

PROVERBS

In 1985, the band *Tears for Fears* released what would become their smash hit entitled “Everybody Wants To Rule the World.” In it, the band sang about the nature of humanity’s desire for power and control, only to abuse it: “Welcome to your life/There’s no turning back/Even while we sleep/We will find you/Acting on your best behaviour/Turn your back on Mother Nature/Everybody wants to rule the world. It’s my own design/It’s my own remorse/Help me to decide/Help me make the most of freedom and of pleasure/Nothing ever lasts forever/Everybody wants to rule the world.” The song highlighted the problem that humans have with authority – we want it so we can make the most of freedom and of pleasure for ourselves.

While blatant corruption has been evident in politics, there is a problem at all levels of leadership where people get power and then abuse it. It often is well-intentioned, because as we are told in 16:25 there is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is death. We have experienced the trauma of leaders using their authority and hurting others, leaving in their wake ruined relationships that never are repaired, people who have been wounded and scarred, and those who justify what they’ve done based on results.

Every age, every institution, and every human being faces the problem of the abuse of authority. In a manual designed to raise up future leaders, it is helpful to remember that power corrupts. Therefore everyone needs the constant reminder that they are under the authority of the Lord. We are all second in command; God is the sovereign. It doesn’t matter if you are a parent, committee member, pastor, governing leader, or employer - everyone has been given authority to serve. Therefore, it is imperative that our leadership reflect the Lord.

Enjoy the Sovereign Lord (15:20-16:9)

In verses 20-24, we have the theme of finding joy on the right path, and this section begins with a wise son walking straight ahead, on the right path. The reason that there is joy is that the path of the Lord is the good path, the path of life, as vv. 25-33 make it clear. Suddenly, from v. 25 on we have many sayings about the Lord that have been brought together, and they point to how we ought to live – first, in the fear of the Lord (v. 33) which is described in vv. 30-32 as the life giving message that comes to those who humbly receive it. The proud reject it, but those who walk in the fear of the Lord – repentance and faith – will find that there is good news.

What is this good news? In chapter 16, we are told how the Lord sovereignly directs his ways. People make plans; the Lord directs their steps. God knows what is truly good and evil (v. 2). What does this have to do with power and control and authority?

It means that there is one sovereign, and you and I aren’t it. We are not the ones in control. We have this illusion of control. Everything around us tells us that we can be in control. We have

climate control in our homes and vehicles. We use birth control to determine the size of our family. We control our vehicle, our purchases, our finances. And yet, as much as we feel that we are in control, we aren't. We feel like we can choose what we want because we go to the store and decide what we want to buy and how much. But then all of a sudden something breaks or an accident happens or someone is hurt, and we are reminded that we don't have control. The Lord is! And the good news about God's sovereign rule is that the humble are the ones who admit that they aren't in control of their lives.

When we admit that we aren't in control, then it changes how we deal with anxiety. Learning to trust is one of the key methods to deal with control. God will deal with evil (v. 5), so evil will not have the final word. He will deal with all injustice and unrighteousness. But in the middle of these sayings, we are told in v. 6 that there is a sacrifice that is for those who repent.

And this is the good news – you can be free from the sin of control. You can trust the sovereign God who invites the humble to find joy in coming to him and receiving forgiveness. He loves to help his people and would rather his people have little in righteousness than much because of injustice. He wants his people to be satisfied in him.

This becomes critical in leadership. Much leadership goes off the rails because it forgets that all authority is derived authority. It puts confidence in strategic plans, but God directs steps. Leadership is about working out God's plans in God's ways in God's time because no one human being has absolute power. Any power that we receive is from the hands of God, and this is why we ought to...

Reflect Our Righteous Ruler (16:10-17:6)

In verses 10-15, we have several sayings about the king, and specifically about how the king uses his mouth. The king's mouth is to speak justice and judgment that reflects the justice of God (v. 8). It's no surprise that we have these sayings about a king following the statements about the Sovereign Lord. Why? Because the sovereign king of a nation only has his power because the Lord gives it to him. Therefore, all the laws and judgments he makes should reflect that he is under the law too.

