

# PROVERBS

When John Lennon sang the song “Imagine,” he envisioned a world without nations, religion, hostility, poverty, or abuse of power. What Lennon wanted was utopia – a world where the brotherhood of humanity got along in perfect harmony.

For Lennon, this utopia could be achieved without heaven or hell, because he believed in the innate goodness of humanity. If we could appeal to the goodness of people deep within, we could imagine a world of perfect harmony.

But in a world where there is no heaven or hell, there is no reward for righteousness and punishment for wickedness. In Lennon’s world, he fails to appreciate that evil cuts through the heart of every single person.

History bears out the problem of the utopian society. Karl Marx believed utopia could be achieved through the economic policies of communism, only for the 20<sup>th</sup> century to reveal that communism encouraged those in power to live in opulence and oppress the common.

In Proverbs 28-29, we have a unit of righteousness and wickedness contrasted, showing that the world that John Lennon imagined can’t be achieved by human goodness and without religion; we need God to deliver us by his Word and his power. So how does righteousness exalt a nation?

At the end of chapter 27 (vv. 23-27), the righteousness that is encouraged is for leaders to love people above productivity and processes. So let’s see what it means for righteousness to exalt a nation by knowing the people.

## **Understand God’s Law for the Poor (28:1-28)**

Since King Hezekiah’s men were pulling together the proverbs of Solomon (25:1) as they witnessed the fall of Israel to the north, and considering how Solomon’s life ended in shipwrecking the faith, we shouldn’t be surprised that Proverbs is moving in a direction to warn us about the failure of rulers. From chapters 28 & 29, we get the contrast of the righteous and the wicked, and the transitions here are about the righteous and wicked. So in vv. 1-28, we hear the warnings to those with wealth and power not to get their wealth and power by abusing the poor.

At the beginning of Proverbs (1:3), we heard about righteousness, justice and equity being the key that rulers use to govern. Now we hear those familiar words in vv. 1, 5, and 6.

What we hear are the warnings about being crooked and the encouragement to walk in justice. God cares about the poor because those with power are tempted to abuse their power. This is the point of v 7b on gluttony and v. 8.

What is good for a nation is when the rich and powerful use their status to lift up those in need. A nation that does not care for the poor and needy is not governed well. The wicked flee from evil when the righteous are bold (v. 1) and when the righteous triumph (v. 12).

God's law made provisions for the poor. The wealthy land owners were not to harvest to the edge of the field so that the poor could work the edges of the field and collect food. This encouraged generosity among the rich and work among the poor (Lev. 19:9-10). And this is what this chapter repeatedly encourages – generosity and hard work. The result of being generous and working hard is that there is plenty (v. 19).

What righteousness, justice, and equity looks like is finding ways to use the power and wealth that we have to lift up the poor and dignify them. The law ought to reward generosity and encourage work while discouraging and punishing the abuse of power. The Bible does not condone taking from the rich and giving it to the poor. What the Bible commends is practicing generosity.

But in God's kingdom, what is even greater is that our worship is connected to how we treat the poor. We cannot expect God to delight in our prayers if we are not mindful of God's laws for the poor (v. 9).

This is one reason I am grateful that as a church we have a mercy ministry and a parish nurse. God's kingdom is about genuinely caring for those in need so that there will not be a needy person among us (Deut. 15:4). This displays the righteous rule of God – when we care for one another and love one another by encouraging generosity and work.

## **Discipline Yourselves for the Good of the World (29:1-27)**

In order to see people flourish, what Proverbs commends is discipline. Children, servants, the wise and foolish, and even kings and nations need to learn discipline.

The disciplined life will be an abomination to those who hate the way of the Lord (v.27). In fact, what will happen when discipline is not encouraged, Proverbs says, is that joy will be eaten up by the fruit of emotions that rule you. When God's law is cast off, people perish (v. 18).

The way to a fruitful society, vv. 2, 15, and 17-19 says is through discipline in the home. If we fail to discipline children, Proverbs says this will lead to the downfall of the nation. The reason for this is that folly is bound up in the heart of a child (22:15). We are not naturally and only good. We are born with foolishness. Correction needs to happen so that we will learn wisdom (v. 15). And when we fail to discipline, what ends up happening is that power is given to fools (v. 21).

