

Part 22: How to Relate to Others (And maybe find justice along the way)

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Justice. Social Justice. Social Justice Warrior.

My guess is that for each of us the word “justice,” and each adjective added to the word causes us some sort of involuntary reaction. In a 24/7 news cycle we are forced to encounter and process our thoughts on racism, poverty, criminal justice, immigration, fraud and political activism.

One of the wonderful privileges of our study in the book of Proverbs is that it allows us to think slowly in a rapid response world. This will be a topic we will address more in a couple weeks.

But this discipline is needed all the more when it comes to how we view our understanding of justice. To over generalize there are typically two camps when it comes to the word. Each camp is admirable in one area, and lacking in another. The first camp cries: "Justice or bust!" For these individuals they rightly understand the weight of justice and equality, two topics which the Bible speaks on very clearly and expects from Christians. But their fault is perhaps in how they define justice and the role justice plays in correcting what sin has distorted.

The other camp cries: "Justice for whom?" These individuals realize that something has to be the basis of justice. Equality undefined will create anarchy. But their fault is often that in the face of a broken world they perhaps are resigned to the fact that justice is so complex and convoluted that they don't actually understand the weight and responsibility that the Bible expects Christians to carry in their own lives.

The problem for each of these is the same when it comes to the Bible's diagnosis. They each lack wisdom. It's very easy to flatten justice into everything or crush it into nothing, but the wisdom of Proverbs refuses to let us think about justice and ethics too simplistically.

When Solomon talks about justice, he's really talking to us about how we relate to others. This relationship is a significant fruit of wisdom. Look with me at the three ways in which he describes this in **Proverbs 1:2-3**. What does wisdom produce: righteousness, justice and equity. Look again at **Proverbs 2:9-10**.

In other words the fruit of God's wisdom in life is that you personally understand righteousness as it relates to our own uprightness in life, justice as it relates to judgements and decisions in the life of others, and equity, equality or fairness in how you treat and speak to others. To put it simply for the sake of us today, justice is simply one piece of God's relational ethics. An ethic is a framework which shapes what we think about what is wrong and what is right. If you ever plan on relating or living with other people in this world, you need a relational ethic which shapes your understanding of righteousness, justice and equity. But just as we've seen with righteousness in Proverbs, justice is also relational, not only towards others, but towards God.

In fact look at how Solomon puts it in **Proverbs 28:5**. Our world speaks often and always about justice. But if we want to know justice, if we want to understand it completely, we must seek the Lord who is just. Christians ought to be leaders in this area because Christians see Jesus most clearly.

Where our world, and both justice camps, often talk about justice as something out there, Solomon shows us that justice is actually something in here and it's the result of how we view ourselves, how we view others, and how we view God. Justice as the world speaks of it is really the fruit of relational wisdom as God speaks of it. That is what we are going to see today. In Proverbs 14 we are going to look at relational wisdom in three ways: **Relational wisdom is realizing that your neighbor matters**, **Relational wisdom is realizing that your own actions matters**, and lastly **Relational wisdom is realizing that God matters**.

Let's begin by looking at our first few verses today: **Proverbs 14:20-21**, and we will also look at **Proverbs 14:31**.

Here we see our first point this morning: **Relational wisdom is realizing that your neighbor matters**.

Now this text shows how sticky the issue of relational wisdom, righteousness, justice and equity really is. Because at first glance we might think that this text is about generosity. That is where it ends: "blessed is the one who is generous to the poor."

We will see this theme a lot in Proverbs and those who have ought to share with those who have not. But Solomon is actually after something bigger than generosity, and something which generosity in itself cannot fix. And that is the disposition of our hearts towards favoritism and partiality.

What actually struck me most in my study of Proverbs this week is that we often strip relationships out of the context of justice. But central to Solomon's justice is how we befriend people and our motives behind our relationships.

Here the poor person doesn't have friends, he is disliked and even hated. But the rich person has many friends. Look at how this is put again in **Proverbs 19:4-7**.

Here is why these passages were so convicting for me this week. Later on Solomon will talk about lying in court to get rich. He talks in verse 31 about oppressing the poor. A constant reprieve in the book is a person who accepts a bribe to distort justice but comfort himself. When I read this, and perhaps when you read this, we give ourselves stellar grades.

