

## **Measuring What Matter Stewardship Series**

### **Choosing Generosity**

**Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 20-23**

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I want to begin by thanking Joshua, Tom, Meg, Doris, and Mary Ashley, who we'll hear from next week, for their willingness to get up here and speak to all of us over these last few Sundays as our stewardship speakers. These personal messages about the impact of what God is doing through our church and our ministries is so important because God is glorified when we name and celebrate the good that God is doing in and through us, and these testimonies help us see in real life how God takes what we are willing to give and uses our offerings for God's good purposes. When we give, we like to know that it's making a difference in some way, and I hope you feel encouraged by what you've heard from our speakers.

These stewardship messages from our members have been a prelude to this day when we begin a 3-week stewardship sermon series that will culminate with dedication Sunday on the last Sunday of this month. And yes, the timing of our stewardship emphasis *is* influenced by the timing of when we start planning and putting a budget together for next year because what we plan is directly related to what is pledged, but the budget isn't the only reason we take time to talk about stewardship every year. It's important to talk about stewardship because it is part of our daily discipleship. We learn from Jesus how God wants us to live, and that includes how we think about and use the resources that God provides for us. An annual stewardship emphasis gives us a chance to intentionally focus on this aspect of our discipleship so that's what we'll be doing for the next three weeks.

We begin today with a reading from the book of Proverbs, and fittingly, because Proverbs offers instruction for those who want to be wise, these selected verses from Proverbs 22 challenge us to think about the choices that we make regarding how we use our resources. Our campaign resource summarizes the challenge in this way. *When it comes to faith and giving, will we have the faith and confidence to follow the way of wisdom—the way of generosity and openhanded living—not only toward the church but toward the wider community and all of life? Or will we choose the way of folly, holding tightly to what we have and keeping it for ourselves?* Let's listen to our reading from Proverbs 22.

***A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,  
and favor is better than silver or gold.***

***<sup>2</sup> The rich and the poor have this in common:  
the Lord is the maker of them all.***

***Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,  
and the rod of anger will fail.***

***<sup>9</sup> Those who are generous are blessed,  
for they share their bread with the poor.***

***Have I not written for you thirty sayings  
of admonition and knowledge,***

***<sup>21</sup> to show you what is right and true,  
so that you may give a true answer to those who sent you?***

***<sup>22</sup> Do not rob the poor because they are poor,  
or crush the afflicted at the gate;***

***<sup>23</sup> for the Lord pleads their cause  
and despoils of life those who despoil them.***

One of the ways we gain wisdom is by making observations about life and then reflecting on what those experiences teach us.

That's how a saying like, "*You catch more flies with honey than vinegar*" finds its way into our vocabulary. Someone learned from experience that it's usually easier to win people over with kindness than with harshness. That saying is not a biblical Proverb, but it does reflect the same kind of wisdom that we find in Proverbs and other wisdom literature – truths drawn from paying attention to how life works under God's care. The sages of Israel believed that God's truth is built-in and discernable within God's creation and the wise person is the one who lives in tune with the way God has ordered the world.

In the verses we just read, the writer observes realities about the rich and the poor. Each grouping of verses has a takeaway. From the first, we take away the idea that God is the maker of the rich and the poor alike, and the value of human life is not derived from what we have or don't have but from the One who created us. From the second group of verses, we take away the idea that generosity toward the poor results in blessing. The takeaway from the last grouping is that God is on the side of the poor, pleading their cause, and to be on the side of God is to be on the side of the poor.

These observations and their takeaways help reveal God's design for human life and what it means to live as God intends. It isn't a design in which every person and every person's situation is identical. Some will have more, some will have less, but that doesn't mean that some are meant to suffer while others are meant to thrive and prosper. Instead, God has designed life with built-in opportunities for people to care and be cared for. I read a devotional by Brian McClaren this week and he describes this design as "the divine ecosystem of interdependence and sharing." In this divine ecosystem of interdependence and sharing, when we practice living generously and ensure that everyone is lifted up, even those with less can experience peace and contentment instead of suffering. The suffering and separation of people from people happens when we

disregard God's way and God's wisdom and try to replace it with our own distorted wisdom.

