



## Respectable Sins

Proverbs 6:1-19

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Imagine with me the events of a single day for a normal man in our present day and culture. For the purpose of this analogy, we will use a man, but it could be man or woman. Let's call him Tom. He wakes in the morning, his children are his alarm. He sleeps as long as he can, while his wife gets the kids ready. At the last possible moment he is finally out of bed, ready to throw on previously worn clothes, and still he is late for work without much thought for his family or his God. When he arrives at work he clocks in, but he isn't happy about it. Work is a necessary evil which he wishes was unnecessary. Then he hears good news: no staff meeting today, his boss is out sick. He knows he was supposed to present on a project at that meeting, so now he is off the hook. There are plenty of things he could get done to get ahead, but he decides to poke around online and on his phone instead. No boss to tell him to stay busy or check up today. Soon, most of the day is taken up and not a single item has been checked off his list. At lunch he decides to take a nap in his car, not because he needs to recharge, but because there is nothing else to do. After lunch a co-worker comes to him with an issue. They have fallen behind on some important tasks and knows that their boss will not be happy when they get back. It's the third or fourth time they work hasn't gotten done, and they know their job may be on the line since they've been put on probation. So they ask for Tom to vouch for them to take the fall instead. Sure, says Tom, how bad could it be? In the moment Tom forgets that he too has exceeded the limits of warnings for poor performance and late work. Just then Tom gets a notification—it's his facebook. He has a brother that has been slowly drifting towards the political left and has all sorts of views he sees as stupid and foolish. Since they haven't talked face to face in a while, all their interactions are comments that Tom leaves on his posts, blasting him for his outrageous opinions and stirring up trouble. Tom spends over an hour crafting his reply that will really get under his brother's skin. After all, he is just telling it like it is, he tells himself. Tom gets nothing done at work, but he still comes home late. At home he tells his wife he is very tired because he had a long and productive day at work, so he lays down while dinner is finished up. After dinner and the kids are put to sleep he tries to talk to his wife about her day, but gets angry when she asks him to help more in the mornings instead of sleeping so late. He stirs up a conflict by accusing her of not understanding the pressure he is under, and they have trouble getting past the fight. After a few episodes of a worthless sitcom, they head to bed. Tom checks his email, it's from his boss, telling him he needs to report to an urgent meeting tomorrow about his performance at work. Things don't look good. He goes to bed early and again wakes up late in the morning, but he gets no rest. In a few weeks he loses his job, mostly because he took the fall for his coworker.



The most remarkable thing about the story is that it's fairly unremarkable. What caused Tom to lose his job? What made him so foolish as to not see it coming? His sins aren't particularly spectacular. He doesn't succumb to the adulterous woman of Proverbs 5, and neither does he enact physical violence against the innocent like we are warned against in Proverbs 1. He doesn't cheat or steal or kill. All in all we might say his sins are fairly *respectable*, since that we all are inclined to indulge in order to partake in or to succumb to without much temptation: Tom's sins are laziness, slothfulness, an inability to consider the consequences of his actions, a gullibility that causes him to trust those he shouldn't trust, and an aptitude or stirring up trouble and division instead of admitting his own fault.

Depending on our own propensity to commit the same errors and since, we might view this character in our story not as a hardened sinner, but simply someone we can understand, someone who sins feel less serious. And yet, Proverbs chapter 6 is showing us that these same sins, the respectable sins of being gullible, of being idle, and of being divisive, are the kinds of sins that will trap you and never let you go. In our search for wisdom, we are right to watch out for sins that are obvious. But we are more right to watch out for the sins that aren't. It's the respectable sins that sneak up on us and in the end ensnare us (v. 2), rob us (v. 11), and suddenly bring calamity (v. 15) and poverty to our lives.

As we examine three of these respectable sins<sup>1</sup> I want us to take heart that God is warning us in his kindness. But, as we will see, we have both a positive example and a shepherding redeemer in Jesus Christ the Son of God. So let these warnings bring conviction, but not despair. Proverbs, as we have said again and again, is *good news* for fools.

## Gullibility (1-5)

We encounter a curious warning in **verse 1**. Once again we have a lecture addressed to the son, but we are likely unfamiliar with what the author means by “putting up security” for your neighbor or “giving a pledge for a stranger.” This is essentially the ancient term for co-signing on a loan. It's putting yourself on the hook for someone else's deal. In other words, if someone is seeking money from a bank, but doesn't have good enough credit or reliability to get money, they can have a “co-signer” or a sponsor. And if that loan is not paid back, then the person who co-signs is held responsible. The bank can then come after you for the full amount of the loan. And so Proverbs 6 is telling us: be careful whose loan you sign onto. The word for “neighbor” and “stranger” I believe is getting at the same thing: someone you know or have met, but you don't know well. The text is warning: don't get yourself into situations where your security is dependent entirely on someone else, particularly someone you don't know well. Ultimately all it will do is be a snare for you to catch you, which is the image we get from **verse 5**.