But this is why Proverbs so wonderfully irritating. Solomon is not simply after not defrauding people, but he's actually after how we befriend people. People who in this specific proverb are characterized as poor. Now it's not that I don't have friends who make less money than me. But the categories in which Solomon often speaks of these marginalized people are those who cannot add much material benefit to the relationships.

There are six Hebrew words used in Proverbs to describe those who are often marginalized and at risk. In the ESV they are translated under five categories: the poor, the needy, the afflicted, the widow and the orphan.

The poor without friends in Proverbs 14 is a word which reflects monetary lack, and the poor without friends in Proverbs 19 is the one who is insignificant. It's root means to become little or tiny.

In other words the bigger contrast that Solomon is after is not just that we don't like the poor and we like the rich, it's that we are prone to relationships where it's easy to get and less prone to ones where it's more likely to give.

That's not to say we don't give, many of us exchange services like childcare, but only to those who we would trust to watch our own kids, or we would willingly watch their kids. Many of us invite people over for dinner, but often do we only invite those who we would want to also invite us to their house? We offer to help out when someone is sick, but only to people who we know are able to also help us when we are sick. This is not only a critique for why we turn away from the poor in our midst, but also a critique of how you might be burdening the rich in our midst. Is the subtle presupposition in our life the relational expectation of: "What can you provide for me" or even worse, "You owe me."

But Solomon says to look at the neighbor who is near you, and to turn away from them because it would appear that in their insignificance or their poverty they can offer you nothing is to not only despise your neighbor but it is to sin.

Look at how James put this in the New Testament context, and note how his example is very literally two people walking into the church gathering and how they might be treated: **James 2:1-9**.

Now sin naturally turns all of us inward. It is God's grace that there are some people who naturally draw us towards them because they look, act, think, dress, and spend like us. It's a grace that some people are easy to invite over for lunch after church. But that's why we must be intentional to make sure we are willing to befriend our neighbors who don't look, act, dress, or spend like us.

One of risks of these marginalized groups in Proverbs is that they have no friend. Look at **Proverbs 18:23**. The poor have to go to great length to be heard winsomely and even then they are often answered harshly. When they are extorted due to their marginalization, they have no advocate. When they are stolen from they have no one with which to share a meal. The first step to fighting for justice is a step of fighting for biblical friendship. That's a friendship which realizes the greatest common denominator we share with the neighbors in our midst.

Look at **Proverbs 14:31**. How can we begin to be generous with our relationships and our resources with those who are around us? We realize that they too are made in the image of God. They are made by the Maker himself. Proverbs 22:2 says, "The rich and the poor meet together; the Lord is the maker of them all."

What do you share in common with the person who looks to have nothing to offer? You share the same creator God who has called each of us to repent and to enjoy his love forever. Do you know this Maker? Consider how the Apostle Paul speaks of him: **Romans 11:33-35**.

Do you know this Lord? Who has been able to give God a gift worthy enough to stimulate God's generosity towards us? Whose perfection is so resplendent that it complements the eternal glory of God himself? Who adds splendor to the God who existed in triune perfection for all eternity? None of us, but God in his mercy moved towards those who could give him nothing because he loved them.

How much more should we seek to recognize the relational responsibility we have with those around us and consider them how God considers them instead of through the eyes of a consumer.

Jesus cared for us who were far from him by sharing with us what he himself earned and we in our sin squandered, a perfect relationship with God. He did it at a great cost because he loved us. This should be the shaping influence for how we view our neighbors in our own life.

When Jesus was asked to define who his neighbor was when it came to love and care, he answered with the parable of the Good Samaritan. The point of the parable was that the neighbor is one who is near to you in regards to responsibility and need. So for you today, think in terms of nearness. If you're wondering who your neighbor is the New Testament helps us identify, spheres of priority where we find our neighbors. The first is your family or roommates, the second is your church, third would be those in your neighborhood or at your work. And they go out from there.

We can't take care of the needs or be friends with everyone, but God in his providence has laid the foundation of your homes and drawn the boundaries of your life so that you might see people how God sees you and care for them at whatever level you are able.

This is how we are to view others. But now Solomon turns to how we are to view our own lives. Read with me **Proverbs 14:22-25**.

Here we see our second point today: **Relational wisdom is realizing that our actions matter.**

I love how Solomon opens this passage here because he speaks of those who devise evil.

