

PROVERBS

Over the past few years, there has been an increase in the calls to address the problems of police brutality. The death of George Floyd due to a knee on his neck caused outrage across the United States. Breonna Taylor died in Louisville KY when police stormed into her apartment and were shooting in an indiscriminate manner.

Increasingly, we live in a world that the use of power and force and privilege have been called into question. An entire philosophy has arisen called critical theory and intersectionality that attempt to look at the world through the lens of power dynamics. So pervasive is this approach that it is commonly taught in government institutions and major corporations. At its heart, critical theory recognizes a real problem – that power has been abused. But its solution is entirely antithetical to the Christian way of understanding power and authority. At its root, critical theory overturns power structures and uses the word “privilege” in a derogatory way. While attempting to address real problems, the solutions that critical theorists propose are even more dangerous. It has created this sense that the way to overcome abuse is by overthrowing power. And yet, this is only another form of Marxism that has destroyed culture after culture.

We live in a world that is suspicious of wealth and power. Yet the Bible has a different attitude towards wealth and power. It recognizes that privilege isn't something to denounce, but something that is to be used in the fear of the Lord. And if we don't have these understandings, our cultural force will shape us and we will not flourish as a society but find that we speed its decline along even faster. So how should we think of power and wealth? Let's consider a few questions:

Won't wealth and power satisfy? (19:10-20:4)

If there is anything that we ought to learn, it is how folly will ruin people and families (v. 13). And the folly that is introduced in the following verses is all about wealth and power. Be wise about wealth and power! Learning how to use wealth and power becomes even more important when you have children who grow up with it. A king needs to train his children well to rule well, and suburban folks who have the good life need to do the same.

One thing that vv. 15, 24, and 20:4 all speak about dealing with laziness. It is tempting when you grow up comfortable to forget that your parents worked hard to get there. So what this section commends is self-discipline, not indulgence. From verse 18 on to the end of this section, what is needed is self-control. You can have wealth and power, but they won't lead you into a good life. Wine and beer are good drinks, but they will ruin you if you don't know how to use them (20:1). Getting involved in a conflict without self control will bring shame and reproach (v. 26; 20:3).

You can have all the money, all the power, but they won't satisfy. So what is needed is to return to v. 23 – the fear of the Lord leads to life. How does confession and trust in

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CBC Ilderton

Andrew Hall

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God lead to life? The commands of God teach us what we need to do; then we need to learn the wisdom about how to apply them. This is what it means to listen to advice and accept instruction (vv. 20, 27). This is where true joy is found.

When we start within, in our hearts, what we find is that God's ways bring the deepest satisfaction that our hearts long for (v. 23). So you can have much or you can have little (v. 22) because with the Lord you have everything you need.

How much do you really need to be satisfied? How much will make you truly happy? It's always just a little bit more. But when you have the Lord, he will satisfy you with every good thing. Power and wealth offer much, but without the Lord guiding you, you'll always want just a bit more, which will never come.

How do people flourish? (20:5-21:4)

People don't just thrive; there has to be a culture that promotes thriving. And if you were to create a society where people could flourish, where would you start? In this section, what we discover is that we are going to have to look deep like a well to draw out understanding (v. 5). Since the need to be steadfast and faithful shows up in vv. 6 & 28, we can understand that flourishing happens with faithfulness and integrity.

And each proverb throughout this section is promoting the good life by seeing how faithfulness and integrity promote good. It's not hard to think about what will create human flourishing. We need leaders who will rule well (v. 8). We need fair business practices (vv. 10, 23). People who work hard (vv. 13, 17) are those who love their neighbour as they love themselves.

But there's more than just being good that has to be promoted. In a world full of sin, we need people who are going to be prudent and wise to deal with evil as well. Good can only do so much; but we also have to understand that part of doing good is to confront evil. Where people curse their parents, they are not only harming themselves, but they are also breaking the 5th commandment that Moses brought to the people (v. 20). Where people seek revenge rather than pursuing justice, no one flourishes because bitterness spreads (v. 21).

All of these things are true and good – to be steadfast and full of integrity. But where do we start? How do we get onto this path? The question in v.9 points us to what we need – we need inner purity. The way we flourish in life isn't by fixing all of the problems out there, but it starts with the war in the heart.