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<sup>1</sup> I am using this term loosely from the 2007 book *Respectable Sins* by the late Jerry Bridges.



What is the essence of the warning of this parable? Don't be dumb. Don't be gullible. Have some foresight, some common sense, to see what you are getting yourself into. Now, you may look at this and say: "that is silly, I would never sign myself away like that." But it's not so simple. Everytime you sign up for an internet account, what do they ask you to sign? They give you the long terms and conditions, pages and pages. And what do we do? We don't read that! We just check the box that says: "I have read and understand the terms and conditions."

The reality is that it is far easier to take a bad deal than we realize. Oftentimes it comes in harmless, even morally upright terms. In our initial example, our fictional man Tom is approached by a coworker who he should probably not trust. He has a track record. But Tom is a nice guy, so what does he do? He covers for him. This is not generosity, it is foolishness. It's gambling away his responsibility and encouraging irresponsibility in someone else. The very fact that this person needs a co-signer means he already has been irresponsible and untrustworthy in the first place.

Again, this does not mean we are misers with our resources. The Bible calls us to generosity, and this text does not teach against it. Notice **verse 3-5**, what is the wisdom required for someone in this situation? To do an plead for freedom from their bad decisions. As Christians, we must not only make sure that we humble ourselves when we make stupid and gullible mistakes, but we must be willing to forgive those who have made stupid mistakes as well. We must be willing to free them from this snare. So here is a warning too: do not operate your business in a way that ensnares foolish people. Instead, Christians are generous of past debts. This is why the year of Jubilee was baked into the Israelite way of life. And we find a beautiful example in Philemon, where Paul says of Onesimus, the escaped slave: "if he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account." His aim is to generously free Onesimus from the debt of his past decisions, as God does with us in Christ. But notice that Paul does not offer a promise to cover any of Onesimus' future debts.<sup>2</sup> Full of generous compassion, but also full of shrewdness that fosters responsibility and wisdom and not foolish dependence.

If you are still struggling to see the significance or practicality of this, I want you to consider how strongly the author encourages the son to get out in **verse 4**. *Do not sleep* until you go and free yourself from your commitment. Plead *urgently* with your neighbor.

Some of you may think this is too harsh: what's wrong with being a bit gullible? Doesn't it show innocence? In children, yet it may. But gullibility, or the propensity to be tricked or duped, is not primarily about innocence, it's about foolishness. It's one thing to assume the best of others, it's another to forfeit your responsibility before God. Listen carefully friends: this world is full of sin and darkness. Our enemy Satan is not stumbling into evil and sometimes tripping us up. He is prowling around seeking to ensnare us. We must have our eyes wide open by faith to the reality that we are at war against sin. And so when it comes knocking at our door, downplaying its seriousness, and says: "why don't you just sign here, what could it hurt?" we must have the wisdom to say: "no, I will not put my life on the line so easily." I will weigh my options before God with

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<sup>2</sup> Coming from Ray Ortlund, *Proverbs: Wisdom That Works*, 99.



patience, care, prayer, and trust. I won't think of myself too highly or too confidently and of sin too flippantly.

## *The Son of God Never Got Swindled*

The reality is that none of us have perfect street smarts. And the Scripture does not condone cold, miserly scrooge like behavior. We are not called to gamble, but we are called to take risk. And often we fall into foolishness, we make bad decisions, we sign our life away on the dotted line only to realize later that it was a mistake. But here is good news: The Son of God Never Got Swindled. Jesus Christ was gentle, generous, meek, and rich in his Father's inheritance—a ripe target for the swindlers to take advantage of. But, being the wisdom of God, he never was. And it wasn't for lack of trying. The devil through everything he had at him. Jesus didn't just get an email from a "sultan" looking for an investor in his pyramid scheme, he has offered the world on a platter. But Jesus knew the fine print.