I watched something the other day which exposed then length at which phone scammers go through to devise evil. They prey, particularly on the elderly, by saying they are due some money as a refund. They offer the help walk them through the process which includes the download of a program which gives the scammer access to their bank accounts. They share personal details with the victim to lull them into a false sense of security and then they "accidentally" over pay the victim and ask the victim to return the money by sending it in cash to the call center employee.

The scheme is so complex and elaborate that it is unfortunately an extremely profitable line of work.

How many of you devise evil like this? My guess is that few of us do.

However, Solomon here calls us to go to the same lengths to devise what is good. Why? This is why the Bible is so wonderful and God so amazing. Why do we want to go to great lengths to scheme what is good and righteous? Not just because it's ethical, but because it's deeply rewarding.

What are we rewarded with? The steadfast love and covenantal faithfulness of God himself. The more we walk in faithfulness to Jesus the more wonderful we find the love of Jesus. This is the joy of wisdoms relational ethic!

What does it look like to devise good like this? I think that's an awesome discussion for you to have on the way home from church. But here Solomon gives us two clear examples.

The first example: **Work hard. Proverbs 14:23-24.**

Solomon just told us to share with those who have not, but here he prevents us from thinking that we can just sit around on our hands and wait for someone else to give us what we need. He says work! Work hard!

Now poverty is not a sin. In fact Solomon, Jesus, and James all warn of the difficulties of being rich and even recommend that life lived as a poor person has benefits over life lived as a rich person. More than that, how much or how little you have is from God himself. In fact in Ecclesiastes 5:19, Solomon says that whatever you make and whatever you possess as a result of your work is a gift of God. Some people have much, some people have little.

This is where it is important to note in today's political word that poverty itself is not always a sign of injustice. It is true that injustice preys on poverty and that injustice can compound poverty. But Jesus himself says the poor you will always have. To say someone's economic status is a one to one parallel to how they are valued is to make a point the Bible never makes. Instead there will be those who make more and there will be those who make less, both need Jesus, both can honor God and both are to walk in righteousness, justice and equity.

However, the Proverbs does make it clear that sometimes poverty is caused not by God's gracious gift, but by your own foolish actions. The one who refuses to work, the sluggard and the sloth, reap their own poverty.

Talk is cheap, Solomon says, go to work. Toil and trust God.

The wise earn their wealth, and so too can you. Now I need to qualify this. Not everyone will be wealthy, but Solomon's point here is that the wise are diligent to work and in that find their reward but the fool refuses to work and in so doing brings folly.

You were made to work, even the wealthy, even those who are retired, God wants you to work, to toil, why? Because we were made to contribute to the glory of God by working to care for those around us and to honor God with the skills that he gave us.

As we work hard we are able to provide for our own needs, and those who are rewarded with more in their work are able to provide for the need of others as well. As a Christian we ought to be diligent to use our wages in a way that is faithful to God and to others. Consider **Proverbs 22:9**.

Work hard, trust Jesus and share with others.

But the second principle of devising good returns back to the issue of partiality. Look at **Proverbs 14:25**.

What's the second principle? ***Speak Up***. Don't be a vehicle for injustice, but instead speak what is true even when it's less rewarding than what is false. The same word for equity in Proverbs 1:3 shows up in Proverbs 8:6 where Solomon says they will speak what is right, or what is fair and true.

The gates of the city in Proverbs was the local courthouse. It's where witnesses were called when there were disputes about payments, conflicts and crimes.

Unfortunately one common occurrence in ancient Israel was that hired workers would be denied pay by their employers. In fact the word in Proverbs for "oppressed" is a word with deep economic significance. They are being oppressed because they are not being paid at all, they are being cheated out of what was owed to them.

Look at how this theme is actually interwoven in a passage we already looked at which spoke of our relationship to the vulnerable: **Proverbs 19:4-9**.

Again look at this issue in **Proverbs 22:22**.

What's the principle here? That we would see and say along with what is true regardless of what it looks like.

To speak for a moment in a political sense a truthful witness has the responsibility to point out where more policy might not be helping the issue and maybe even contributes to it. But it also looks like opening our eyes to our neighbors and saying in truthfulness, that there are issues that one way or another need to be addressed. Such truth doesn't fit neat political categories but it does fit into the Bible's understanding of truthful witnesses.

