

Proverbs 31 - DiCicco

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[0:00] Well, good morning. It's good to say that again. Glad you're all here with us. I didn't get the jobs that I got growing up or in my early days of my career.

Perks can be pretty beneficial. I worked at Chick-fil-A. It was my first paid job where somebody could fire me, as Pastor Godoy put it. At college, I worked in the kitchen. And at both of these, one of the great perks of working with food is that the perks are the food itself.

We had good discounts at Chick-fil-A, and at college, we got free meals, which was great. We ate early before everyone else, and often we were allowed to bring in a friend. And, you know, as things like this happen, as perks get used, the boundaries of them get pushed a little bit more and a little bit more.

And one of the guys who worked for me in the kitchen, he, you know, he had a wife and two small kids. And so he would bring them in. And that sort of makes sense.

You can't bring your wife and leave your two kids at home. But over time, these perks began to be abused. That one was a bit understandable. We had to set some boundaries.

[1:28] But at Chick-fil-A, it reminded me that in my early days there, there was people who would work in the back and people who worked in the front of house. I worked in the front of house to start. And some of the guys in the back, right before their shift closed, they would drop extra chicken in the fryers so that their friends on the line could stuff bags full of chicken.

And then they would order their, you know, discounted food and get a little bag stuffed with six or eight chicken breasts instead of the one sandwich they were supposed to have. They had perks, both their position in the kitchen, let them do that, and their discount.

Obviously, one of those perks was allowed. The other one was an abuse of their privileged position. It seems to be a thing that as people get perks, as we have benefits, we want to use them.

Maybe sometimes in ways they shouldn't be, but we want to share them with others. They're for our family because they're hungry, which is what these guys at Chick-fil-A were doing. They were bringing home very cheap produce.

But we often want to use our perks for the benefit of others. And it's, you know, it's a little bit unethical to do that. And the lines get gray and blurred.

[2:42] But what if that was okay? What if that's how God actually designed the world to work? Wouldn't it be great if God designed the world to work so that you could put your perks to use for others?

It would be good if we could take advantage of a position that we have. We started in Proverbs six weeks ago now, in the beginning of January, and we sort of set the table for this series.

We said it would be sort of like a banquet coming through this book. And as we've gone through, we've heard little sermons, topical sermons on diligence and sloth, on money, on speech.

And one of the things that has come up over and over again is that as we hear the voice of wisdom and learn to live wisely, there are certain benefits that come to us as followers and fearers of God. Dan said in his sermon on sloth that sloth leads to poverty, but diligence leads to prosperity. Tad pointed out that in Proverbs, as it sort of gives us a picture of the wise, that wisdom, the trajectory of wisdom, bends towards wealth.

[3:57] As we looked at speech, we saw that speech had this power to persuade. And so the question, as we sort of walk through this, is, okay, if wisdom gives us these perks, if living in God's world according to the ways God has intended gives us these things, how do we handle these things well?

I don't know how you reacted. Some of these statements were, I don't know, somewhat shocking, meant to be provocative. I wonder if you flinched a little bit at some of these things, that the

trajectory of wisdom bends towards wealth, or that speech is intended to persuade, even motivate. But what do we do with that? Because I think in our day and age, we're sort of primed to see these goods, these perks of living wisely, as sort of primed for abuse.

We are too well aware of the human condition. You can turn on the news and the rich, they get richer. They're not generous with what they have.

The diligent poor who work hard, they're exploited by those in power. Speech? Well, speech itself is used to twist and to spin, not just to motivate, but to manipulate others.

[5:13] So if these are really goods, what do we do with them? What does Proverbs have us do with these goods? Well, as we walk through Proverbs 31 this morning, I think this final section, these two final speeches, sort of give us the final course of this meal.

You can call it dessert if you want, or whatever the best final course for you is. I don't have a sweet tooth, but whatever this best final course is for you, it's going to answer this question.

How do we handle these so-called goods without taking advantage of them? What do we do with them? I think this text has been placed here, like Dave mentioned last week, put together to answer this question.

