

Sermon 4, Gang Membership for Dummies, Proverbs 1:8-19

Proposition: Listen to your parents, because your life is at stake.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this morning to the first lecture of the book of Proverbs. The prologue is over; we have seen the thesis statement — and now we have the privilege of looking together at “chapter 1” — the first thing that the book has to say to its readers. What is that thing? It is that sin is a whole lot more serious than you think. Sin, in fact, is deadly. Here, at the beginning of the book, Solomon confronts us with an extremely stark kind of temptation. There is absolutely nothing subtle about how sin is presented here. Why is that? Because even the subtlest of sins is deadly. The difference between sins is only a difference of degree, not of kind, and so even the smallest sin is really no different than the gang violence and armed robbery presented here. Do you think it’s okay to murder people for \$50? If not, then you should be opposed to every sin, to sin in all its forms. That is the message King Solomon presents, the first thing he has to say to his readers.

I. The Basics of Wisdom: Listen to Your Parents, v. 8

Our text begins with the basics of wisdom. Wisdom is something that can be gained by listening to your parents. The instruction of your father and the teaching of your mother are absolutely basic! Proverbs should contain the same wisdom that you as a parent teach to your children. Indeed, in a rightly ordered world, the wisdom of Proverbs would be the wisdom that your parents taught to you. But whether you had good parents who taught you this wisdom or not, you now have the wisdom right here in your lap. So pay attention to it! You have no excuse; you cannot plead ignorance. Wisdom is intimate and tender; it is the teaching that loving parents pass on to their children — and it is here in front of you as God’s gift to you.

Have you thought of the Bible in these terms? “This is the instruction of a loving Father given to me — and only a fool would despise it?” Solomon doesn’t want you to think of this wisdom as something abstract and distant. It is something near, something right here, something close to you — “tremulous and tender,” as Andrew Lloyd Webber might have put it. So listen to

it! Listen to the wisdom of God, which addresses you through the written word and through the preached word.

II. The Attractiveness of Obedience, v. 9

But in addition to the direct appeal to listen, the father explains why the son ought to listen. Why should you pay attention to the wise instruction of God's word as mediated through your parents and teachers? The answer is that obedient people are attractive people. The "graceful ornament" that wisdom is actually means "an ornament that brings favor," or an ornament which is literally attractive. Do you want to be admired? Then listen to your parents as they teach you the word of God. Listen to the wisdom that's found in the rest of this book of Proverbs, and more broadly in the Bible as a whole. That's what this verse is saying. Wisdom is the best adornment you can put on your body! That, of course, is also how the book of Proverbs ends. "Favor is deceitful, and beauty is vain — but a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised." So, whether you're male or female, the message is clear: Wisdom, consisting in the fear of God, is the best ornament for your life. You can put on an Armani suit and still be a fool. You can wear enough makeup to choke a hippopotamus, and still be ugly. But the woman who fears Yahweh — she is praised; the man who fears Yahweh — he is attractive.

III. The Size of the Stakes, vv. 10-19

But our passage goes on to make clear just how big the stakes are. Sin is not ever a "little white lie" or a passing glance which doesn't really mean much. Sin, in the words of the sermon outline, will take you further than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay. And so this book of Proverbs, which contains wisdom for everyday life, begins with the most egregious example of sin that can be found — that is, armed robbery and murder as part of a gang.

Now, how many of you were solicited to join a gang this past week? Presumably, in our nice upper-middle-class suburban existence, gangs are things we see on TV, not things that we see in our homes and on the streets of our neighborhoods. Why, then, does this father warn his son against joining a gang and pursuing a lifestyle of armed robbery? The answer is that this sin is typical. Its wrongness is easier to see than most, though, because it is both a sin and a crime and because all of us know intuitively that murder is wrong. It's a Really Bad Sin. And so Solomon/the father brings it forward here as an example of what sin is like. If you want to know sin, don't think about stealing a grape from an open package at the supermarket. Think about lying in ambush and jumping out to slaughter unwary travelers. There's a big difference between those two things — but the lesser sin will eventually ripen into the greater if left unchecked.

