

This summer we're going through the book of Proverbs, a book that is all about how to live wisely. One definition of wisdom, by Tim Keller, is "competency with regards to the realities of life." In other words, the wise person knows the right thing to do in the majority of situations where the moral rules do not apply. This morning, in contrast to last week's sermon where I looked at many verses about the words we speak, I will be diving deep on just one verse:

Proverbs 29:18 – Where there is no revelation, people cast off restraint; but blessed is the one who heeds wisdom's instruction

Some of you may be more familiar with the King James Version of this verse:

"Where there is no vision, the people perish."

The reason many are more familiar with the KJV verse is that vision has been a major buzzword in leadership culture for quite some time now, and the KJV version in plain English sounds like it is saying that when an organization or church lacks vision, people die or atrophy or get spiritually weaker. And so, this verse has become a favorite especially among megachurch pastors and writers who would typically never quote from the King James Version. But as you might imagine, whether it was Solomon or another wise person who wrote this particular verse, they weren't consumed with crafting vision statements the way modern day CEO's or pastors might be. Solomon wasn't getting together with his cabinet to figure out what Israel's 10-year plan should be. No, vision Biblically speaking is something else entirely.

The word translated either vision or revelation is "Chazon," vision, revelation, prophecy, authority. Consider some different Bible translations of this verse:

NIV – Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint

ESV – Where there is no prophetic vision, the people cast off restraint

CEV – Without guidance from God, law and order disappear

NLT – When people do not accept divine guidance, they run wild

HCSB – Without revelation, people run wild

This verse is about the power of wisdom from God to provide guidance and order for individuals and for communities. And that's why the word vision can be misleading, and a better translation is revelation or prophetic vision. **Because what we need, both individually and as a community, is not a compelling vision statement produced by humans who claim divine guidance, but a word from God, a revelation of God's will.** We need clarity from God as to how to live. Because where there is no revelation, no prophetic word from God, people cast off restraint. They run wild. There is anarchy, as

law and order disappear. There is chaos, as people go in all kinds of directions and there is no agreement on what is right and wrong, ethical and unethical. This verse calls to mind the situation in the book of Judges:

Judges 21:25 - In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.

And so, again:

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The first problem is that many people interpret this verse through the lens of 21st century leadership culture. But a second problem with many modern interpretations of this verse is that it leaves off the second part, which illuminates the meaning of the first part of the verse. Blessed is the one who heeds wisdom’s instruction. Blessed is the one who not only receives wisdom from God but acts on it.

At its heart, this verse is a warning about the chaos that happens when there is no authoritative prophetic word from God guiding a community, and then an encouragement about the blessing that happens when the people are following God’s wise instruction.

So this morning, let me try to explain why I believe this verse is so wise and yet so counter-cultural in our day and age. Let’s talk about the chaos that happens when there is no authoritative, prophetic word from God, and why the one who heeds wisdom’s instruction is blessed.

1) The chaos

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Where there is no revelation, people cast off restraint. When there is no authoritative, prophetic word from God guiding a community, there is chaos. And when God’s authoritative word is rejected, there is chaos.

Now, the reason I see this verse as so counter-cultural is because many in our culture would say something quite contrary to this verse, something like “where people cast off the restraint of ‘God’ or ‘religion,’ they are blessed.” Many would claim that if we could just free ourselves of the restraints of religion and let people live as they please,

individuals and culture would be better for it. **Imagine no religion... imagine all the people living life in peace.** That sort of thing.

I believe that this is because our culture places a heavy value on freedom, freedom that is defined as the absence of restriction. In other words, the free person is the one who is free to choose to be or do whatever he or she wants, throwing off the shackles of parents, religion, and society's expectations, and nobody can tell them what is right or wrong for them. It is the attitude that says, to quote William Shakespeare: *This above all; to thine own self be true*. Charles Taylor called this a mark of the age of authenticity, which he explained this way:

I mean the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.

This is expressive individualism, the conviction that the most important thing is to look inward, to find out who you truly are and what you truly desire, and then to live that out, no matter what others say. To not let anyone else tell you what you can and can not do, or who you can or can not be.

