

Sermon 39, Biblical Karma, Proverbs 11:24-31

Proposition: In God's world, do good, get good; do evil, get evil.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the concept of Karma is not, at root, a Christian one. If you recall, karma essentially says that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. If you see someone suffering, the iron law of karma means that that person did something to deserve that suffering, either now or in a previous life. Karma is the law of individual retribution, and there are no exceptions to it. This doctrine is a very comforting one, because it assures us that if we are good we will prosper and that there is no such thing as a suffering innocent person. But precisely for those reasons, it is also inadequate and just plain wrong. You see, the Biblical view teaches the solidarity of the human race. We are all in this together, and when you see an innocent person suffering it's not because of his crimes in his previous life but rather because of his membership in a guilty race. To be human is to be subject to the human condition of sin and misery. Yes, of course, much suffering is individually deserved. But much suffering isn't. Much success is individually deserved; but much isn't. Yet with those qualifications made, I think the term "karma" can be rehabilitated, filled with Christian content, when we understand that not everything is individual in God's world. Much is corporate. Yet on the individual side of things, and in general, God's world is one which if you do good, you'll get good, while if you do evil, you'll get evil.

I. Getting by Giving: Generosity Creates Wealth, vv. 24-26

The first three verses of our text this morning dilate on the theme of how generosity creates wealth. Now, we have seen over and over that this is true. “Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed” (Pro 19:17). In other words, generosity creates wealth because our Father loves to see us share. Remember how Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes that the boy was willing to share? But brothers and sisters, don’t take my word for it. Studies conducted using the best empirical methodology that we have say the same thing: Arthur Brooks's *Who Really Cares: Who Gives, Who Doesn't, and Why It Matters*:

In 2000, controlling for education, age, race, and all the other outside explanations for giving and income increases, a dollar donated to charity was associated with \$4.35 in extra income. Of this extra income, \$3.75 was due to the dollar given to charity. . . . All told, this is evidence that charity has an excellent return on investment, far better than the return from the vast majority of stocks and bonds. (pgs. 146-147)

Did you hear that? Generosity makes you rich. In fact, one dollar given, as best as we can tell, comes back as three dollars and seventy-five cents. Now, the stock market is supposed to give you six to ten percent annually. But God gives between 375% and 435%. He doesn’t promise to give it annually, of course. But He still promises to give it.

So can you trust God and be generous?

A. Hoarding Makes You Poor, v. 24

One gives freely, yet grows all the richer. Of course he does! He trusts God to provide for his needs. Brothers and sisters, do you know who provides for your needs all the time, whether you trust Him or not? Of course! Your loving Heavenly Father gives you everything you need. He wants you to be like Him, and in general, He rewards your generosity with greater wealth while chastening your stinginess with greater poverty.

You know, tithing is the only area where God says to test Him. Giving to the poor is the only virtue He has promised to reward financially. Why are you hanging on to that money instead of sharing it? Are you afraid that God won’t take care of you?

B. Generosity Makes You Rich, v. 25

You mustn’t be! The generous person will be enriched — or in the more colorful Hebrew idiom, *made fat*! God will fatten you into the person He wants you to be, as Joel Osteen might say. The one who gives will receive. Now, the proverb doesn’t get into this, but again, if you’re giving *in order to get* you won’t receive. God rewards generosity, but He doesn’t let Himself be manipulated. You water people and help them grow, and you will be watered so that you too can flourish like a plant. This is God’s ordinary way of working. Now, do some generous people lose everything? Of course. But brothers and sisters, the ordinary tendency of generosity is to enrich you, while the ordinary tendency of hoarding is to impoverish you. Period.

C. People Curse Price Gougers, v. 26

And anyway, people curse price gougers. What’s in view here is the practice of buying up grain in order to drive up the price. You know there will be a demand for something, so you corner the

market in that thing and wait for prices to quintuple. Then you sell it and make a killing. Solomon says that that kind of behavior is cursed because it harms ordinary people. Now, most of us are in little danger of doing that. I don't see any railroad or timber or Internet tycoons in the congregation in front of me. But brothers and sisters, how might we be guilty of this? The principle involved here is really one of equity. People curse anyone who uses his power to require something manifestly unfair in order to benefit himself. Fathers, you can violate the spirit of this precept by forcing your children to buy their own food and clothing before they're ready for that kind of responsibility. You can kick your 18-year-old out of the house and tell him to make his own way in the world; in our developed economy, such an approach is deeply unfair. Wives, you can tell your husbands that they won't be getting any sexual intercourse unless they start picking up their socks, or unless they take at least two overtime shifts per month. Children, you can tell your parents that they won't be getting any respect unless they purchase you the latest videogame. The bottom line here is that anytime you have something other people want, you can manipulate the situation so that you profit from their distress. That's evil. Humankind in general reprobates that kind of behavior. And the implication, based on where this proverb is positioned, is that Jehovah hates it too.

