

Part 18: How to Be Good (and other half-truths)

Tyler Velin | Proverbs 11:29-12:12

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As the seasons are changing in Missoula my family has spent more time outside which generally leads to more frequent discussions with our neighbors.

The other day God turned one of those conversations in a distinctly evangelistic way when my neighbor began to share with me his view on God. He said something that I'm sure you've thought or maybe even heard yourself: "I think that if we try to do what is good and love others that we will all end up in the same place."

Now, here's the rub. Most Christians understand that this is an incomplete statement, yet most non-Christians would agree that we should be good and loving to those who are around us.

But even if you understand that the gospel is not the good news of how good you are to other people, but instead the good news of how good Jesus is to broken sinners, we certainly don't think you shouldn't be kind and loving to other people.

In fact our text today in the book of Proverbs deals almost exclusively with the call Christians have to love and do good to other people. However, when you find out what really saves people before God, it not only defines what good and loving is, but it actually empowers us to do just that in ways unique from our world.

What we are going to see is that God does care how we act towards others, perhaps even more than we think. Yet God's wisdom turns our world upside down. Instead of our goodness and kindness towards others as being what earns us favor with God, it's actually God's favor to us in the gospel which frees us to be good and kind towards others.

Our big picture today is that **Those who are rooted in righteousness bear wonderful fruit for the sake of others.** We are going to see this in four ways today each of which is indicated by Solomon applying a vivid and enduring metaphor to the life of the righteous. First we are going to see **The Winsome Fruit of the Righteous**, then **The Life Giving Root of the Righteous**, thirdly **The Safe House of the Righteous**, and finally **The Gentle and Generous Fruit of the Righteous.**

In addition to our relationships with others, Solomon also includes the contrasting theme of what is solid and enduring with what is fleeting and empty.

We see this contrast almost immediately in our first two verses today: **Proverbs 11:29-30.**

So here we see the big contrast of the day put on stunning display. On one hand the one who troubles his community inherits the wind, and on the other side is the wise of heart who is solid like a tree.

Have you ever tried to capture wind? It should be easy because it's nearly everywhere. Yet, you can never hold it, you can never possess it. In fact if you ever were to capture the wind it stops being wind.

This is the life of those who trouble their own household and their own community. These individuals trouble their community probably in one of two ways. The first is that they are constantly making foolish decisions which have adverse effects on those who are near to them. Solomon warned of this ripple effect in **Proverbs 10:1**.

Or there are those that we see in Proverbs 2:14 those who simply delight in doing evil and rejoice in wrongdoing.

But just like the individual who tried to capture the wind in a jar, as soon as he thinks he has what he wants, he realizes he's already lost it and must search for it again.

All of this is contrasted with the enduring and beneficial nature of the wise. This is where we see our first point today: **The Winsome Fruit of the Righteous**.

Where the foolish person is always a burden to those who are around them the wise are a blessing. Where the foolish person irritates others to gain nothing for himself, the abundant life of the wise satisfies himself and others.

Now, Jesus himself says that we should not be surprised when people hate Christians because people hated Christ himself. Christians will often be opposed on account of the gospel. But two things remain true for the wise of heart. The first is that we should make sure that if we are hated, it is for the gospel and not for our lack of care for others. Yet, secondly, Paul says that Christians are the aroma of Christ. To some this aroma is offensive, but to this aroma is pleasant and leads to life.

This text shows us that generally speaking the life of the wise is meant to be sweet smelling and winsome to those around them.

Solomon says the righteous are wise of heart. A number of times in the book of Proverbs we have run into individuals who "lack sense." In Hebrew the word translated as "sense" and the word translated as "heart" here in verse 30 is the same word.

In contrast to the fools who lack heart there are those who are wise in heart. And in contrast to the offensive and wind-chasing fool, the wise of heart actually woo others to themselves. Last week we saw that we are called to be kind and the word translated as "kind" in Proverbs 12:17 is the Hebrew word for covenant love. The kind believer is made wise of heart because we have encountered God's covenant love in our own heart.

The fool turns away his own household with his lifestyle, but the wise win people by the shape of their heart.

How do you get a heart like this? It grows out of the righteousness we see in **Proverbs 11:30**.

Unlike the inheritance and trouble of the wind, the righteous bear a fruit which is itself a tree!

I can't tell you how many times when I was younger I ate a piece of fruit and buried its seed in the ground wanting a tree to grow out of it. You know how many trees I've grown this way? Zero.

But here the righteous grow up and their fruit is full grown trees!

How can this be? Well remember way back in Proverbs 3 when we were learning about Lady Wisdom? Look at what Solomon said about her: **Proverbs 3:13-18**.

Lady Wisdom is the tree of life and those who have her and hold fast to her are blessed. Now as we've discussed, Lady Wisdom is an allegory for God, and we see in 1 Corinthians 1 that Christ is the fulfillment of Lady Wisdom.

So what is the fruit that falls from the branches of the righteous person? The fruit that falls is the promise of salvation in the tree of life. The fruit that falls from those who are wise of heart is the gospel of Jesus Christ where all who hold onto it by faith are blessed! We drop the gospel everywhere we go.

