

A Memorable Commencement

6th Weekend of Easter – May 20/21, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Proverbs 24:23-34 (The Message)

It's wrong, very wrong,

to go along with injustice.

Whoever whitewashes the wicked

gets a black mark in the history books,

But whoever exposes the wicked

will be thanked and rewarded.

An honest answer

is like a warm hug.

First plant your fields;

then build your barn.

Don't talk about your neighbors behind their backs—

no slander or gossip, please.

Don't say to anyone, "I'll get back at you for what you did to me.

I'll make you pay for what you did!"

One day I walked by the field of an old lazybones,

and then passed the vineyard of a lout;

They were overgrown with weeds,

thick with thistles, all the fences broken down.

I took a long look and pondered what I saw;

the fields preached me a sermon and I listened:

"A nap here, a nap there, a day off here, a day off there,

sit back, take it easy—do you know what comes next?"

Just this: You can look forward to a dirt-poor life,

with poverty as your permanent houseguest!"

*It's graduation season. So many people, young and old,
moving on to the next stage of their lives. So many speeches.*

So much celebration. So much hope.

What if God were the commencement speaker?

How to Go Wrong with the Book of Proverbs

Dillard and Longman remind us that there are a few ways we could go wrong when we come to the book of Proverbs.

First, we can make the proverbs out to be absolutes, divine promises that always bear out. However, the proverbs themselves reflect truths that will bear out over time. You and I know that the good guys do not always win in this life. But our time frames are not limited to this life. God is a mighty fortress even for those who die at the hands of evil.

Second, we need to read the proverbs in the context of all Scripture. Read alone, the proverbs would lead us to believe that success is God's blessing and suffering is his curse. But the book of Job reminds us that things are not that simple. Yes, sin always carries with it terrible consequences that may not be immediately evident. But at the same time, suffering does not necessarily imply sin. Stuff happens and much of it we don't understand. Job certainly didn't.

Third, as highlighted in this study, always read the pithy aphorisms that make up much of the book in the context of the first eight chapters. Will we choose Wisdom or folly? Everything starts there.

It is the time of year for commencement speakers. Each year seems to bring new controversies about one invited speaker or another. This year, the headlines are about John McCain going to Liberty University and Condoleeza Rice to Boston College. Can we imagine the headlines if God were to be booked as a speaker? What might God say?

Transitions

Words can be so very revealing. "Graduation" is an ending word; "commencement," a beginning word. Every graduation (or commencement!) marks an ending and a beginning, the transition from one stage to another. And late each spring, there are tens of thousands across America, celebrating millions of graduates/commencers. Commencements are a universal experience in our society. There are kindergarten commencements, fifth-grade, eighth-grade, high school, and beyond. And even as adults, transitions from one stage to the next mark the progress of our lives, though it is easy to underestimate their importance. Commencement speakers are speaking to us all.

Today, we'll try to imagine that the book of Proverbs is a commencement address, God's commencement address. Like most of the commencement addresses I've heard (and I've heard more than my share!), the book of Proverbs is filled with lots of good advice. Look at today's passage: fight wickedness, be honest and prudent, don't gossip, no payback, work hard. Pretty hard to go wrong with

any of that. Indeed, wise pithy sayings are how most of us think of the book of Proverbs, but God is too good a commencement speaker to simply knit one piece of advice after another into a speech.

Wisdom

The book of Proverbs does not open with the good, practical advice that we associate with Proverbs. Instead, the first third of the book is an extended presentation of the value of wisdom and the danger of folly. In an extended metaphor, a young man is wooed by two women, Wisdom and Folly. Surprisingly, both women in the metaphor live in the highest point in the city (Proverbs 9:3 and 9:14), a place reserved in all ancient near-eastern cities as the place of god(s).¹ What are *both* Wisdom and Folly doing there?

Israel had always been tempted to worship other gods, Baal being the chief god in the Canaanite pantheon. It is the priests of Baal that Elijah takes on at the great competition recounted in 1 Kings 18. Thus, the choice offered between Wisdom and Folly in the book of Proverbs is a choice between the LORD God and Baal. Who will the Israelites follow? Who, or what, will we follow? Who is our god? Will our god be money or time or career or family or flag or the “divine within” or spirituality? Or will our god be the one true God?

This choice is the most important choice any of us ever make in our lives. Scripture always casts the choice in stark terms – the way of the wise v. the way of the foolish, the narrow path or the broad, for

Jesus – Wisdom Teacher

If you are using the *Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible* to read through the Bible this year, you may have been struck by Ben Witherington’s notes on the Gospel of Matthew. He helps us to see that when we see Jesus as teacher and rabbi, we are seeing Wisdom (as in Proverbs) at work.

Witherington writes, “In the Jewish tradition, ultimately Wisdom was *the* teacher of God’s people. . . . Matthew assigns this role of Wisdom as *the* teacher to Jesus himself. . . . In his resurrection Jesus becomes *the* Teacher who continues teaching and guiding his people how to live.”

This does not mean that Jesus was merely a dispenser of sage advice. Rather, Jesus used the Wisdom forms like proverbs and parables to convey the message that the Kingdom of God was arriving in himself.

