

¹ My son, if you accept my words
and store up my commands within you,
² turning your ear to wisdom
and applying your heart to understanding—
³ indeed, if you call out for insight
and cry aloud for understanding,
⁴ and if you look for it as for silver
and search for it as for hidden treasure,
⁵ then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God.
⁶ For the LORD gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.
⁷ He holds success in store for the upright,
he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,
⁸ for he guards the course of the just
and protects the way of his faithful ones.

⁹ Then you will understand what is right and just
and fair—every good path.
¹⁰ For wisdom will enter your heart,
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.
¹¹ Discretion will protect you,
and understanding will guard you.

¹² Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men,
from men whose words are perverse,
¹³ who have left the straight paths
to walk in dark ways,
¹⁴ who delight in doing wrong
and rejoice in the perverseness of evil,
¹⁵ whose paths are crooked
and who are devious in their ways.

¹⁶ Wisdom will save you also from the adulterous woman,
from the wayward woman with her seductive words,
¹⁷ who has left the partner of her youth
and ignored the covenant she made before God.
¹⁸ Surely her house leads down to death
and her paths to the spirits of the dead.
¹⁹ None who go to her return
or attain the paths of life.

²⁰ Thus you will walk in the ways of the good
and keep to the paths of the righteous.
²¹ For the upright will live in the land,
and the blameless will remain in it;

²² but the wicked will be cut off from the land,
and the unfaithful will be torn from it.

-- Proverbs 2

Good news, or just more good advice?

I was first introduced to this contrast by one of my Regent professors who insisted that when we preach, we do our best to preach good news and not just good advice. You can find good advice anywhere but only one place has truly good news, and this most distinctive element of the Christian faith is what we all—not just preachers—need to proclaim.

But most often, the kinds of sermons that people most want to hear have to do with receiving good advice. It's just *easier* than hearing a story and then trying to figure out how we fit into it. "*Tell me what to do and I'll do it*" is often on the lips of everyone who steps through these doors. As you may know, this is also what robots want the most: a clear set of instructions that they can carry out *ad nauseum*. It almost goes without saying that God doesn't want us to be robotic minions, he wants us as *friends*.

Not that there's anything *wrong* with good advice or practical teaching. But when all we look for is a set of how-to instructions on living a Godly life, we risk shutting out much of the wonder of discipleship to Jesus. Maybe this is why Jesus' reiteration of the Ten Commandments in the Beatitudes of Matthew 5 are so much less *achievable* than the ones given to Moses—maybe we're to have a sense that wise, skillful Kingdom living is less about following rules and more about being transformed from within. Following an external set of guidelines isn't always a bad idea, but it doesn't get at the place from which everlasting life flows: the heart.

But is Proverbs only a book of good advice? I hope by now you've clearly heard that I'm not against good advice, but I'm not sure it's strong enough medicine for a world that is already swimming in the stuff. What we need is more potent. We need good news.

Not so coincidentally, we have it. As you may know, the word "gospel" comes from the Middle English word "godspell", which means "good news." This is a translation of the Greek word "*euangelion*", from which we get our English words "evangelize" and "evangelical". Now, given that "*euangelion*" was used by the military to describe a message of victory, what are the New Testament authors thinking about when they describe the message of Jesus as "*euangelion*"? Nothing less than the advent of the Kingdom of God. If someone were to ask "what is the gospel?", my simplest answer would be to say "*the rule of our loving, just, and good God is both coming and here.*" For some of us, this doesn't sound like good news. We might think of God as some sort of cosmic killjoy who frowns every time we do something fun. Yet for others who know, a saving God who won't let injustice and suffering go on forever is very good news indeed. And for Christians, the definitive act of God's saving work—the way he goes about fixing things—is in the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus. The upshot? Because of what Jesus has done, and if we place our trust in him, in God's eyes, we are now no longer held responsible for our rebellion against him. We *can* know the living God and enjoy a relationship with him. And because we are in restored relationship with God, we *can* know renewal and resurrection in our relationships with ourselves and with others as well.

In fact, this good news is such a big deal that we can safely say that it supercedes every bit of good advice. This is why whenever I read a book like Proverbs that sounds like a lot of good advice, I get impatient. I've had more than enough good advice and I've given out far too much of it myself. What I starve for—and what I think you long for in your deepest heart of hearts—is to be given good

news. Given the chance, I'd tell you every Sunday from now until the day I die that we no longer live in a world dominated by bad news, but that good news—the best news— has come to us all.