Before we go through the text together, let me just pray for us, and we'll dive in. Father, would you give us eyes to see your Son in your Word, ears to hear your wisdom, that we might be trained to live in a way that reflects his image among this world.

Amen. As Dave read for us, you might have heard, again, a new contributor to the book of Proverbs, the words of King Lemuel.

[6:34] If you were really listening, you actually heard these were his mother's words. So he gets named, but she does get the credit. And we could sort of get lost on wondering who exactly this is.

And I think the identity is not so important. He was a king in Israel of some sort. We know even less about his mother, but what's important is the placement of this speech. These first nine verses of Proverbs 31 sort of go together.

Verses 10 through 31 are their own portion. We'll get to that in just a second. But it's put here at the end because Proverbs has been sort of leading us along a path, moving us from the very beginning, and if you remember the first few weeks, of sort of a beginner's course in making wise choices.

Really black and white questions, right and wrong. It's gotten more and more complicated. You've heard it as we've talked about sloth and wealth and learning from creation and the wisdom it has. And now here at the end, chapter 31 begins with this little speech from a mother to her son on what is not black and white, but what is most fitting for someone of his position.

[7:41] It is not right for kings, she says. She talks about what is fitting, how to use the goods that he might have. Two sort of controversial goods sort of pop up in this thing, but before we get to them, one is sort of a review for us.

It's more of a black and white good. It's the first thing she says. It's a little bit striking. She says, do not give your strength to women, your ways to those who destroy kings. Which is quite a description.

It's definitely not the description we would want to give. We're more, you know, more happy to describe women as the last half of this chapter does. You know, an excellent wife. But what she's doing is pointing out that actually this king is pursuing women, and by this she means sexual fulfillment, maybe the good of relationships, in a way that is not suited to the good.

I say this because the way she addresses him, she calls him her son, son of my womb, son of my vows. She points out that she, as his mother, is vowed to his father.

I'm guessing another king. But when she exhorts him, she says, don't give your strength to women. Plural. I mean, Proverbs paints this good of marriage or sexual fulfillment in pretty black and white terms throughout the book.

[9:00] You can just skim backwards. Proverbs chapter 30, verse 20. We read it last week. This is the way of an adulteress. She eats and wipes her mouth and says, I have done nothing wrong. Proverbs presents this as clearly the wrong way to do something.

There is a right and a wrong way to pursue sexual fulfillment. And she sort of calls her son out for his abuse. There's no gray here. This is a black and white matter.

But then she moves on to more controversial goods. First is the good of power or authority. She says, it is not fitting for kings to pursue in excess these goods that are going to destroy you.

Meaning that there is a right way to use your authority, your power, your influence. And what this will do will actually destroy what you're intended to do with your position. It's not for kings to drink wine, for rulers to take strong drink. These things, she says, destroy kings. And drink is actually the second maybe controversial good in Proverbs.

[10:02] Because while the king is told to maintain the good of his position by not giving in to strong drink, the poor are offered a chance to use this to an end.

Give strong drink to the one who is perishing. It's right there in verse 6. Wine to those in bitter distress. Let them drink and forget their poverty. And remember their misery no more. So while the pursuit of many women outside of a marriage relationship is sort of presented as a black and white, don't do this, power is presented as a good. And we know it's fraught with its tensions. We'll get there in just a second. Also is drink, strong drink. What may not be fitting for a king is fitting for the poor. They're encouraged to use drink in a certain way. And what we see in this opening section is Proverbs is training us actually to be wise users of good.

[11:05] Those who are able to capably use created goods. That alcohol exists in this world. Dave pointed out that there are things we learn from creation that teach us something.

God could have created the world without certain things. But because they are in it, the wise learn to use them. Proverbs trains us to be capable users of goods. But wisdom is not content to simply show us the goods and send us out to use them however we want.

Proverbs isn't training us just to be capable users of created goods. She wants us to be capable users of goods for a purpose. To use goods for something.