We tend to think of wisdom as an abstraction. But for the Jews, Wisdom was the expression of the living God. Wisdom was one of several cherished symbols for God and God’s work in the world. The book of Proverbs personifies Wisdom as a woman who exercises a commanding presence over the city, as God does – for God is Wisdom. The Gospel writers depict Jesus as Wisdom in person, wisdom you could talk to and touch. And, further, if Wisdom connotes God and God’s work and Jesus is Wisdom in person, then . . . Jesus is God. Jesus as Wisdom is another means by which the first Christians came to embrace Jesus as divine, despite what Dan Brown would have you believe.

God or against God. We can’t have it both ways. There is no room for compromise. The Laodiceans thought they could be lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, and Jesus spit them out of his mouth (Revelation 3:14-22).

It is this choice that God lays out before us in the first part of the commencement speech, for unless we embrace God as the foundation of our life from which all things follow, there isn’t much point in reading on the book of Proverbs. Without God, Proverbs becomes nothing more than yet another self-help book – and who needs another one of those.

Seeing God’s wisdom at work

By beginning the commencement speech (alright . . . the book of Proverbs) with the choice between Wisdom and Folly, God reshapes the specific advice that follows. If we choose Folly, the way of the world, then all the specific advice in the proverbs becomes nothing more than helpful tips that might get you further in life, depending on what your goals.

But if we choose Wisdom, the way of God, then all the proverbs become infused with God-awareness and God-purpose. For example, one of the proverbs from today’s reading urges us to forgo revenge. This is certainly counter to how many people think the world ought to work. And even for those who might embrace the advice, chances are it is because they know what a vengeful heart does to themselves.

But if we come to this beginning with God, then foregoing vengeance can be seen to be a reflection of God’s own character, the God who refused to abandon his people or even return hurt for hurt. Fighting injustice becomes a reflection of a just God. Hard work and prudence become a commitment to use well all that God has entrusted to us.

¹From Dillard and Longman’s, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, Zondervan, 1994. Only one person could build on the highest point in a city and that was the city’s god. Thus, God’s temple in Jerusalem was built on the highest point within the city walls.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

May 21 - 27

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.
Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 A day for reflection and catching up</p>	<p>Day 2 1 Samuel 20-22; Proverbs 27:15-27 The friendship of David and Jonathan; Saul descends further into madness and murder</p>
<p>Day 3 1 Samuel 23-25; Proverbs 28:1-14 David spares Saul's life; Samuel dies</p>	<p>Day 4 1 Samuel 26-28; Proverbs 28:15-28 David spares Saul a second time; Saul's descent is complete as he consults a medium</p>
<p>Day 5 1 Samuel 29-31; Proverbs 29:1-14 David confronts the Philistines again; Saul's sons are killed in battle and he commits suicide.</p>	<p>Day 6 Philippians; Proverbs 29:15-27 This is the most personal of all Paul's letters, written from prison.</p>
<p>Day 7 2 Samuel 1-3; Proverbs 30 David mourns and is anointed king of the tribe of Judah</p>	

Sermon Notes

May Book Recommendation

Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense, by N.T. Wright

Even a casual reader of these studies has probably noticed how foundational Bishop Wright is to my work and my understanding of God, Jesus, and the Bible. A couple of months ago, Bishop Wright released a new book that I will recommend first to anyone, *Simply Christian: Making Sense of Christianity*. This is an introduction to Christianity unlike any you've read. Wright makes the case for the Christian claims and explains in simple, yet beautiful, prose the story we tell about God and his creation.

I hope you will find time this summer for Bishop Wright's book. It is both an easy and a thought-provoking read. I'm pretty sure that you will never see your faith in quite the same way again.

Decoding Da Vinci: The Movie!

With Scott Engle at 9:30 in Wesley Hall on Sunday, May 28

Well, it's here. *The Da Vinci Code* movie opens on May 19. You can bet that it is going to be BIG. More copies of *The Da Vinci Code* were sold in 2004 worldwide than of the Bible. On Sunday, May 28, Scott Engle will discuss some of the many mistakes and misconceptions about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Constantine, and the New Testament that are key to the book's plot. The Good News is not a secret!

Inspiration, the St. Andrew Bookstore, has copies of the CD recordings of a two-week class on *The Da Vinci Code* that Scott recorded in 2004. This is a two-CD set and costs \$5.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

You might begin by talking about the book of Proverbs as God's commencement speech. Does this analogy make sense to you? Is it helpful? How so? If someone asked you to contrast Wisdom and Folly what would you say to them? How is a discussion of Wisdom and Folly going to be different for a Christian or Jew than it would be for someone who denies God?

In his commentary on Proverbs in the *New Interpreters Bible* (in our library), Raymond Van Leeuwen draws our attention to the complex relationship between Lady Wisdom (the way of God) and Dame Folly (the way of the world). [You might re-read Proverbs 9]. Wisdom's house "designates a world in order, full of life. Folly's house is a world in disorder, descending into Sheol, the realm of death." But both occupy this world. Wisdom may have built this house, but Folly dwells there too. Folly seeks to tear down the life-giving house that Wisdom built. Seen this way, Folly is evil, creating nothing, only destroying. And here is the key for our day-to-day experiences. Folly masquerades as good (Isaiah 5:20). When we are tempted away from God, it is by something that God created good, but has been distorted and twisted by Folly/evil/sin. As Van Leeuwen writes, "Folly has not built her house, she has stolen it."

How can such distortion by Folly be put right? Who can put it right? How can we possibly hope to see through the distortion to the underlying goodness and beauty?