Throughout this section, we have come back to several proverbs that speak about the Lord, reminding us that the fear of the Lord – repentance and faith – is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge (1:7; 9:10). We can look at the world around us and despair. But Proverbs reminds us that we start with ourselves. We begin with our hearts, with our souls, and that we come before the Lord and wait upon him (v. 22). Waiting on the Lord isn't passive like waiting in a line. Waiting on the Lord begins with confession (v. 9), and

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this confession is that we are not sovereign; God is. This section ends in 21:1-4 with two simple reminders: God has all things under his control, so don't be arrogant. Arrogance will lead us to curse others, take shortcuts, and result in vengeance. But waiting on the Lord means that we confess our need and believe that God has all things in his care. But waiting upon the Lord means humbling ourselves to walk in his ways, not be arrogant to think that we can make it on our own without the Lord. We need his ways of justice, righteousness, and equity so that we practice steadfastness and inner purity by desiring his ways, not by pursuing revenge or selfish greed.

What are the good uses of power and wealth? (21:5-22:16)

Part of figuring out how to flourish is also by discerning how we fail to flourish. In 21:5-10, it can be summed up in one word – selfishness. And the result is disaster (v. 16).

When we look more closely at how power and wealth are to be used to create flourishing, we see that we pursue justice and care for the poor and needy (vv. 11-21). We refuse to let money corrupt us and be changed by bribes (v. 14).

When we are thinking about the needs of others, what will happen is that we will find that life actually opens up blessings and treasure (v. 20) because righteousness and kindness bring life and honour (v. 21).

And this is what we want. We want people to treat us fairly. We want people to be kind to us. This is the summation of the law – to love your neighbour as you love yourself. By loving others, by showing kindness rather than harshness, by doing what is right and good for everyone rather than considering your own interests, power and wealth are used for the benefit of others around you.

Have you ever stopped to consider why police cruisers in London say “To Serve and Protect”? Is this some mere sloganeering? No – this is how power is intended to be used. With all of the discussions that have gone on about defunding the police, the wrongheaded thinking has misunderstood what the real problem is. The problem isn't a police force. The problem is that we forget that power is to serve and protect. This is why community policing initiatives, community involvement, local engagement by police are so critical. Yes, they have power. But what is the purpose of that power? To cause us to live well as a society. You don't fear the police when you're obeying the law. You don't fear the police when you see them working for your good. But as we forget the fear of the Lord in our society, these problems will be amplified.

I am thankful for those who are serving in systems of justice. Those of you who are in our church and work in the legal profession and law enforcement are blessings to our world. This is why vv. 22-29 really speaks about the need for us to understand the right and wrong uses of power (v. 22, v. 29).

We need to talk more about how to use our influence and power. This is what Proverbs 21:30-22:16 commends. What we need is grace rather than riches (22:1) and learning

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to treat people as made in the image of God rather than on appearances (22:2). This is the life God honours (22:4).

So we need to train up a generation that understands what a good name is (22:6) – it's those who serve. It is those who pursue purity of heart (22:11). It comes back to being a person of faithfulness and integrity.

We can talk all we want about the specifics, but we need to come back to the basics. In a world where my happiness is the supreme good, faithfulness and integrity will fall by the wayside. What we need is to come back to these principles over and over. How can I live with purity of heart, faithfulness to God, and doing what is right before God?

As we promote this kind of society and we encourage our children to be honest, hard working, truthful, and trusting God, we will continue to create a counter-culture in a world that wants to be happy but whose happiness is always at the expense of others. But this is not the way of Christ...

See the Wisdom of Christ

Here is the thing about the wisdom of Christ. I come back to Paul's hymn in Philippians 2:6-11 over and over. Christ had power. Christ never surrendered his power and privilege. But Paul says that Christ didn't consider privilege and power first. He considered humility and service first. He took on the form of a servant. He obeyed the Lord. His power and privilege were always in the perspective of doing good by obeying his Father.

And this is the wisdom that we need. Our attitude should be the same as Christ. We don't need to overturn power or privilege. We need to use it well. We need to use it for the advantage of others. If we only denounce power and privilege, we will find that we only fall into the Marxist trap that removes power from good and God-fearing people and places it in the hands of those who know how to abuse power.

So where do we begin? We begin in the community of Christ – the church. We start as a local church not by trying to control, but to serve. We start by humbly seeking to love and understand, to listen to advice, to not demand our own way, but submit ourselves in the fear of the Lord, to do good to others by being radically generous and caring for those in need. And when we do, we will find that our worth isn't in what we have or own, but in the Saviour who loved us and gave himself for us at the cross.