It's true that cheaper goods, or political clout might come with a little bit of defrauding here or there. But as Christians we see these riches gained hastily do not profit.

Biblical wisdom opens our eyes to witness what we see and speak truthfully and wisely towards it. We are not biased towards the rich, nor skewed towards the poor but instead we are faithful to God in all that we see and say.

There's an important principle here which challenges and relieves us. It challenges us that Christians should be involved personally as it relates justice and social aid. But it relieves the infinite burden by again stressing you are primarily responsible for that which is nearest and most known by you. The witnesses at the gate are called because he or she is close enough to the situation that they know or have an interest in what is going on.

We cannot and will not be able to make all injustice justice, but we can influence with righteousness in the places that God has currently placed us. In this area the responsibility of wisdom's relational ethic can be boiled down into three clauses: That we would be as faithful to God as we can, with what resources God has given us, in the community God has placed us.

But this is what leads us into our last point today: **Relational wisdom is realizing that God matters.**

Read with me: **Proverbs 14:26-27**.

So here after a series of verses which deal with primarily issues of justice, compassion and ethics, here we encounter two powerful verses on the fear of the Lord.

We've defined the fear of the Lord in Proverbs as a reverent reliance upon God. The fear of the Lord is trusting that God is able to keep all of his promises for us if we do the difficult work of trusting in him even when life is hard because we stand by faith in Jesus Christ.

Here we see that the fear of the Lord does two things for us as it relates to relational wisdom. The first thing it does it comforts us (***The Fear of the Lord Comforts Us***).

The fear of the Lord gives us strong confidence, and provides a refuge for our children.

As much as our world loves justice, it thinks little of righteousness. But biblically speaking you can't separate the two. There will be times where our responsibility to care for our own brothers and sisters in the church, and to care for those in our community in a way that God calls us to might not look like what the world says justice needs to look like.

There will be times where helping the poor, living generously, befriending the weak, helping the afflicted, choosing what is righteous, just and equitable might put you at odds with the consumer comforts you enjoy in life. There might be times where walking in righteousness and devising what is good might cost you relationships and even your job.

But in these moments we drive our hope deep into the fear of the Lord. That God will not forsake those who seek what is righteous. And for those who seek Christ we have his righteousness which delivers from death itself.

Our greatest problem is not the injustice of the world but the divine justice of God which hangs over the head of each and every one of us. But for those who come to Christ, Christ is sufficient to share the abundance of his life with us because he took the just punishment for our sins.

All of our thoughts on justice are meant to lead us here. Look at **Proverbs 29:26**.

It is God who is just. Justice exists because God does. He is the basis of it and we see the wonderful promise of God in **Proverbs 14:32**.

What is the promise? The promise is not that we will accomplish full justice in this world, the promise is that God one day will. The wicked will be destroyed, but the righteous who are hidden in Christ find refuge in their death. What does that mean? It means that in the same moment the wicked are judged, the righteous are justified. Not by what they did, but by what Jesus did in his life and death.

We can look at passages where justice is promised to roll like a river and we can know and hope that it is not a wish dream but that it will actually happen. Not by anything we do, but by what God himself will one day do.

Justice will reign because God will reign. Here is your hope, come and be saved by this God.

But there is a second thing a fear of the Lord does: ***The Fear of the Lord Compels Us***. The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life that one may turn away from the snare of death.

Because we know that we are safe in the redemption of Christ and that God will ultimately defend the cause of the oppressed, we don't fear oppression as we seek to live out righteous lives. We turn away from sin and fear no consequence. We care for our neighbor as God has called us to and know that this fountain of life will not grow dry even as we pour it out.

We pursue wisdom, righteousness, justice and equity even though we know none of those things will be accomplished until God himself accomplishes it. We pursue what is right in our own hearts, in response to God, and towards others because we trust that all of it will matter someday even if it looks small and insignificant in our day.

Look at how Jesus himself described this tension in **Luke 14:12-14**.

We get to turn away from sin and turn towards generous God honoring choices because we know that in Christ Jesus we have life eternal in the resurrection of the just. We know we will stand before God robed in the riches of Christ then, so we can serve Christ and love others in this world now. This is the sum of relational ethics and this is our hope as individuals and as the church.