Our own distorted wisdom is what the writer of Proverbs calls foolishness or folly. It may appear wise and even be presented as truth, but when folly is put into practice, it never leads to abundant life or lasting blessing. Consider the alternative "wisdom" that probably sounds very normal but stands in contrast to the wisdom found in Proverbs. Many times, we see that people do treat other people as if they are inferior or of less value. We notice the human tendency to put people in a pecking order and assign value based on where one falls in the pecking order. The result is that some are lifted up while others are left behind.

Similarly, where the poet says generosity results in blessing, we're often encouraged to secure our own "blessings" by holding tightly to what we have. Think of the parable that Jesus told about the rich fool. In that same Brian McClaren devotional, he offered these comments on the parable. "The [rich] man epitomizes the confidence and narcissism of civilization...He talks to himself about himself, and neither listens to nor thinks of anyone else...He asks himself what to do to maintain stability, to keep the system going, to keep the growth in GDP flowing, so he can take it easy, party, and chill. He tells himself the answer...grow! Build bigger barns. Hoard more stuff. A collapse in the rich man's health interrupts his schemes for wealth...He was rich, yes, filthy rich in a certain selfish sense. But rich toward God? Rich in wisdom to remember that he is a candle, that life is a gift, and that his flame will someday go out? Rich in caring about others, especially the poor and vulnerable, so beloved of God? He proves utterly bankrupt in all these departments. He is forever known as the rich fool...." This is where distorted wisdom takes us.

And there is the final distortion of the truth found in Proverbs. The poet says that God pleads the case of the poor, yet it seems to be the exploitation of the poor that makes our world go round. We see it when corporations post record profits while the people who stock shelves or clean buildings can't afford rent. We see it when predatory lenders make their money from those already drowning in debt. The world calls that success—but Proverbs calls it folly.

Every day we make choices about how we are going to live. Every day we can orient our lives around God's truth and make decisions that show that our hearts are aligned with God's heart and God's purposes. We also have opportunities every day to ignore God's wisdom and to go our own way. Discipleship is the ongoing, daily practice of seeking God and choosing God's way in every decision. A common temptation is to compartmentalize our lives and to try to hold on to our own autonomy over certain areas. How we relate to and what we do with our possessions is sometimes one of those areas that is difficult to surrender. When stewardship season comes around and we are asked to consider what and how much we will give to help further God's mission, it isn't just an opportunity to think about a dollar amount that we're willing to give away, but our lesson from Proverbs reminds us that it's a chance to examine ourselves and think about which wisdom our lives are truly oriented around. Is it the real wisdom of God or have we been persuaded by the foolishness of this world? Which economy are we truly invested in — the economy of the kingdom of heaven, where giving and receiving sustain the whole community, or the grasping, me-first economy of this world?

Brian McClaren closes the devotion I've already mentioned with this exhortation. He says, "If your heart is fully invested in the rich fool's economy, the judgement that passed upon that system is passed upon you...But if you withdraw your consent from the rich

man's human system of wealth, if you transfer your trust to the larger system, if you seek first and foremost the divine ecosystem, you will end up with everything you need."

If you withdraw your consent from the rich man's human system of wealth....

What are the ways that we might withdraw our consent from the rich man's human system of wealth and transfer our trust to the system of interdependence and caring that God has built into Creation? One way is through generous giving that helps meet the needs of the vulnerable, and one way to do that is by giving to the church, but that's just a starting place.

As we move through this stewardship season, may our hearts be opened and tuned in to the wisdom of God. May we see and embrace every opportunity to choose generosity which is the way of wisdom, and may our commitment to God, God's people, and God's purposes deepen with every faithful choice we make every faithful action we take. Amen.