How dare you abuse your position of power in order to aggrandize yourself at the expense of others! Look instead at Jesus, who had the salvation that the whole world needed and who chose to pour Himself out to death for us instead of demanding that we pay more than we could ever afford in order to enrich Him.

II. Karma for Real, vv. 27-31

Well, the first three verses taught something of a paradox: Those who give will get richer, while those who refuse to give will get poorer. The rest of the verses here teach more straightforward truths.

A. The One who Seeks Good Finds Grace, v. 27a

First of all, the one who seeks what is good will find grace. That is, people (and God Himself) will be well disposed toward someone who is diligently seeking what is good. Now, this needs to be good in general, not some particular good. Someone who is only seeking one good at the cost of many others will find not grace but abuse. Right? If I have a student who insists on good grades at the cost of politeness, relationships with me and the class, and true learning, that student will not find favor with me or with any other teacher. Really, though, to seek all goods at once is only possible by seeking God. Only in seeking and finding Him can we avoid seeking one good at the cost of others. For instance, it's often the case that we seek peace at the cost of truth, or wealth at the cost of integrity, or success at the cost of honesty. But you can only find God by repudiating all sins and seeking all good because it is good.

Now, the New Testament (and indeed already the Old Testament) tells us that there is no one who seeks good things, no one who seeks God, apart from God's first seeking him. But again, this book of Proverbs is wisdom for sons. Given the truth that you are a son of God through faith if you believe in Jesus, then you already know that God has sought you and given

you the grace to seek Him back. His grace, in other words, enables you to seek good and thus to find even more grace. This is true even in human relationships. Someone who doesn't know or care about you won't get to know or care about you just because seek good. But someone who already knows you and already cares what you're doing will be even more well-disposed toward you when he sees you diligently seeking good.

B. The One who Seeks Evil Finds Trouble, v. 27b

The flip side of this, of course, is that the one who seeks evil finds trouble. If you want evil, you can have it! This applies to gangbangers and criminals, of course. But it also applies to nice church people like us. Here's what I mean. Imagine a day when you're tired, you don't feel right, and your spouse seems to determined to push your buttons. You decide that you're just going to give in to your feelings and be a massive grump for the rest of the day. That is the definition of seeking evil. When you seek relief from stress in yelling, grumping, fussing, and generally being the kind of person you wouldn't want to live with, you will find trouble. We all know that. Solomon is just reminding us of it here. Don't give in to evil; you will find trouble!

Now, how can you avoid giving in to evil? Only in the power of Christ. Yes, that's right: When temptation comes, flee to Him for peace. He can help you say no to the desire to react wrongly.

C. Mammon Can't Save, v. 28a

Well, we return to the theme of the first section of our text. The one who makes money his god will fall, because mammon can't save. Riches won't hold you up forever. They won't keep you alive, or make you a holy, happy person united to God and your community.

So don't worship them! Give them away. Trust the God who provides, not the riches that He provides.

D. The Righteous Flourishes like a Leaf, v. 28b

But the righteous flourishes like a green leaf. Notice the mismatch: clearly the righteous person is one who doesn't trust in riches. The righteous person is one who has faith in Christ, not in stuff! And as Psalm 1 and many other places say, the righteous person with his roots in the living water of the Holy Spirit will flourish like foliage.

What kind of life do you want? A fall, a fall that's certain to come if you make money your god? Or a flourishing life, one in which you prosper amazingly because God Himself is feeding and watering you? Brothers and sisters, money can't make you flourish like a leaf. Only God can do that. Won't you trust Him and stop sinning by trusting money?

