is a very complicated subject. It's not as simple as little bumper-sticker solutions to these problems. But it's helpful to run it through this grid of the righteous and the wicked. Some people are poor through no fault of their own. But it's also true some are poor because they're wicked. Again and again and again the Book of Proverbs says if you choose this path, there will be devastation; there will be calamity; it will make a mess of your life; you'll pay a cost. Choosing the path of wickedness often has devastating consequences. There are those in our culture who are convinced if we just collected all the money and redistributed it equally to everyone, it would solve the problems. It's helpful to understand, biblically that will never work...it will never work! Why? Because the wicked remain wicked; that doesn't turn the wicked into righteous. They will take what they are given and they will use it to disadvantage others and they'll get right back in the same spot. We'll be right back where we started. The only way that can change is if people choose a different path to travel. So, sometimes the poor are poor because they've chosen the path of the wicked. That's what it says in verse 3:

> **A poor man who oppresses the lowly** (in other words, the poor oppressing the poor)
> **Is *like* a driving rain which leaves no food.**

We would say *like a hail storm that strips the field bare.* Everybody loses; there's nothing left! Basically the idea is: sometimes people are poor because they're on the path of wickedness. Therefore the poor victimize the poor; that's the orientation they have in life. They perceive themselves as victims, so they justify victimizing others. It's the law of the jungle. So verse 3 is saying, "When the poor victimize the poor, everyone loses!" It's understanding those that are abused somehow feel justified to turn around and abuse others. It happens all the time. Our nation is filled with poor-on-poor crime. What we will not consider is there is a deeper heart/soul issue that, until people travel a different path, you're not really going to fix the problem.

Verse 6, then, is another perspective:

> **Better is the poor who walks with integrity**
> **Than he who is crooked though he be rich.**

There are others that are poor through no fault of their own—through life circumstances—but they travel the path of righteousness and they live their lives with **integrity**. What the proverb is saying is, "I'd rather be poor and have my integrity than to be rich and to be **crooked**," ...to be wicked. Now here's the problem: We, as a culture, don't buy that. Maybe people wouldn't admit it, but people's behavior gives them away. At the end of the day, most people would rather be rich by any means possible than to be poor with integrity. It's reflective of the path they're traveling. The path you travel reflects your perspective of what matters about money and stuff and, ultimately, what lasts forever. So what the verse is saying is, "I'd rather be poor and travel the path of righteousness than to be rich and to be traveling the path of wickedness."

Now here's the deal: not everyone in the room will be rich—probably not many of us. But every single person in the room has equal opportunity to live his or her life with integrity and, at the end of the story, integrity is what matters. If you travel the path of righteousness, you can't forget that. These are the values that matter most.

Verse 8:

> **He who increases his wealth by interest and usury**
> **Gathers it for him who is gracious to the poor.**

We've seen this before; we don't want to get confused. There's nothing biblically wrong with, for example, a bank giving a loan, charging interest. In our culture it's a business deal. It's regulated; everybody knows the terms. Honestly, in many cases it's a win-win deal. Most of us are purchasing our homes that way. Some people purchase a car that way. Some people start a business that way. It's actually a way that everyone can win. That's not what it's talking about. What it is talking about is the unregulated system in the ancient Near East where, when people were in crisis, when people were going through trauma—maybe it was a drought, maybe it was a famine, maybe war, whatever it was—the rich would loan money to those in desperate need, but charge them ridiculous interest rates—averaged around thirty percent—that the poor could never repay. So the poor ended up becoming the slaves of the rich. The Old Testament laws strictly forbid wealthy people from loaning money to the poor in their hour of need and charging interest. Behind that is the concept of the righteous. "This isn't about me; it's about us, and if necessary I will disadvantage myself to advantage the larger community. We're in this together." That's what verse 8 is talking about.

Now it seems to me, in our country there is a tension between the rich and the poor. There's often this kind of resentment that the poor feel toward the rich. It's helpful to understand that the best thing that can happen to a community is that the righteous prosper financially, because when the righteous prosper financially, everyone wins because they steward what they've been given for the greater good of the community! The poor ought to be the biggest cheerleaders of the righteous when they prosper, because that's how everyone's going to win. That's the idea.

