

PROVERBS



Not long ago I was visiting an elderly person and I asked them, “What’s one of the benefits of being older?” I thought it would open up a good conversation, to which they replied, “Well, at my age, there isn’t much peer pressure!”

Peer pressure can be an enormously difficult field to navigate. From the clothes we wear to the ideas we should believe, we feel this enormous pressure to conform to the ideas around us. We all want to feel a sense of belonging, a sense of place, a sense of welcome. Even in the church, it is easy for us to sit in the same spot, talk to the same people, and have the same types of conversations so that we feel welcome.

Proverbs 1 moves in an interesting direction. It begins with telling us to fear the Lord, and then moves into this call from a father to a son to not join a gang. As I was looking over this passage, I had to ask myself, “How many of you have been tempted to join a gang?” Really? Well, this sermon is going to go over huge! Proverbs 1 began with the fear of the Lord as the beginning of knowledge, and then immediately begins by telling this son not to join a gang. It seems unusual, strange, and foreign to us. What we fail to appreciate, however, is that the movement of this passage has a profound warning to all of us. Peer pressure can be an enticement and allurements that leads to all sorts of evil, entrapping people who get involved in it so that they are destroyed by it.

What the father wants to teach in these opening verses are the most critical lessons we all have to learn. So let's look at three lessons, and I want to jump back and forth in this passage to help us unpack the riddle that is here to help us.

Discern the good voices

There are two predominant voices in these opening verses, and the father wants to help his son discern between those two voices. First, there is the voice of the mob. The way that the mob works, we are told, is that they ‘entice’ – and this word is the same root word that was used in v. 4 to describe the simple. What these voices do is they offer a way that seems right, appealing, prosperous, and easy. These are the voices of comfort, ease, the voices of recognition and belonging. “Come with us!” they say (v. 11). They sound inviting, welcoming, tolerant, and open. It is an appealing voice – that’s why others have already joined the gang! The simple aren’t able to discern. They don’t have the life experience. They think they know the path to the good life, but they haven’t had the life experience to know the difference between the enticing voices and the wise voices.

But the other voice is the voice of the father and mother. They can see further down this path than the son can. Their life experience means that they can see where this gang is going to take their son. So the voice of the father says, “Don’t go!” (v. 10). “Don’t walk with them!” (v. 15). “Don’t even start to hang out with them” (“walk in the way with them” – v. 15). They know that

PROVERBS



bad company can corrupt the best of character (1 Cor. 15:33). They can see where the general pattern is heading (vv. 16-17).

What is hard to do when you are young is to listen to advice and accept instruction. Proverbs will spend a great amount of time telling us that the path to the good life starts when we are young – learning to distinguish between good and bad advice, between what is enticing and what is true.

What is needed is to discern the difference of truth and falsehood, because discerning the differences is more than just learning to avoid trouble. Discerning means learning to spot trouble beforehand. Only the simple believe everything they hear. But the wise look beyond the words and see where the paths go by the different voices.

Commit to the right loyalty

What people want is a sense of belonging. They want to feel like they fit in. This inclusion is what makes various groups so strong to the simple. They feel loved and accepted. They feel included and embraced. The father sees this about the gang. He calls them sinners who entice and he intentionally says that they use inclusive language. “Come with us; let us lie in wait...we shall find all precious goods, we shall fill our houses with plunder.”

The gang offers an easy loyalty. In fact, this is what every group does that attracts the simple. Why do people feel like they fit in? Because before they believed what the group said, they felt welcomed and loved.

Just consider the story of Nicki Cruz, a Christian minister who was president of the notorious New York gang the Mau Maus. At age 3, Cruz said, he suffered severe physical and mental abuse at the hands of his parents. At age 8, Nicky's mother, in a spiritualist trance, called him the "son of Satan" and hurled curses at him. He said he became the victim of repeated abuse. At age 15, Cruz was sent to New York City to live with his brother. Soon after arriving in the city, Cruz left his brother's home and joined a gang called the Mau Maus. Seeking a sense of security, he tried to prove his toughness and bravery to his new "family," which led him into a cycle of drugs, alcohol and brutal violence. At age 16, he became the warlord of the gang, leading the gang members into destructive rampages and beatings. Gang members died senseless deaths as directed by Nicki. All this because he found a place of acceptance and love.

Most people don't become murderers or violent criminals. But many will join a group that leads them down a path because they feel loved. They feel accepted.