For the king, for those in power, they use their goods toward a certain end. To those who drink, also towards a certain end. Verse 7 is, I don't know, it's a little bit striking.

It's not something that we might often read or preach from in church. Let the poor drink and forget their poverty. Wine and remember their misery no more. Let's just say off the bat that Proverbs is not condoning excess here.

[12:19] The good of strong drink in some way has to do with forgetting. It's why the king is not to drink. Lest he forget the decrees and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.

But the poor are given license to drink. That they might forget. So how exactly does Proverbs help us walk through this? First of all, it doesn't condone excess.

You flip back to chapter 23. The end of that chapter has a long discourse. A long speech on the dangers of excessive drinking.

I'll just read verse 29 and 30 for you. It asks us, Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause?

Redness of eyes. It's those who tarry long over wine. Who go out to try mixed wine. So excess of alcohol is not something Proverbs is interested in.

[13:14] Nor is it the right way to pursue this good. But Proverbs does celebrate the good of alcohol as a gift from God. Proverbs 3 verse 10 speaks of the one who honors God with wealth.

That's what it says. Your barns will be filled with plenty. And your vats will be bursting with wine. A full wine cellar is a reward from God for fearing him, according to Proverbs.

But again, at the same time, to abuse a created good always ends badly. Chapter 21 verse 17 says, Whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man, and he who loves wine and oil will not be rich. So if you are pursuing the good life that Proverbs is painting a picture of, don't pursue goods in excess. To take advantage of created goods just for their perks is not beneficial.

It's self-destructive. It's what Pastor Godoy mentioned when we talked about sloth. It's an excess of the good of rest. So the poor are encouraged to somehow enjoy the goodness of wine or strong drink according to its good design.

[14:24] A good design that Psalm 104 describes as gladdening the hearts of men. Proverbs is training us to be capable users of created goods. Training us to understand the world that God has created and to use it in a wise way.

As those who fear him. The second sort of controversial good is power. And this in Proverbs is also a good.

I know in our day we often flinch at this. Clearly it's a good that not everyone has. This ruler is not a democratically elected official. He is the king. He was born into this position.

He's already clearly abusing it. And his mom is not telling him not to forget the rights of the afflicted unless he has done that and is just pursuing his own pleasure. Again, we are primed for abuse. We know that absolute power corrupts absolutely. For many, maybe some of us here, power, the existence of power or authority in this world, is not a created good.

[15 : 27] It seems more like a created evil. It's coercive and oppressive. And all forms of power need not just be checked or balanced, but just uprooted. Constantly torn down.

I think Proverbs understands that. Chapter 28, verse 15 says, Like a roaring lion or a charging bear is a wicked ruler over a poor people.

But again, Proverbs challenges this. Black and white understandings of these controversial goods. Just the next verse. It's true. A ruler who lacks understanding is a cruel oppressor.

But he who hates unjust gain will prolong his days. Proverbs doesn't want to just train us to see the goods that God has made. Or to know how to use them.

But how to use them for good. Remember, this is a graduate course in ethics. It's not the beginner course in right and wrong. We have moved through Proverbs to the more difficult to parse out gray matters.

[16 : 28] And it takes much more gray matter to figure out how to use these controversial goods. It takes thought and consistency. Power has a good for which it is created.

That's what verse 8 and 9 says. To the king, his mother says, Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth and judge righteously. Defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Wouldn't it be good if our rulers did this? If they were consistent in wise living. If they feared the Lord so that they might open their mouth for those who can't open it for themselves.

For those who have rights but no way to enact them. If our judges judged righteously. If we defended the rights of the poor and needy. Wouldn't it be a good world if those in power did that? Maybe there's application for us here. You know, it's easy for those in power to use their perks well. But what about those of us who weren't born monarchs?

[17 : 35] Those of us who aren't kings and queens. Those who weren't born into privilege. Great Proverbs teaches us to be capable users of God's created goods. To defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Well, I can't even get my rights to be heard. Well, like this king.

We know the story of one who had all rights. The privilege of his position offered him all the perks of heaven. In Mark chapter 10, Jesus, he calls himself the son of man.