But it's very interesting to look at verse 8 and realize the contrast with those who abuse the poor in their hour of need in order to accumulate wealth. The contrast is not with those who accumulate wealth by being honest and fair and operating with integrity. It's those who accumulate wealth through honest, fair, decent practices but then simply stockpile it more and more and more. That is not the behavior of the righteous; that is the behavior of the wicked. It's selfish; it's self-centered; it's greedy. God did not prosper the righteous so they could stuff it away and accumulate more and more and more. What the proverb says is, "God's going to take it away from the wicked and he's going to give it to the righteous." What do the righteous do with it? Well, the proverb says: **Gathers it for him who is gracious to the poor.** What God expects from the righteous is that we put it into play. We steward it for God's purposes. We understand ultimately what matters. We understand what lasts forever, and we, rather than just accumulate more and more and more, we steward it; we become a conduit of it; we put it in play for the kingdom. I'm absolutely convinced that God looks for people through whom He can bless with great wealth, that they just put it back into play. They become a conduit for the flourishing of the community.

One of the things that we need to celebrate together is Lincoln Berean has those who are righteous whom God has prospered, and they generously turn around and put that resource back into play so that others can flourish. The reality is there are many of you sitting here this morning, through the ministries of Lincoln Berean, through the ministries that go around the world and out into the community, thousands of people have flourished. That has been made possible by the righteous whom God has prospered, and they steward their resources for God's purposes, and many of you sitting here this morning have benefited from that. That's why we cheerlead when the righteous prosper...because we all benefit from that. How you view this stuff has to do with whether you're

traveling the path of the righteous or the wicked. I may be poor, but I may be poor with integrity. I understand what matters; I understand what will last forever. I'd much rather be poor with integrity than rich traveling the path of the wicked. I also understand if God prospers me to just stockpile it, that is the behavior of the wicked. But to steward it and to understand God wants me to put it back into play to advantage others, that's the behavior of the righteous. The issues of poor and rich are affected by what path we travel. Verse 11:

> **The rich man is wise in his own eyes...**

This is a consistent message in Scripture. There's a danger. It doesn't have to be this way but there's a danger when people accumulate wealth, it can affect how they view the world, how they view themselves, how they view others. There's a temptation to think, "I'm wiser; I'm smarter; I know more; my opinion matters more. Somehow, because I have more net worth, I have more worth." Jesus talked about this a lot. This is the whole idea of, *"It's harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."* It just messes up our thinking. The contrast:

> **...But the poor** (not just the poor, but the one) **who has understanding (**Again, the understanding of God's vision and what God wants for the world) **sees through him.**

If God has blessed you, that's awesome. Steward it for God's purposes, but be careful that it doesn't start to change your view of the world and you start to become wise in your own eyes. But even the poor with understanding can understand what matters and to live for that. Basically the proverb is saying, "I'd rather be poor and get it, than to be wealthy and not get it." So, again, depending on what path you're traveling, it affects your perspective of all of these things.

Now, I don't have time to go into the rest, but just to highlight this again and again in this chapter. Verse 19:

> **He who tills his land will have plenty of food,**
>
> The idea is this person isn't just in it for the money but finds value, nobility, in work. This is this person's contribution to the flourishing of the community, contrasted with:
>
> **But he who follows empty *pursuits*** (We'd call them get-rich-quick schemes) **will have poverty in plenty.**
>
> In other words, those who are passionate about work because it's right and noble will have plenty of food. Those who are living for money may end up with plenty of poverty. It's kind of a play on words.

Verse 20:

> **A faithful** (trustworthy, honorable) **man** (or woman) **will abound with blessings,**
> **But he who makes haste to be rich will not go unpunished.**

Again, the orientation is what matters. What has value? What am I living for? Verse 22:

> **A man with an evil eye** (Evil eye is greedy, a person who is greedy) **hastens after wealth**
> **And does not know that want will come upon him.** (want for all kinds of things that ultimately matter.)

Verse 24, he ends up robbing, disadvantaging his own family. Verse 25:

An arrogant man (This, again, is a greedy person.) **stirs up strife;** (creates conflict)

Verse 27:

He who gives to the poor will never want,
But he who shuts his eyes will have many curses.

Again, the issues of rich and poor. It's not an issue of whether you're rich or poor so much as which path you are traveling. If you travel the path of righteousness, you see these issues through that grid. If you're traveling the path of wickedness, you see these issues through that grid.

The last thing I want to talk about is the issue of sin. So, depending on which path we're on, it affects our perspective of sin. Verse 1:

The wicked flee when no one is pursuing...