The other loyalty is the loyalty that comes from a loving home. In these opening 9 chapters of Proverbs, we might summarize what they are teaching to young people as “Honour your father and mother” (Exod. 20:12). The reason that Proverbs suggests honouring parents is due to the

PROVERBS



fact that the father and mother are noble people. They are dignified. They are people of respect, of character. No, they're not perfect, but they are people who fear the Lord and walk in his ways. So the other loyalty is not first to mom and dad, but a loyalty to the Lord and his command. What Proverbs wants to help us think about is how we remove the gap between the command to honour father and mother and the experience of it. There is a loyalty that is called for, and that loyalty is first a loyalty to the Lord. When we love the Lord, we can honour our parents, as imperfect as they are. We can see that there are father figures in the Church of Jesus Christ to come alongside the fatherless.

For this reason, it becomes all the more important that we believe what Jesus taught us about being the Church. "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, by your love for one another" (Jn 13:35). The most damaging thing to the witness of Christ is a church where people are disgruntled and unhappy with one another. But what is a powerful tool of witness, something that draws people in is rarely an amazing performance on Sunday, attractional events, or great programs. What draws people in is a loyalty that comes from the Lord.

Yesterday I was speaking to a group of men, and I had encouraged them to go and thank someone who had made an impact on their life. One of the men came and shared with me that over 20 years ago he had come to his church. He admitted that he was a bit "different" and struggled with being a little off-putting. He had been put into a group with an older man, and this man, he said, was with him at the retreat. Because of his welcoming embrace, he has found a church home where he has been able to honour the Lord.

Church – this is what we must become. We must become a life-giving community that counters the community destroying call of those who entice. The reason that various groups draw people in – whether it is a gang, a cult, a conspiracy theory group, a group centered around sexual identity – is that they give people validation, recognition, and love. But the voice of Proverbs says, "Don't walk on the path of evil." Why? Because what Proverbs wants is the good life for you and me, a life where we will...

Benefit from the best rewards

Everyone sees some sort of benefit to being part of a group. What the gang offers are precious goods and the fill of plunder (v. 13). These are easy riches – they're not worked for, they're not earned. They are taken, stolen, seized.

The result is that they are caught in their own trap. They lie in ambush, but are the ones ambushed. So if we rush past this proverb and think that we aren't tempted to join a gang, so this doesn't apply to us, verse 17 reminds us that birds are trapped because they see the net, they see the seed, but they fail to see the danger. They are unaware.

PROVERBS



Yet this is what this proverb is intended to do. To trap us here so that we might be spared the larger one of getting caught up in greed and gaining the world while losing our soul. To see that we are the ones who can dismiss wisdom and go astray because we want to fit in, we want to feel loved, we can easily accept easy rewards that actually become a trap for us, leading to our own ruin (v. 18) and stealing the path to the good life (v. 19).

But there's something deeper going on here. Why start with the voice of avoiding the gang? The language of 1:8-19 parallels Genesis 37:19-28. In the story of Joseph, he is sent by his father to his brothers who are tending the flocks. As the brothers see Joseph approaching, they are jealous because Joseph is loved by his father and receives a beautiful coat. Out of their jealousy, they shed blood of an animal and stain the coat, throw their brother in a pit, sell him for a profit at the cost of his life. And here in Proverbs 1, the father uses the same language to describe the mob because the concern is that Israel will become like Joseph's brothers in Genesis 37. That the inner drive to be wanted, to be loved, to feel recognition can lead us astray. In fact, this struggle was not just some possible threat that Israel faced – it was a reality that Isaiah spoke to, calling his nation to account for the sins against its own people and its lack of justice: "Their feet rush into sin; they are swift to shed innocent blood" (Isa. 59:7). Peer pressure can cause us to do crazy things to feel loved and accepted.

But there is a different reward for those who listen to advice and accept instruction. The father says in v. 9 that it is like a graceful garland for your head, pendants for your neck. It's the Olympic medal around the neck and laurel on the head. Through hard work, study, and discipline, we can find our identity, our security, our love where it really matters – in the Lord who loved us and gave us his Son for us.

If anyone could see the love that God has for us, it is that he did not spare his only Son but gave him up for us all. So as Paul can say in Romans 8:32 – how much more will he graciously give us all things, especially the wisdom that we need.

Can we tell the difference between truth and deception, between promise and seduction? Do we know the difference between the voices that bring life to our communities and the ones that take it away? Do we know the difference between dangerous desires and godly desires? Wisdom offers to guide us. And in Christ Jesus, we have the wisdom, righteousness, love, and acceptance that God has for us.