And what is interesting about the gospel is that it teaches us that Jesus did pledge himself to another. In Christ we have the perfect example of a deal that looks terribly foolish. He traded his perfect righteousness for our sinful filth. We come to him, unable to take out a loan for any righteousness to our account because our credit is so bad, and we say "Jesus, this is really risky for you. I'm not worth trusting, and I've got a lot of debt of sin that is separating me from God. But I need a loan, I need you to cover me before God, because he is too holy to accept my credit score." And Jesus says: "I'll do better. I won't loan you my righteousness, I'll give it to you." Taken aback, we have to wonder if God is getting swindled. Is grace really so great that it can be given freely to debtors? But here is the kicker: God can't be on the hook to the bank. He is the bank. If Christ is yours, you are fully covered. No defaults, no evictions, no bankruptcy, no foreclosures. So don't trick yourself into thinking too highly of yourself. Don't make bad bets on sinful people, don't make promises you can't keep. Don't trick yourself into making dumb decisions by wanting to be someone else's savior. Instead, when someone comes to you in need of a guarantor for their life, a co-signer for their own bad reputation, be generous and forgiving of their past and point them to Christ, the only one who is rich enough in grace and love to write blank checks for those unworthy to receive them.

## **Idleness (6-11)**

The next respectable sin we encounter in our text is the sin of sloth, laziness, or as we will say: idleness. **Verse 6** the proverbs is no longer addressed to the son, but to the sluggard. What is a sluggard? It rolls off the tongue slow, from following function. It's a person that every culture has many words for. We say "loafer" or "slouch" or even "couch potato." But we all have the mental picture: usually we imagine a man, perhaps for a reason, and that man is slow and indecisive. He never tackles problems, he puts them off and procrastinates. He never wakes up before he has to,



and when he is awake, he seems to be marked by lethargy and irresponsibility and dullness. Two other proverbs give us a better picture:

“The sluggard buries his hand in the dish, it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth.” (26:15)

“The sluggard says: ‘there is a lion outside! I shall be killed in the streets.’” (22:13)

The sluggard then is unable even to finish a meal, much less serious tasks. And he is overcome with daydreams and excuses for not working industriously, imagining lions when really he simply must overcome the drop from his bed to his floor. And here I think we find a respectable sin, someone to laugh at and pity, but not someone to bring conviction to us. What are we told so often by culture? We must lean into self-care. And so what is a sluggard, but someone who has leaned a little too far in? I’m sure he will find some motivation, we think. And so the sin of sloth is buried a bit. But what is the result of idleness, **verse 10-11**? It’s poverty. And here the text means physical poverty but also spiritual, mental, and even emotional poverty. Idleness promises rest and delivers more tiredness. It saps away the days, steals time and purpose, and reduces work into an evil. Eventually, the sluggard stops working all together or is fired, and even self-imposed physical poverty sets in. Spiritual poverty also results from idleness. The sluggard says: I just want a little rest. I’ll seek God later, I’ll kill this sin later—but later never comes. Like a thief in the night, consequences come. We are not guaranteed tomorrow.

What is the wisdom offered to the Sluggard? It’s quite funny, really: go the ant. The smallest creature. How do we keep ourselves from idleness? We find the nearest anthill and take notes. What is it about the ant that exemplifies wisdom?

*First, motivation from God-given purpose.* Verse 7, the ant has no leader. No slavemaster is making sure the ant works. She is not driven by cultural pressures, by pride, ego or necessity. The ant is a hard worker because she is internally motivated. God made the ant to work hard, and, I would argue, to be an example of hard work for us. We are created by God for good work. In the garden God said: subdue the earth and fill it. We are meant to be, both men and women, co-rulers and workers of the earth. God has given us our purpose—we don’t need a boss to tell us work is good, or culture to pressure us into making money. God has created us for work—it’s not a necessary evil, it’s part of his original plan.

*Second, adherence to God’s way.* The, **verse 8**, gathers food in the summer and for harvest. In other words, the gathering of food is not willy-nilly, it’s purposeful. It’s done at the right time, in order to prepare for winter, and it’s done in the right way. The ant is prepared for what comes next—there is a foresight here that the sluggard lacks completely. The sluggard says: “I’ll get to it tomorrow.” The ant says “Tomorrow will be too late, I must get to it today.” So in the Christian life, we remember God is patient but he is calculated. He is purposeful. And here on earth, he has given us an urgency. Tomorrow is not guaranteed, so we are meant to work for our daily bread and depend on him for what we need. To work in a Christian way is not to value salary or position, but to value working *towards* God in *God’s way*. This doesn’t mean we make plans devoid of God. It doesn’t mean we resort to pragmatism or building bigger barns so that we can then lay around. No, it means doing



God's work in God's way. It means honest, even menial work, when done for the building of God's fame, is preparing for the harvest of righteousness not now, but the end of the age. God provides for us now, but he will truly bless us for our diligent work in the age to come.