This attitude seems self-evident to us in America today. It is the air we breathe. We believe that we are basically good people with good desires who should have the right and the freedom to live as we please, without anyone telling us what to do. That in order to be fulfilled and free, we need to be able to follow our inward desires and beliefs and that others need to affirm those desires and beliefs, or else they are intolerant and doing harm to us. Even the Supreme Court of our land, in a 1992 ruling in *Planned Parenthood vs Casey*, said "the heart of Liberty is to define one's own concept of existence of the meaning of the Universe." In other words, the value of liberty means that each person gets to define their own meaning and purpose. And if each person has the right to define their own meaning in life, then that also means that no one else has the right to tell them that they are wrong or misguided.

So what is it? Where there is no revelation, people cast off restraint and we have anarchy? Or when people cast off the restraint of God and religion, they find true freedom and are blessed?

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I think we are seeing what happens when people cast off the restraint of God and religion and go after their own individual freedom and happiness, and it is closer to chaos than utopia. Think about it: what happens when a community rejects God's authoritative word? Everyone becomes their own authority. There is no higher standard to which to appeal.

For example: some in our culture think that women's bathrooms, or women's prisons, or women's sports, should be used by anyone who identifies as a woman, and that this is the right and compassionate thing to do. Others believe that women's bathrooms, or women's prisons, or women's sports, should solely be the domain of those who were born biologically female, or "assigned female at birth" in the lingo of today, and that this is the right and compassionate thing to do. So who is right? The majority? The oppressed minority? The policy makers? And to what higher authority do you point to decide who is right?

Or, for a darker example: years ago, I saw a short Nazi propaganda film called *Opfer der Vergangenheit* (Victims of the Past). This 1937 movie appealed to natural selection in order to bolster public support for the planned T-4 Euthanasia Program for the mentally ill, which they called "inferior life-forms," so that they would not weigh down the progress of humanity. The film begins with these words: "*All that is non-viable in nature invariably perishes... we humans have transgressed the laws of natural selection in the last decades. Not only have we supported inferior life-forms, we have encouraged their propagation.*" The film laments that healthy, "normal" people are living in ramshackle hovels while the mentally ill are housed in beautiful buildings, asylums for the mentally infirm. The answer, this video argues, is to stop transgressing the laws of natural selection and kill off the mentally ill.

Hitler and his followers believed that it was necessary to exterminate inferior humans so that the fittest might survive. Others believe that this is wrong. Why? Who says? Hitler's views were more in line with the ideas of evolution and natural selection. So what makes him wrong? To what higher authority do you point to decide who is right?

Cultures around the world have practices that we may find wrong. Some parts of India still hold to the caste system, reinforced by their belief in karma and reincarnation, that teaches that those who are born lepers or in a lower social strata deserve to be there because of what they did in a past life. Our Christian heritage teaches us to have compassion on those who are outcasts. Which is right? Some cultures teach that women are inferior, that they are possessions of their husbands or fathers, that they can not vote or own property. Who are we to say they are wrong?

That's the chaos that happens on a cultural level when you throw off the restraints of God's authoritative prophetic word. Where there is no higher authority to which to appeal, everyone is their own authority, and no one can tell anyone else what is right or wrong, ethical or unethical. And even on an individual level, there is chaos. Think about it: does throwing off every restriction and indulging in as much drinking, or drugging, or sex, or gambling, or work, or gaming, or anything else truly lead to happiness? Or does it lead to chaos in your life?

And how do you "follow your heart" when you have conflicting desires within you? You want to eat your favorite foods, but you also want to see your children and grandchildren grow up. Which do you want more? You want to have a flourishing marriage, but you also want to go out with your friends every weekend, or play video games. Which do you choose? I want to own my own home, but I also want to travel, which will require working and saving money. Which do I choose? Which freedom is the most important?

When there is no authoritative revelation from God, the result is not utopia but chaos.