It was this figure from Daniel chapter 7 who had all power and all authority over the whole earth. And he tells his disciples as they're fighting for power amongst one another. He says, you know what?

This son of man, this one who has all dominion over the world. He came not to be served. But to serve. And to give his life as a ransom for many.

[18 : 33] And Philippians chapter 2 tells us that though Jesus had equality with God, he had all the perks of heaven. He didn't take advantage of them. But he humbled himself to the form of a servant.

Even to the point of death on a cross for you and I. That we might enjoy every spiritual blessing in him. Gain the perks of his position.

Again, that's great for Jesus and it's great for the king. What about those of us who weren't born into power? This king, Lemuel, had perks of his position.

So is it only those who are in power who can work for the good of others? I think Proverbs actually answers that question by giving us another new character.

Not just a new contributor. We've had those back and forth. King Lemuel isn't really a surprise. We had the words of Agur last week. And there are lots of people who add to this book. But at the end of a book, Proverbs does something that most literature professors will tell you never to do.

[19 : 37] Which is introduce new characters, new concepts, new things right at the end of your book. You want to pick up on the things that you sort of started at the beginning. Like maybe the son from Proverbs chapter 1 through 9.

He would have been a great person to put at the end. Like, okay, look how this boy has grown up in wisdom and now he is great at handling this world and all that it throws at him. But no, Proverbs introduces for us a new character.

The excellent wife. The woman of valor. It's another way to translate those words. A woman of valor. I wonder how it hit your ear when it was read.

When Dave read the characteristics of this woman. She lived today. She had social media. She would be, you know, the homesteading, homeschooling, homemaker extraordinaire.

Did you hear how she lives her life? She gets up, you know, at 3 a.m. to make fresh croissants for her family. And they're there waiting for them. While those are rising in, you know, in the oven.

[20:43] She's actually, what does it say? She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong. So she's in the garage doing CrossFit or something. She has multiple channels going on at the same time. Multiple side hustles going on, too.

She's buying land. She's farming. She's investing. I mean, come on. If she did exist today and there were these social media accounts, I think most of us would call AI pretty quick.

Like, this is a fake account. There's nobody like this. If she existed, she's probably the kind of person who, you know, on her screen time app would have like 25 minutes of spare time a week. 25 is a high bar. Some of us might be able to get close to that, but 25, that's pretty high. This sort of picture of this woman, this almost caricatured picture, causes some people to say, well, she can't be real, so she must actually just be a picture of lady wisdom.

Right? This character we've had throughout the book, right? You don't want to introduce a new character at the end, so maybe what's happening here is we're calling back to this wisdom who calls out in chapter 1, who speaks about herself in chapter 8 and 9.

[22:02] Maybe this is lady wisdom. A personification of all of that the wise person does. Maybe that's who she is.

I mean, after all, she's described in verse 10, did you notice, as far more precious than jewels. That's how wisdom's been described throughout the book, right? Well, I think that's problematic for a couple of reasons.

One is that, I mean, throughout Proverbs, wisdom isn't portrayed as having a husband or children. For one, wisdom is also normally the subject of her own speech.

She's the one speaking. She is spoken about, but she is calling out to the fool, to the simple, to turn. This woman is the object of praise rather than the subject of wisdom.

She's slightly different. She's not really talked about like this, lady wisdom. And so I don't think Proverbs 31 is just a personification of wisdom, not just a picture painted of true wisdom.

[23:08] No, I think she is herself the picture of wise living. She's not wisdom herself, but she is herself the picture of wise living. Not a personification of wisdom, but an exemplification of wisdom.

I mean, this after all, maybe you've read the footnote in your Bible, this is an acrostic poem, verses 10 through 31, which means that each line of this poem begins with the next letter of the alphabet.

I mean, we have things like this in English. We have acronyms. We have short, punchy sayings. Things that help us remember stuff.

This acrostic poem was a tool for memorization. I don't know if any of you are in sales or maybe you've seen The Office, which is where I learned this, but, you know, the acronym ABC is always be closing.