Basically the idea is: if my orientation is the law of the jungle, it's a dog-eat-dog world, I've disadvantaged others, so my concern is that others are going to disadvantage me. This is the world I've created so I live with that anxiety; I live with that fear; I live with that concern. So even when no one is pursuing me, I'm fleeing, because it's never safe. That's the world I've created. There's never peace. There's never rest. There's never a sense of everything's okay. I've created a world where it's survival of the fittest and if I don't flee, somebody's going to get me.

Brené Brown, who is a researcher, in one of her TED talks identifies that we in 21st century America are more in debt, more obese, more addicted, and more medicated than any generation in the history of America. She believes all of that roots to stuff inside of us, deep in our hearts, that's never been addressed or resolved, and it creates all these unfortunate external behaviors and habits. It's this whole idea that when that's the world I create, when that's the path I'm on, I can never rest. The alternative:

...But the righteous are bold (confident) **as a lion.**

We know from reading the Psalms and other passages that even if someone *is* pursuing me, I can find refuge; I can be at peace; I can rest. So the idea is the wicked flee even when no one's pursuing but the righteous rest and are at peace even when someone actually is pursuing them, because my confidence is in God. I know where I stand in Christ. *"If God be for me, who can be against me?"* Verse 9:

He who turns away his ear from listening to the law, (meaning God's path)
Even his prayer is an abomination.

Basically the idea is: if you're unwilling to listen to God, then God may be unwilling to listen to you. I am just shocked on a regular basis by how many people I talk to are living their lives on *their* terms. "I'm going to be my own god. Nobody's going to tell me what to do. I'm going to travel my own path. I don't really care what God has to say." And then when calamity hits and it's a mess, they are angry and offended at God because God doesn't bail them out. Well, here's a newsflash: "If you're unwilling to listen to God, then maybe God's not interested in listening to you...certainly until

you're willing to confess and repent." Why would God enable your bad, destructive behavior? Verse 13:

> **He who conceals his transgressions** (he hides his sin) **will not prosper,**
> **But he who confesses and forsakes *them* will find compassion.**

When you travel the path of the wicked, it's a dog-eat-dog world; it's the law of the jungle. The last thing you can afford to do is expose your weakness, expose your sin. You can't be vulnerable; therefore you hide your sin; you conceal your sin; you pretend that it's not there. You try to bury it, which ultimately just destroys you. Contrary to that, **he who confesses** (the word **confess** means to agree with God. "I agree with you, God, this is sin," which implies, then it must stop. I can't say, "God, I agree with you; this is sin," and just keep doing it, which is the second part of the verse: **confesses and forsakes**. We'd probably use the word *repentance*—**forsakes** that behavior. What do you find if you do that? You don't find abuse. You don't find God's going to whack you. What you find is compassion...mercy...grace. You find forgiveness. You find freedom. You find your way back to the path of righteousness that is going to deliver the life that your soul longs for. Verse 14:

> **How blessed is the man who fears always...**
>
> Fear is the word for reverence. When I live my life with humility and brokenness and trembling before a holy God, in other words, I'm submissive to His path. I'm blessed. I'm happy. I'm full.
>
> **But he who hardens his heart will fall into calamity.**

It's a very consistent message in the Book of Proverbs. If this morning you find yourself saying, "I'm not interested in what God has to say; I'm not interested with what you have to say, Preacher; I'll travel my own path; I'll make my own rules; I'll be my own god; I'm going to do this my way;" if you're going to stubbornly bow your neck and say, "Nobody's going to tell me what to do; I'll live my life on my terms," that's up to you. But the consequence is calamity, and you need to know that!

So how do you live skillfully in a despairing and confusing world? It requires an understanding of the difference between the righteous and the wicked and how we view life, how we view money, how we view the things that matter, how we view sin. There's no way really to live skillfully if you don't have an understanding of the righteous and the wicked and how that plays out in our culture. So, I leave you with this question: "Based on what we've discussed this morning, would you say you are righteous or wicked?" I don't know; you tell me. Based on what we've discussed this morning, are you traveling the path of the righteous or the path of the wicked? My prayer is that we will all choose the path of flourishing—that we will *choose* the path of the righteous.

> *Our Father, we are thankful that You have given us a road map to life. Lord, my prayer is that every single one of us here this morning would travel the path of righteousness, that we might experience the flourishing that our souls long for. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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