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2) The blessing of following God's authoritative word

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Our culture teaches that true freedom is the absence of restriction, and so blessedness comes from casting off restraints of God and religion. And maybe part of you believes that. But can I suggest to you that true freedom is not the absence of restrictions. In every area of life, true freedom comes when you submit to your design, submit to the right restrictions, to the life-giving restrictions. Consider some analogies: Freedom for the fish is not going on dry land. What about the bird: freedom for the bird is not swimming. Freedom for the pianist is not just playing whatever keys they want, but disciplining herself to the rules of the piano until she can freely play anything. Freedom for the basketball player is not doing whatever he wants, but submitting himself to the rules of the game and the best possible training until he can do anything on a basketball court. Freedom for the car owner is not doing whatever he wants to his car, but submitting to the scheduled maintenance so that the car will perform at its best for a long time. In every area of life, freedom as the absence of restrictions, as the ability to indulge every desire, does not lead to life but to chaos, to breakdown, and to death. In every other realm of life, violating the design leads to chaos, breakdown, and death.

And yet somehow, our culture has come to believe that if we can all just have the freedom to look within and choose our own path, that the world will be a better place.

So what is true freedom? True freedom is not the absence of restriction, but submitting to the right restrictions, to the life-giving restrictions. True freedom is living as you were designed to live, as God intended you to live. Blessed is the one who heeds wisdom's instruction.

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Blessed is the one who learns and obeys the will of God, for they are submitting to life-giving restrictions. It is the heart of Peter's words:

1 Peter 2:16 - Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves.

And when you stop to think about it, this concept of giving up your freedoms and rights in order to follow the lead of another person, is not as foreign as it seems. Think of athletes with coaches, or musicians with their instructors, who submit themselves to another because they believe that their coach or instructor can bring something better out of them than they can bring out of themselves. And there are others who willingly submit themselves to another person because they believe in the mission or purpose of that person, and want to join him or her in their journey, like in the military or in a company or organization.

The bottom line is that ironically, your free choice to serve and worship God and submit your will to God's will and to seek His kingdom above your own ends up becoming the most freeing decision you can ever make. You are surrendering your life to the one who will unlock your greatest potential, as His lordship in your life can transform you into the person you were created to be, empowering you to be and do what you could never be or do on your own.

John 10:9-10 - I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

And the choice to follow Jesus, to live as His servant, gives your life its greatest possible purpose, the mission of saving people from death and bringing God's kingdom of love, justice, and peace to this broken world.

But the truth gets even better. Here is the thing that the writer of Proverbs didn't know. Truth is not just a matter of following laws. Truth became a person.

John 14:6 - Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

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Ultimately, this verse is not about submitting to laws. It is about a relationship with a person. It is about trusting the one who restricted His freedom by coming down and living as a man and dying an unjust death on a cross for you. You were made to know Him, love and be loved by Him, serve Him, enjoy Him.

And he has shown us, not only in word but by His example, what life to the full looks like. Our vision is to be a church where people are being transformed by the gospel of Christ into His likeness, who in turn bring the gospel of Christ into our community and world, calling others to be transformed by the gospel of Christ.

We believe there is life-changing power in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and we want to see you transformed and being a part of God's mission to transform this community and world into His kingdom, to His glory.

Our vision is Jesus. It is the gospel. The way is not a 10-step plan but a person. The truth is not a bunch of laws and principles but a person. He is the way, the truth, and the life. What does it look like to seek Him, to know Him, to be like Him, to follow Him?

And the even better news is that we do not have to wait for the word of a prophet. We already have his authoritative prophetic Word. He has given us revelation in His Word about how to find this life to the full. He has shown us how to have a healthy marriage, and how to live as a single person. He has revealed to us how to raise children, how to have healthy relationships, how to not be ensnared by money or status or fame. He has shown us that it is better to give than receive, to lift up the oppressed, to lay down our lives for others. He has revealed that true greatness is found in being the servant of all.

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You want to be blessed? You want to experience true freedom and life to the fullest? Then heed wisdom's instruction. Get to know wisdom, truth, Jesus, and follow His revelation.