Correction is a gift not only for children, but for the world. We need to learn correction. We need to learn that discipline is the way that we keep our mouths in check. It is the way to keep foolishness from spreading. We need rulers who will govern by righteousness, justice, and equity. But the way that begins is in the home.

There are two ways that discipline happens. First, there is the formative discipline that Proverbs commends. Verse 18 has often been used by leaders to promote their vision for organizations. “Where there is no vision, the people perish,” says the KJV. Yet the actual translation is better in the ESV – where there is no prophetic vision, the people will throw off restraint; but blessed is he who keeps the law.

The vision here that is needed is to be formed by God’s Word. We need to be formed by the prophetic vision of hearing and keeping God’s word – that is where the blessing comes from. Proverbs has commended the discipline of being formed by hearing the Word of God.

The second type of discipline that is needed is described in v. 1 and 15 – the discipline of correction. Without correction, we will continue in the way that seems right to us, but not necessarily right to the Lord. “There is a way that seems right to a man,” Proverbs 14:12 and 16:25 have said. We need to humble ourselves to receive God’s Word and human correction (vv. 18, 23). And when we do that, we will find that even in a world gone bad like in Hezekiah’s day, we will see that evil is dealt with (v. 16). Wickedness will have its limit. There will come a point where wickedness will destroy itself.

But that should not cause us to throw off God’s Word or to give up hope. Those who trust in the Lord are safe (v. 25). Injustice has social consequences – but those who seek the Lord will find that he is a refuge. Too often we put our hope in politics or political figures (v. 26), but what we need is a trust in the Lord. He is our deliverer. And as Proverbs 28:13-14 remind us, it’s when we confess our need for him that we find that our hearts are soft.

What Proverbs 29:1 warns us is that if we refuse to receive correction, we will become like Israel – stiff-necked. And the result for Israel was destruction. As King Hezekiah’s men organized these proverbs, they were reflecting upon their brothers and neighbours to the north who had fallen to the Assyrians. They were reflecting upon Solomon’s life and how he failed to discipline his son well, which resulted in the nation being divided. So we might wonder if there is any hope for us?

## **See the Wisdom of Christ**

When Jesus was born, he came and he learned the ways of the Lord. He lived under God’s law. And by learning God’s law, he suffered and became even more obedient (Heb. 5:8). Jesus had to learn obedience. So if he had to learn obedience as a sinless man, how much more will we need it?

Jesus brought about righteousness, justice, and equity by learning God's ways. He cared for the poor and needy. He came to set people free from the bondage of oppression, sin, and death. He proclaimed the gospel message – announcing in the synagogue in Luke 4 that the year of the Lord's favour had come that had been told by Isaiah (61:1ff) – that the Spirit of the Sovereign Lord was upon him to bring good news, setting people free from bondage.

And not only did Jesus announce good news, he brought that freedom. To people enslaved and enchained, captured by the demonic, he spoke the Word of the Gospel and set prisoners free. In Mark 5, a man who had been so tortured by sin, a man who had been bound by chains and yet could not be free, found himself liberated not by throwing off restraint, but by coming under the word of the Gospel.

And this is what Jesus does. He comes and he proclaims the year of favour from the Sovereign King. He tells us that the way of life is not by throwing off restraint, but by accepting the ways of our God.

John Lennon wanted to throw off national boundaries, religious ideology, and see peace come. Yet Lennon couldn't experience this himself. He was known for his rebelliousness, and yet he couldn't find peace. He was known as being possessive, angry, and explosive. So even the ideal that Lennon wanted, he couldn't find it in himself.

But I can imagine a world with perfect harmony. I can imagine a place where there are no nations and borders. I can imagine a world without hunger and oppression. But it's a world where God has dealt with evil once and for all – by punishing the wicked or by forgiving sinners who have trusted in the blood of the one who came and learned obedience through suffering.

And that world is the world we work for, live for, and wait for. It's not something we have to imagine. There is a King who is coming perfectly to reign.