

“Wise Living: Healthy Relationships”
Proverbs 6:16-19, 10:16, 11:2, 30-31,
13:10, 14:12, 23, 25, 29-30, 15:18, 22,
and 16:28; Matthew 6:25-34

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Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

Proverbs 14, verse 12, says “There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is a way to death.” That’s pretty dramatic. There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is death. That’s a dramatic statement.

It is as I’m thinking about that it’s one of the reasons I am coming around to wisdom again. It doesn’t seem like we spend that much time with biblical wisdom, and yet there is a sense that we have to find a way to make our decisions. We need wisdom in deciding. I was reminded again this week how important it is to think about what kind of source we have for the decisions we make. Is it something just internal? Do we just have all that we need within us? Do we just pay attention to our feelings, and whatever our feelings are, that’s the guide we use? Or is there some kind of source outside of ourselves that we listen to? Is there someone that we respect or some line of thought that we have decided is right? I think it’s really important and it changes how we live and what we do depending on what the source of our decision-making is.

There is a story that addresses this. It happens to be a Chinese story. A woman named Li-Li gets married and she moves in with her husband and her mother-in-law. She can’t stand her mother-in-law. Li-Li thinks her mother-in-law is obnoxious. Finally, she thinks, “I know what to do.” She goes to the doctor and says to him, “I can’t live with my mother-in-law. She’s too obnoxious, so can you give me some poison to give her? It has to be slow-acting so it’s not obvious that I’m doing this.” The doctor says, “OK, but you also have to be really nice to your mother-in-law so people won’t suspect you.” She agrees, so he gives her some stuff. Li-Li starts putting it in her mother-in-law’s food, and treating her really nice. As time goes on, she begins to like her mother-in-law. Now she realizes, “I really like her, but I’m killing her.” She runs back to the doctor and says, “Doctor, is there anything I can give her so that she won’t die now? Is there an antidote?” The doctor looks at her and says, “I gave you vitamins. The only thing poisonous in that conversation was your attitude.”

What we base our decisions on matters. So I want to think about how wisdom influences our decisions. One of the verses we read today about wisdom showing us a different way talked about the way that leads to death, but then another verse says, “The wages of the righteous leads to life.” So I want to start with righteousness. I’m not doing this just because I think righteousness is really important. Proverbs says in Chapter 2, “For the Lord gives wisdom. From his mouth comes knowledge and understanding.” A little further on it says, “Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity and every good path for wisdom will come into your heart.” So over the next couple of weeks we’re going to talk about those things: righteousness, justice, and equity. Today, I would like to start with righteousness.

It's interesting that *righteousness* in Hebrew comes from the word that means "to be straight." So there's something about being righteous that's about being straight. It's interesting when you hear all those verses about lying being crooked. Wisdom denies the value of the lie of being crooked and instead values being straight.

Sometimes it's hard to define something in the positive, so you'll notice there's also a passage we read today that comes at it from the negative. It says six things the Lord hates, seven which are an abomination. It talks about haughty eyes, lying tongues, destruction of the other, wickedness, attentiveness to evil, false witness, and sewing discord in families.

If we think about those negatives, those are the opposite of righteousness. Haughtiness. You may have heard the phrase "Pride goes before the fall." That's also out of Proverbs. There is that perspective in Proverbs that righteousness is the opposite of being haughty. One of those verses talked about being humble, having humility. Then another of the verses says "Lying lips conceal hatred." It's a feeling we have towards somebody else or of a situation. Do you notice that all these things about righteousness are about how we relate to one another?

"Truthful witness saves lives, but the one who lies is a betrayer." I've always thought about how important it was to tell the truth and I realize that a lot of that sense comes out of Proverbs. We get ourselves into a lot less trouble when we don't squirt out all the toothpaste, when we think about what we say before we say it. I don't think most of us think of ourselves as those who are going to take someone's life. Destroying a life is the opposite of righteousness. Righteousness is a giving of life.

A couple of words that I struggled with in that negative side of things were wickedness and evil. What is wickedness? It's a word with so many different connotations that it almost becomes meaningless. But as I looked back on it, it had this sense of vanity in it. What I recognized is that wickedness is the idea of doing something hurtful out of vanity or jealousy. Again, we can flip that and say, "What is righteousness, then, but the opposite?"

And how do we define evil? It's sometimes incredibly hard to define. There was a sense, as I was looking at the definition of evil, that it included being poisonous. Poisonous mischief is a way of thinking about evil. And why do we do poisonous mischief? Oftentimes it's because we want to make ourselves look better or we want to get back at someone else. It's all about relationship.

So as we think about the negative side of things, those are all anti-relationship, anti-righteousness things. Righteousness is about how we do human relationships well.

There's another story that some of you may have heard. It's about a fellow who gets to Heaven—gets to the Pearly Gates, as we like to say—and meets with St. Peter. He says, "I'm really excited about getting to heaven, but I can't help wondering what Hell is like." St. Peter says, "Alright, I'll show you Hell." He takes him to a nice room and there's a large table with a pot of stew in the middle of it. Everybody has a long spoon,

long enough to reach the pot. They can only hold the end of the spoon, so there are all these people who are trying to eat but can't quite do it. Some were really making a mess trying to get the long spoon into their mouths. They couldn't quite do it. They were glum and unhappy and struggling. The man says, "I've seen enough!" He goes with St. Peter to Heaven. He goes in, and the room looks just the same. Again, there's a pot of stew in the middle of the table, and everybody with these long spoons, but everybody is happy and talking to each other and hugging one another—and feeding one another.

That's what righteousness is all about. We've looked at it from the negative perspective, but if we begin to look at it from the positive perspective, it's about feeding one another, about sharing. Or to put it in a clearer definition, *righteousness is decisions, actions, and conduct that bring about, renew, or secure shalom*. They bring about peace. It's about the ways we do things, the decisions, actions, and conduct of our lives, that bring about or renew or secure us living together in peace and grace.

Indeed, Proverbs 11:30 says, "The fruit of the righteous is the tree of life, but violence takes life away." As we think about what God is sharing with us through wisdom, one of those things is righteousness. I sometimes talk about it as right relationship. The trouble with talking about it as right relationship is that we may tend to think there's one right way of doing things. It's more like *healthy relationship*, because there are many ways we can react to each other that are helpful and encouraging and bring about shalom, bring about the harmony of a community, the goodness and grace that we can live together, the ways of sharing.

That's why righteousness is important. It leads to life. God would give us that direction, would help us with that as we listen, as we care for one another, as we share, as we learn not to squirt out the toothpaste, as we listen for the advice God gives us. Proverbs is really not the be-all and end-all; it's like an arrow that points us in the right direction, a guidepost along the way to righteousness. It asks us the question: What is the source that we use to make our decisions? Is it something internal? Is it just our feelings? Is the way I feel today how I'm going to make my decisions today? Or is it something external that guides us and gives us direction, helps us know?

It matters what that external is. What I'm encouraging us to do is to think about how it is the wisdom God gives us. The idea of righteousness is part of that. How do we become righteousness? That is, how do we become those who bring about healthy relationships that help bring peace, show grace, encourage goodness, build each other up? How can we be a blessing to one another? I think that is what Jesus means when he talks about striving for the Kingdom of God.

I encourage us this week to think about what is our attitude like? What is the source we are looking to in making our decisions? What guides our actions, our conduct? How often do we think, "Does this really help secure, renew, bring about a better life for all of us? Shalom? Peace? Grace?" What it makes me realize is that sometimes I need to check my attitude at the door and think about what God wants and how I might share my spoon. Amen.