What does this mean for us? It means that rather than being marked by a glum idleness, our church should be more like an anthill. Every member has a purpose, a part, and no piece is too small or person too little. We are called not to grandiosity, but to diligence. Even those who are young, who are disabled, who are less strong or less smart or less talented by the world's standard—we are God's workmanship, and the church is his workforce by grace in the world. So we must encourage one another in a Galatians 6:9 way: "And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up." This does not mean that we are busybodies, unable to rest. It means that we understand that our work in this world is not yet finished, and God will supply every need we have. It's through our weakness that we work, not our strength. But our weakness before God enables us to work for him and to rest in him at the same time.

### *The Son of God Became a Carpenter*

Christians should be simultaneously the most diligent and productive and the most at peace. Why? Well, because of this good news: the son of God became a carpenter. Does it not blow you away? He whittled, and sawed, and measured and built ancient tables for normal folk. Because he was a workman, truly human. And not only did he fashion physical wooden tables, he fashioned by means of a wooden cross a spiritual table for sinners to dine with God. This was Christ's great work: to obey unto death the will of the Father and therefore bring sinners back to God. We have peace with God because of the work of Christ, rest and the unburdening of heavy loads, and therefore he has given us a great work: go and make disciples. Not go, and be mediocre. Not go, and hate your nine-to-five. Not go, and work for your self. Go, baptize and teach them to obey all I have commanded you. Be my workers, take part in this great harvest. You may be as small as an ant in this great work, but every ant is needed.

The gospel turns sluggards into workers when we realize that the kingdom we are building is not our own, when we understand we were created for this purpose. Jesus Christ saved us to get off the couch and off our social media and to give up our useless, childish ways. And this is the best promise of all. He says go and do this because: I am with, even until the end of the age. The carpenter king has rough, working hands. But they are inviting and firm, always holding ours and showing us the trade of building God's kingdom. This is wisdom.

### **Divisiveness (12-19)**

Now we come to our last respectable sin of the text and I find it laughably applicable. The internet age has made us a people ripe for disunity and divisiveness. Let's look at what the text describes here in **verses 12-15**. What's the deal with the feel and eye signals here? The scripture is trying to get us to draw an image of a person who is brash in his sin. He is not stumbling upon it because he is



too blind to see it. Rather, he is foolish in a different way. This person mocks, points, winks, and flaunts his sin. His heart desires evil, and what is the centerpiece of this evil heart? **Verse 14**, he is continually sowing discord. In fact, I think the text is arguing that it is this act of sowing discord that is the signal of wickedness. When I say he flaunts his wickedness, it's not always in obvious ways. Its hidden in winks and symbols, or in our case, it's hidden in snide remarks or facebook comments or gossip behind the back. What we see described here is a spirit of divisiveness that uses wit and jokes and clever arguments to spread division and create enemies. It's the person rolling their eyes in the back during the sermon, hoping others see them. A troublemaker.

And this kind of behavior, this kind of person, their sin is often excused. They are the ones who are unafraid to tell the truth, who are blunt and don't mind confrontation, who are unafraid to speak their mind. What could be so wrong about that? A little discord every once and a while never really hurt anyone, right? But look how serious this is to God, **verses 16-19**.

This kind of poetic structure is meant to build up. The first six things in the list are precursors for the last, the seventh one. That is the main point. You can see how they are physical in nature at first: the eyes, the tongue, the hands, the heart, the feet. But what is the climax? What is it that in his holiness God cannot stand? **Verse 19**, those who sow discord among brothers. This text is saying that what God hates about haughty eyes, about lies, about violent hands, is that all of them sow discord. God *hates* discord, plain and simple, and he loves unity. And the place where he hates discord most of all in his blood bought bride the church. It's among his people. And so, friends, we must treat discord of any kind among us the same way God does: we must hate it. It cannot be respectable, it cannot be admissible, it cannot be dismissable, and it cannot be forgettable. When we act better than one another, smarter than one another, more holy than one another, we forget the gospel and make a mockery of grace. And we make God sick to his stomach.

Nowadays divisiveness puts on a mask and pretends to be wisdom. It says: it's better to divide with fellow Christians than to be dragged down by their negative influence. And yes, sometimes Christians must go separate ways and denominations must split and we must follow our convictions, but never do so harshly or to cause trouble or to look down with a smirk at those for whom Christ died. Divisiveness is not wisdom, and it is not respectable. It's a trap of sin, and no sin is respectable.

### *The Son of God Unifies Enemies*

Grace Church, here is wisdom and good news when we are prone to the folly of divisiveness. The son of God unifies enemies. His blood runs thicker than any division you can cause. He will build his church. He will not fail. Your sins, as un-respectable as they may be, cannot stop Christ from saving his own, making holy his own, and unifying his own together forever. Here is good news for fools like us, from Ephesians 2, which we will have the joy of getting to this fall. Let me leave you here.





Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Thanks be to God.