And this is where true leadership begins. It begins with recognizing that we are never in charge. Whenever we receive power, it is because we have been entrusted with it under the Sovereign God. Parents have authority given by God and are accountable to him for it. Board members have accountability. CEOs, and employers have accountability.

In the Old Testament book of Genesis, Joseph had to learn this the hard way. He had dreams and visions of his family bowing down to him. But he would be thrown into a cistern by his siblings, sold into slavery, imprisoned in Egypt, until finally he arose to power as second in command in Egypt. And when he arrived at his position of power, it was his responsibility to

serve the people in the famine relief project. He never attained the position of Pharaoh; he was always second in command.

And so it is with our power. It's always derived. That's why vv. 16-19 have the bookends of humility. Our power is to serve. Our power is derived. Better to be humble than fall. Better to admit our failures than to hold on to them and try to benefit ourselves. Wisdom is better than gold.

And then our lips should reflect the righteous ruler, which is what vv. 20-30 point us to. When we have authority and power, one of the best ways that we can show our submission to the Lord is by how we use our words. As parents, employers, committee members, even as a pastor, our words really do matter. They ought to be truthful AND persuasive. Life-giving AND judicious. Unrighteous words create a fire. They destroy friendships. They alienate.

And so it is no surprise that we are warned in v. 25 that there is a way that seems right to a man, but it leads to death. We have to be grounded in repentance and faith. Power is best used when coupled with knowing God more and being aware of our propensity to abuse power.

When we know that God is sovereign and we are not, then we will aim to know his ways about power, his ways to use our words, and his ways to build up others. We might think we know how. Unless we reflect on God's ways and aim to reflect his ways, humans will ALWAYS abuse power. To get off the path of God's sovereignty is to get onto the path of destruction. And that never ends well.

But we might despair. If humans will always abuse power, then is there any hope? And that is where we...

See the Wisdom of Christ

If Paul can say that all the wisdom and knowledge of God are hidden in Christ (Col. 2:3), then it should be no surprise that Proverbs is pointing us to the wisdom of Christ. And when we look at Christ's life, he had received all power and authority from God. At the temptation he faced by the devil in the wilderness, Matthew 4 shows us that in each situation, Christ did not use his power to satisfy himself. He did not use his power to get food for himself, he did not use his power to protect himself, and he did not use his power to promote himself.

Instead, what we see is that Christ was fully submitted as a human being to the Father. He submitted himself to his very Word. He recognized that his power was not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk. 10:45).

In coming to earth, Jesus did not hold on to power for himself, but he went to the cross as the crucified King. But he didn't stay dead. He was raised to life by the power of the Spirit and then

told his disciples these words: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18).

But what does he do with that authority? We see in how he comes. He comes with all the power of heaven – with an angelic army declaring that he has arrived. And he lies in a manger. He is the humble King who lies in a manger. He doesn’t assume equality something to be grasped. He makes himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, Paul says in Philippians 2:6ff.

And so when he is given all power and authority, he gives it to us as his Church. “Therefore go....” And so we go as his servants. We go into the world with his authority to have dominion over creation as servants. We are here to go into the world with the good news that God’s power has come to serve, and it is most clearly seen as we do what is right in God’s eyes as he has commanded us.

And that ought to give us pause when we face anxiety and worry. Yes, we will struggle when we face hardships that we cannot control. But we have this sure word – the King has come to rule and reign.

And when we feel tempted to worry, when we try to seize control, remember that there is a God who has sent his Son to reconcile us as the covenant keeping God (Prov. 16:6) who gives his life as a ransom for many so that we wouldn’t have to worry about ruling the world to control things, but entrust ourselves to our Creator.

The great reformer Martin Luther, on one occasion when faced with threats against his life and had to hide, his wife expressed great concern for him. In a letter to Katie, he wrote these words:

“I have a better worrier than you and all the angels. He lies in a manger and clings to a virgin’s breast, and yet he is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.”

Is there any better one to trust than the King who never failed in how he used his power for good?