That's why I love how this verse finishes when it says whoever captures souls is wise.

The foolish individual will live for himself and in so doing never get what he wants and is generally a burden who frustrates those who are around him. But the righteous people, the ones who have experienced the faithfulness of God in salvation, drop daily the hope of the gospel so that they might capture souls.

God's people are meant to be winsome winners of souls as their own life testifies to the gospel of grace which saves and satisfies them. At the end of the book of Daniel, Daniel receives this stunning picture into the future where God redeems his people finally and fully. And look at how the angels concludes this picture: **Daniel 12:3**.

This is a massive paradigm for the church to understand. We want to be wise, we want to have lives shaped by the wisdom of God, but part of being shaped by God's wisdom is a real desire to capture souls, and to turn others to the righteousness of God which saved you in the gospel.

Why does God care about how you interact, love, work and speak to those who are around you? Because God is in the business of capturing souls and he has so chosen to use his people, the church, as a means through which he does just that.

When you assess the motivational and wisdom principles which shape your life, are you consciously thinking about how your life gathers others to Jesus? There is both a challenge and a promise here. The challenge is that you are the one who goes out to the harvest field! You are the one who God has called to gather the souls in this text.

But also we gather not by our own power but by the power of the gospel. We are not pointing them to ourselves, we are pointing them to a tree sufficient in itself to save all who lay hold of it: A tree of life seen most clearly as the tree of death, the cross where Jesus went to die for those who are dead in their sin so that they might be made alive by his mercy.

The old Scottish pastor Horatius Bonar wrote to pastors what Solomon is writing to us all when he said: **"The question, therefore, which each of us has to answer to his own conscience is, "Has it been the end of my ministry, has it been the desire of my heart to save the lost and guide the saved? Is this my aim in every sermon I preach, in every visit I pay? Is it under the influence of this feeling that I continually live and walk and speak? Is it for this I pray and toil and fast and weep? Is it for this I spend and am spent, counting it, next to the salvation of my own soul, my chiefest joy to be the instrument**

of saving others? Is it for this that I exist? To accomplish this would I gladly die? Have I seen the pleasure of the Lord prospering in my hand? Have I seen souls converted under my ministry? Have God's people found refreshment from my lips and gone upon their way rejoicing."

This is a noble goal, but how might we actually live such lives? Well certainly we share the gospel as frequently, intentionally and humbly as we possibly can.

But in order for us to do this, we must first understand the gospel. In other words before we can become winsome to others we need to understand how we have been won to God himself! Seeing how Jesus saves us is not only the footing for our words, but the foundation of our lives before others.

Before Solomon turns us back towards our relationships with other people in our life, he pauses to remind us of our relationship with God himself. This is our second point: **The Life Giving Root of the Righteous.**

Read with me **Proverbs 11:31-12:3**

How we understand our own relationship to God always shapes how we understand our relationship to others. If we deny that a God exists then we reserve the right to define what is good and loving by our own standard. Which means that we answer the question of "What is good?" by asking, "Good for whom?" What might be good for you is not good for someone else, so at some point we get to make our own qualitative decisions of who is the beneficiary of what is good.

But if we believe there is a God yet think we must perform well enough to earn our own salvation then we also view those around us as either tools we can use to elevate our own performance, or threats which make us insecure about our own standing.

But here the wise are learning to see our relationship to God through the lens that God himself is providing and this shapes how we interact with others.

At first glance doesn't it seem that this passage sounds a lot like what my neighbor believed about God: If you do good and love others, you'll win God's favor. We see that don't we! We see that God has promised to reward the righteous and punish the wicked. There's the equation: Do good, get good.

But for anyone who thinks we can earn God's favor by being good enough, there's this middle verse which really throws a wrench in our thoughts. What is that wrench? Discipline.

Why would anyone who is trying to earn favor by their efforts or live a good life by their own works love discipline? Doesn't discipline assume a failure? And wouldn't we then fear that? But those who fear discipline are here called stupid!

How do we understand both our need for correction but also balance God's just judgment of the sinner? By understanding the root which holds us in the storm of judgment.

When we encounter "righteousness" in Proverbs it is the doorway to the gospel. Yes, on one side of the door is the responsibility for you to live, pursue and love what is right and not what is wrong, but the entrance to this door is the righteousness of God which is given to those who love him.

No one is established by wickedness, but the root of the righteous is never moved.

In Isaiah 54 God is sharing with Israel their hope for deliverance and look at what he says: **Isaiah 54:14**. God is promising to establish his people in righteousness! And look at what follows in **Isaiah 55:1-3**.

The reality of repayment is burdensome. Each action that we do in our lives will be punished and rewarded for what it is. The problem is that we know the scale will not tip in our favor. I heard someone pose a question that if those around you could hear all of your thoughts for a day, would anyone want to be your friend?

Our hearts and our minds are inward on our own wicked desires and away from God. But here God calls to those who are weary to come to him. Jesus picks up this text in Isaiah and says this **Matthew 5:6**.