So what place does good advice have in a world that is coming alive with the good news of God's Kingdom? After all, now that the solution's been given, why bother with the things that won't justify or satisfy? What need do we have for good advice? One commentator suggests that a good reason for keeping Proverbs around is like how having a twenty-dollar bill doesn't negate the value of the five dollar bill you started out with. You don't just throw out five dollars just because you have twenty. Yet while that's true, there must be more. In fact, the good news is for me so good that it can't just be four times greater than good advice. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the song that God sings from Genesis to Revelation—Proverbs is a note in its chorus. Therefore the question still remains: where do Christians who have staked their lives in the good news put all this good advice?

My submission to you today is that good advice—especially the kind we encounter in Proverbs— only makes sense in the context of good news. Outside God's alternative reality, Proverbs doesn't make much sense. For example, we read again and again in Proverbs about how the wicked will perish but the righteous will be vindicated, and yet we live in a world where the wicked seem to regularly get away with every kind of evil. Or else Proverbs promises that it's better to eat a crust of dry bread in peace than to feast in a house that's torn apart by strife—yet we all know poverty is often a contributing factor of domestic troubles. However, when we hold these Proverbs against what we know of God as he reveals himself through Scripture, we get a very different picture.

Since God is just, those that unrepentantly commit every kind of evil act will eventually have to face the justice of God. Maybe not in this life, but certainly on the other side of death, those who refuse to live according to the rule of love for God and for neighbour will face the consequences. And since God is very interested in peaceful relationships in and outside the home, we can trust that it *is*

actually more blessed to eat humble food in love than to gorge ourselves while the world around us burns.

Without some kind of radical restoration wherein God is revered as the one true God, the wisdom of Proverbs comes across sounding a little limp. After all, why bother with righteousness and justice if living this way only hinders your plans? The best option of this world is never to love God or even love your neighbour. What works best is to look out for yourself and to step on those who get in your way. Think about how much further you could go in business if you didn't have to worry about honest measures and accurate weights. Think about how much more sexual pleasure you could have if you acquired multiple husbands and wives.

Yet in God's economy—his house rules—we are assured that living for ourselves and our self interests is never the way we ought to live. This is because with the advent of his Kingdom, the rules of reality have changed. In this restored version of reality, to love your neighbour and pray for your enemies is the most rewarding way to live. To be honest in all our dealings—including the way we deal with ourselves—is now the way that profits us the most. It may not feel this way, but with God's alternative reality slowly working its way into becoming the *only* reality, the old order and the old ways are passing on.¹ The new has come.²

Since the good advice of Proverbs is only comprehensible inside the good news of the Kingdom of God, we need to be careful about how we pursue practical teaching. Though it's nice to have ladder rungs which we can grasp and measure our progress, the great temptation of this is that we boil down what is a dynamic dance with the living God into a forced march. Much of the joy of following Jesus comes from not quite knowing what happens next nor how well we're doing. This is on purpose—we aren't to follow some rigid plan of growth because discipleship isn't quite so simple.

¹ Rev 21:4

² 2 Cor 5:17

When it comes to following Christ, one size does *not* fit all. Yet as we discover that our justification with the living God has been taken care of, the burden to prove ourselves worthy of grace falls from our shoulders. We learn to live joyfully because we learn to trust that as we remain in Christ, we bear much fruit.

Yet how, then, do we take Proverbs' good advice? The truth is, we *do* need to struggle with applying the truth of our risen Lord and his Kingdom into our lives. We *are* to take the good news spoken to us and then live it out. But since the good news is spoken to *us*, good advice must also be given and taken *in community*. Utilizing the good advice of Proverbs is a matter of a Body discerning together what it means to live wisely as citizens of the Kingdom of God. Yet in order to do that, we each need to learn to live as though we trust each other with our lives. Then, when we apply good advice to our lives, we do so with the backdrop of being a people of good news. Like Archimedes' boast that with a firm place to stand he could move the world, the gospel of Jesus Christ is the firm place on which we stand as reconciled people. Good advice is the way we move the world. And because we're people who are becoming secure in our identities as sons and daughters of God, we can go ahead with confidence that good advice isn't meant to condemn us, but to grow us even more into the likeness of God.

- 1.) How does good advice change the way we live?
- 2.) How does good news change the way we are?