You know, you're always trying to sell somebody. Or, you might remember from elementary school, stop, drop, and roll. You know, for that moment that will come in all of our lives when we catch fire, we know exactly what to do.

[24:08] This is what this Proverbs 31 woman is. It's a mnemonic device to capture all that wisdom is in this book. She is herself the picture of wise living.

I mean, just notice, I mean, she is closely related to wisdom. Just notice how she's described far more precious than jewels. You know, she has been taught by wisdom. You can see in verse 26, she opens her mouth with wisdom.

The teaching of kindness is on her tongue. She is the one who embraces the invitation of wisdom from chapter one. She's embraced this invitation, has learned from wisdom, not only cognitively, but she's put things to work.

She is diligent. You know, she is a good example of the kind of work that Pastor Godoy exhorted us to a few weeks ago. And just look at verse 13. She seeks wool and flax and works with willing hands.

Verse 15, she rises while it is still night and provides food for her household, portions for her maidens. She is a diligent woman. She's not slothful. But she's also intelligent and industrious.

[25:13] Verse 16, she considers a field and she buys it. With the fruit of her hand, she plants a vineyard. She perceives that her merchandise is profitable and her lamp does not go out at night.

She does seem to be a little bit impossible. I mean, she rises while it's still night and she doesn't put her lamp out. She says, you might get three or four hours of sleep. Maybe the picture of her in your mind is becoming clearer.

She's got deep bags under her eyes. She's almost a caricature, like the beauty of the woman in Song of Solomon. Nose like towers and teeth like goats.

But this picture is a portrait of true wisdom. She is herself the picture of wise living and she's embraced the invitation of wisdom. Her wisdom has resulted in a good life.

This wisdom is almost a means to an end. Her diligence has brought in wealth to her family. It's, I mean, in part allowed her husband to be one who is at the gates of the city.

[26:18] That's where the decisions were made. It's influence over culture. Wisdom is almost a means to an end. Is this how we view wisdom? How we view the fear of the Lord?

I mean, at the very least, this woman, she's pictured that the fruit of her wise life is presented as a real motivator in pursuing good. And this is how it has been all throughout Proverbs.

Living wisely brings its perks. She's an example of wisdom not just as she embraces the invitation of wisdom and lives according to its design but also because she enjoys wisdom's perks.

Did you notice? She's not someone stoic. She's not someone who fears the Lord or is wise for wisdom's sake. But she really pursues the perks of wise living.

Like one of the other Proverbs says, a married woman hunts down a precious life. She's a picture of this. Did you notice verses 21 and 22? She's not only pursuing these goods and using them for comfort.

[27:23] Verse 21, she's not afraid of snow for her household but all her household are clothed in scarlet. They're comfortable. She enjoys wisdom's perks.

The wealth she has made for herself not only allows them to live in comfort but read verse 22, she makes bed coverings for herself and her clothing is fine linen and purple. Not only comfort but even luxury.

And this in some ways is praised. She enjoys the good life that fearing the Lord and following this route that wisdom has set out might give to her.

This woman of valor. She's an example of wisdom not just in that she embraces the invitation, the call of wisdom, not just that she enjoys the perks that wisdom brings but also that she employs wisdom's perks for the good of others.

And this is how she is a picture that stands next to this king and sort of answers our question. Well okay, if we're supposed to use the goods that God has given for the good of others to be capable users of created goods is it only due to position that we are able to do this?

[28:36] You know, the king, the firstborn son of the monarch is probably the most powerful person in the land but a woman who's the wife of some man in town far lower on the social ladder in this day.

And yet she is an example of employing wisdom's perks for the good of others. I mean, right off the bat she's wise for the good of her family.

I mean, that's the first thing that's really said about her. Verses 11 and 12, the heart of her husband trusts in her. He will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not harm all the days of her life.

Verse 15, she rises and feeds her household. Verse 27, just sort of summarizes her. She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.