How will they be satisfied? By coming to Jesus who takes all their unrighteous, wicked acts of sin and pays the price in his own body and gives us his perfect score of righteousness. This is what it means to be established in righteousness, to take Christ's by faith.

And when we do that we are able to understand ourselves, our failings and our strengths more clearly because we see that all we have is dependent upon all who Jesus is to us.

Perhaps you've driven around Missoula and seen some of trees that were uprooted by the windstorm we had a number of months ago. What you also see is that though the roots went out, they did not go deep. But the root of Christ's righteousness drives our souls deeper and deeper into the steadfastness of mercy and favor of God.

This is what we get to call others into! This is the wonderful message of hope in the face of judgement.

But just as receiving God's righteousness shapes our standing before him it also shapes the way we interact with others. When we see all we have in Jesus we are able to fulfill the greatest commandments to love the Lord with all our heart and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

In other words we are able to interact with others in a righteous and Christlike way because we really believe that living out Jesus' righteousness in our life is the best life for us and for others even when it's difficult in a broken world.

Solomon gives two practical examples of what this application looks like in closing. The first is **The Safe House of the Righteous**.

Read with me **Proverbs 12:4-7**.

As we go on in the book of Proverbs the pace of the Solomon's proverbial teaching becomes tighter and punchier. The beauty of Proverbs is that each of these can be a sermon in itself! Which means that I encourage you to spend time this week looking back at the individual verses here and to just sit and chew on each one.

As you do that work I promise you will find some immediately practical help in each one. However, what I'm trying to do as Solomon picks up the pace, is to show the general sense of what Solomon is saying.

The general sense of what we just saw in the verses 4-7 is that the righteous refuse to hurt, harm or steal from their own community to get what they already have in the gospel.

From a humanistic perspective we are generally predatorial, offensive, or mean towards others as a sort of self-preservation. We put down others, take from others and manipulate others in order to protect or experience our own security or well-being.

This shapes the small seemingly insignificant decisions like reserving the coffee cup which has a little bit more for yourself and giving the less full one to your spouse to the bigger decisions like taking physical intimacy from your boyfriend or girlfriend which is only meant to be taken by their spouse.

But the promise Solomon gives is that though our own hearts scheme, and perhaps are schemed against, those who pursue wicked will be overthrown. But the righteous live in a safe house.

We've seen the theme of this house before when it spoke of Lady Wisdom's house in **Proverbs 9:1-6**.

As we go about our lives and interact with those who are around us, we have the privilege of giving people a glimpse into life in this house. By grace we get to live in the house built by Jesus where all our needs of belonging and security have been met by his blood!

Which means now we have the privilege of being a representative of this eternal safety with our own lives. Our lives are places where others get glimpses into the safe enduring care of Jesus Christ. When people encounter you do they encounter a heart satisfied in the provision of the gospel which makes them feel safe? Or do they encounter a heart which is still willing to take from others what it can only receive by grace?

Solomon's last point talks largely about the way in which the righteous person thinks about himself and others. This is where we see our final point: **The Gentle and Generous Fruit of the Righteous**.

Read with me **Proverbs 12:8-12**. Don't we see the gentle and generous heart of the one who has "good sense"?

What good sense this is! Here we see a person so kind that they consider even the lives of their animals to be significant. A person so clear headed that they are content putting their hand to the daily tasks of life instead of constantly longing for something unattainable!

We can only have a good sense like this when God opens our eyes to see the beauty of Jesus in the gospel!

The gospel makes us humble and gentle. It frees us from constantly searching for the praise of man. I love the illustration Solomon uses in verse 9. What he's basically saying is that it's better to be thought less of by others but to be well thought of by those who know you than well thought of by your social media friends but to be unloving to those who are near to you.

What a message for our fear of man driven world!

Better to be someone who has a job which seems insignificant in light of worldly aspirations but who sets his your to the plow of working for the Lord in everything than to have the job title of glory but to

be absent minded about God's glory. Better to be seen as a boring man who rarely takes his wife out but who loves her like Jesus loves her than a man who affords her the fanciest hotel but loves her poorly. Better to be a parent who looks like their home is out of control but who raises their kids to love and obey God than to have a Pinterest ready home with kids empty of grace.

When can we actually pursue such paradoxes? When we realize we stand in God's favor because of Jesus Christ. If Jesus stands in our defense, we can let the skeptics bark. But those who know us, and know our reality, experience the warmth of the gospel at every junction.

The wicked always want what they never can have and this makes them greedy and generally unwilling to share what they do have. But the righteous bear fruit. Fruit enough for them and enough for others.

And look at this fruit: **Galatians 5:19-23**.

The righteous have been rooted in the gospel so that they might produce a fruit which they can share with others. Look at all this wonderful bounty which by grace can fall from your limbs!

When can we find ourselves satisfied with these fruits? When can we generously give these fruits to those around us? Only when we become comfortable with the righteousness given to us in Jesus Christ, only when we have been established by the root of the gospel which frees us from fear, from selfishness, and from our own judgment.

Being so established by the fruit of Jesus's gospel of grace, let us seek to be fruitful disciple makers, evangelists and neighbors to those around us for we have an enduring hope that this really is the lasting life.