E. Trouble Your Own House, Destroy Your Inheritance, v. 29a

Well, the proverbs go on to warn us that if you trouble your own house you'll inherit the wind. Harm your wife, your children, your siblings, and you won't get anything when your parents die. You'll get air, and air is a synonym for emptiness. Has anyone here ever joked about "No, this bag isn't empty. It's full of air"? Well, if you want an inheritance that's full of air, you can have it. The righteous person, by contrast, blesses his household. He helps his mother. He provides for his wife and kids. He encourages his family in godliness according to his place and calling.

F. The Fool Becomes a Slave, v. 29b

But just like the man who troubles his own household, so the fool too will experience problems. He will end up being a slave. Remember, Aristotle defined the slave as a living tool, as someone who lacked the capacity for self-direction and therefore was fitted by nature to be completely subject to the will of another. We may recoil in horror from this definition, yet it remains the foundation of our penal system here in this nation with the highest incarceration rate in the world. Brothers and sisters, Solomon says that the fool who lacks the capacity for self-direction toward the good will end up as a slave to a wiser person. In our society, this slavery takes the form of terrible credit scores, welfare checks, and subsidized housing or even outright homelessness — but it is nonetheless a form of slavery in a very real sense. Be a fool, and become a slave.

Now, again, this is Biblical karma. Solomon is not suggesting that all slaves are enslaved because they were fools. Rather, he is saying that folly will lead to a condition equivalent in function if not in name to slavery. Don't be that fool! Instead, fear God and know Him so that you can be wise.

G. The Righteous Produces Life-Giving Fruit, v. 30a

The righteous grows the same kind of fruit that the tree of life grows — i.e., fruit that gives life. Now, all fruit gives life because it's food. But the message here is not just that the righteous gives natural life, sustained by natural food, but even that the righteous mediates spiritual life sustained by the sacramental food of the Tree of Life. How can that be? Ultimately, I would say, through spreading the good news of Jesus. We give life, not from ourselves, but by proclaiming the life that was manifested in Christ.

H. The Wise "Takes Lives" for Christ, v. 30b

Hence the second half of the verse, which talks about winning souls. This is the only place in the Bible that talks about "winning souls." The phrase is a bit of an odd one, because it is simply the Hebrew words for "takes lives," and in most places it has that sense or slaughtering or murdering. The one who takes lives is wise — clearly, here, meant in the ironic sense of capturing people for Christ. Notice that Solomon expects every righteous person to grow the life-giving fruits of the Tree of Life. We could also call these the fruits of the Spirit. The wise person spreads the gospel and thus catches lives just like a "fisher of men."

How can we do this? If you aim at nothing you're sure to hit it. If you have no plans to take lives, I can assure you that you won't. There's no such thing as accidental evangelism. We as a church are moving toward outreach through divorce care and at Gillette College. Think about being wise and getting involved there, or in other ways. Christian education is a very important way of taking lives. Disciplining your children is a very important way of taking lives. Getting to know your neighbors is a very important way of taking lives. Be wise, and pursue these ways. It's what a wise son would do. What fruits of the tree of life have you grown recently?

I. The Righteous Have an Earthly Reward, v. 31a

Well, finally, we see that the righteous have an earthly reward — a reward, as we have seen, of prosperity, of blessing, and of seeing those whom they won for Christ grow up into Christian maturity. Now, Peter transforms this verse into a warning: The righteous is scarcely saved! And that is true as well. The fact that the righteous have an earthly reward is no reason for triumphalism. Brothers and sisters, take heed as to what your earthly reward might be. Biblical karma means that in some significant ways, you are going to experience the fruit of your deeds right here on earth. If they were bad deeds — which all of us have truckloads of — you are truly going to realize that the righteous is scarcely saved! Yet this is also a message of comfort, because the righteous can expect the good rewards of their actions too. Biblical karma has room, unlike pagan karma, for forgiveness. You are righteous, but you are saved.

J. The Ungodly Definitely Have an Earthly Reward, v. 31b

How much more will the ungodly suffer the rewards for their deeds, yes, even on this earth? They will not be saved, and therefore we can only imagine how awful must be the Hell to which to they are destined. They have no pangs in life, but they do have them at death. Don't be ungodly. Don't suffer the fate to which they are speeding. Instead, brothers and sisters, take refuge in Christ your Savior, looking to Him to save you even from your good deeds. Amen.