She uses the goods of this created world to serve other people. First, those in her family but she's also wise for the good of society. One of the things that Tad pointed out in his sermon on wealth is that the righteous rich are not just rich for themselves but they are generous towards others.

[29:50] That wealth is put to use. This is the same for this woman. The righteous rich are generous and so is she in verse 20. She opens her hands to the poor. She gives generously to those in need.

Reaches out her hands to the needy. Her house even has influence. Like we mentioned her husband, verse 23, is known in the gates. He sits among the elders of the land. She not only has learned from wisdom but she instructs others in wisdom.

Verse 26, she opens her mouth with wisdom. The teaching of kindness is on her tongue. She is one who has learned to use these goods not just for the benefit of her family but for the benefit of those

around her.

Her children, those in society, those who live near her. What is the end of the picture we have of this woman?

She looks well to the ways of her household. She opens her mouth with wisdom. She reaches out to the poor. She employs wisdom's perks for the good of others and the result of all of this, her children rise up and call her blessed or her husband also.

[30 : 58] He praises her and here's what they say. Many women have done excellently but you surpass them all. There's that word again from the beginning, right?

The excellent wife. Many women have done excellently but you surpass them all. It sort of starts out as this picture of, you know, no one is like this.

At the end, it's like, well, many women. Many women are diligent in their house. Many people are able to put their hand to the plow and work hard or able to open their hand and give generously to others.

This is not a distinctly Christian thing. The city of Wheaton is full of people who have a lot of money who give it and invest it in many places in the community.

It's not only those who fear the Lord who can work for society. Other people can do real good, can be benevolent for the sake of others. What is it that sets this woman apart?

[32 : 02] What is it that makes her surpass them all? Verse 30, charm is deceitful and beauty is vain but a woman who fears the Lord is greatly to be praised. This is the high praise given to this woman.

This is what sets her apart from the many women who have done excellently. Many have done this but a woman who fears the Lord, she is to be praised.

Again, maybe we hear from this woman if Proverbs teaches us that those who fear the Lord will embrace the invitation of wisdom, learn to enjoy the perks of wise living and to employ these perks for the goods of others, how much more should you and I who follow Christ do the same?

Knowing that our labor is not in vain. That's the exhortation, the encouragement Paul gives at the end of 1 Corinthians 15. Because of the resurrection, we can work hard knowing our labor is not in vain.

How much harder can we work than this Proverbs 31 woman to employ the perks of wise living for the good of others, knowing that the Lord underwrites our work and will cause it to bear fruit?

[33 : 14] And how much more should we who have already been given every spiritual blessing in Christ, those of us who enjoy all of his perks, put to use our spiritual benefits, for the everlasting spiritual good of all?

She is praised for employing wisdom's perks in this life. What if we as a church employed the spiritual blessings we have in Christ for the good of those who do not know him?

So as we come to a close, as we are asking, trying to answer this question, what do we do with goods that come from wise living? these things like speech or power or money that seem primed for abuse?

What is it Proverbs wants to teach us as we close the book? I think Proverbs wants to encourage us to take full advantage of wisdom's perks.

Take full advantage of wisdom's perks. wisdom because wisdom puts goods to use serving others. Wisdom calls us to pursue, to embrace her invitation, but then to not only enjoy this for ourselves, and that's an important part of wise living, but to employ these goods, these perks, for the benefit of others.

[34 : 33] Not just simple goods like work and wealth, but even complicated ones like power. So wisdom handles dangerous goods with care. Wisdom's not content just to be capable of something, to know there is a good and to use it, but to be capable for something, capable for the good of others, to be careful not to take advantage of the benefits in each good, but actually to take full advantage of wisdom's perks for the benefit of all.

If we would be wise, if we would fear the Lord, if we would have character that bears the mark of wise living in our day and age, you and I need to learn to take full advantage of wisdom's perks. Would you pray with me? Our good and gracious God, from you every good and perfect gift has come.

Would you teach us, Lord, how to recognize this and then to live accordingly that we might be good stewards of that which you have given us. In Christ's name, amen.