A. How to Handle Temptation, v. 10

The father begins with a summary statement that explains how to deal with solicitations and temptations to sin. The answer to them is very simple: Don't give in! While it is true that you should not even mentally consent, the Hebrew word literally means something more like "begin to act upon." Don't even begin to do what the sinners want you to do!

Now, of course, sinners are only one source of sin. Obviously, this father is not so naive as to think that the world alone is the problem, and that the flesh and the Devil are not equally involved. But rather than warning at this juncture against internal temptations and the supernatural forces of evil, he simply presents one scenario of temptation as coming from the world. If sinners entice you, *don't give in!*

Now, obviously that's really good advice. But is it realistic? That is, how can you actually keep from giving in?

The answer is to get wisdom by listening to your parents and beyond that by listening to the word of God. You will learn to see the temptation for what it really is — a temptation rather than a can't-miss opportunity. The power of God, accessed through prayer and the discipline of wisdom, is what will keep you from being assaulted and defeated by temptation. Indeed, the father's rhetorical strategy here is to paint all sins with one brush — the brush of murder. Do you want to be a murderer? Then say yes to sin and to sinners. If that doesn't sound good, then stay away from sin altogether. One sin allowed, one sin consented to, will damn you to hell forever. If there's any sin you don't want to sin, then you need to shun sin altogether. And that, ultimately, is only possible through fearing the Lord and walking in the power of the Holy Spirit through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Proverbs, in other words, presupposes the gospel here. Only someone who already fears the Lord will be able to tell temptation to take a hike!

B. The Lure of Gang Membership, vv. 11-14

Well, the father continues to paint his scenario here. He wants to make clear the lure of gang membership. The gang offers belonging and riches. The father, of course, makes it clear that the temptation is not to hurt evil people who deserve it, but to attack the innocent without cause. In other words, he is inoculating his son against temptation by phrasing the words of temptation in a way that reveals what's really being suggested. And brothers and sisters, this is a major strategy that we ought to use to fight against temptation. Don't let the tempter put his spin on it; you put a gospel spin on it! So when that familiar stirring comes and you feel like you just want to see a little bit of sexy material, don't think of it as "I will feel so good and see some really beautiful women exposed for my pleasure." Think of it as "I am being asked to defile my own mind, to sully and despise and use someone's sister and someone's daughter, and to spit on God's good creation, not to mention my own wife, mother, and daughters. I am being asked to use people for my own pleasure rather than to love them as people."

What's the difference there? In one scenario, you're promising yourself pleasure if you sin. In the other, you're promising yourself the pain, shame, damage, and guilt of sin. Which way of thinking is more calculated to help you say no to sin?

Brothers and sisters, contemporary brain science has disclosed that the brain is tuned to notice specific things. You and I were created with the ability to dial in our focus, and we do so automatically. Specifically, our brain focuses first on what we expect to see. That's why it's mentally taxing to explore a new building or a new city. You don't know what you're going to see, and so you actually have to notice everything. Either that, of course, or you're focused on

just one thing: “I need to find out what street I’m on and which direction I’m going!” The point is that if your brain is expecting pleasure, it will be looking for the pleasurable elements in sin. But if your brain is expecting disgust and revulsion at the thought of sin, it will be looking for those elements instead. Modern cognitive science, in other words, is simply telling us what Solomon knew long ago: the way to prosper is to train yourself and your brain to notice and to expect the right things. When you get solicited to sin, you should instantly be thinking about the reality that you’re being asked to shed innocent blood, to be like someone who goes down to the pit. Did you notice that? The robbers compare themselves to those who go down to the pit in v. 12. They are saying, “We are like people on their way to Hell. Care to join us?”

This is the lure of sin — and the Bible’s message is “Resist and reject that lure!” Say no to drugs, say no to sin, say no to gangs — and do it by thinking about what that sin, that drug, that gang is really offering.

C. The Wages of Gang Membership, vv. 15-18

But the father not only explains what the gang will do; he also outlines the consequences of their behavior. If you walk in the way with them, you will be caught and killed. Even a bird is smart enough not to land in an obvious trap. But these sorts of sinners hunt down their own lives — that is, they not only land in the trap, they even build it! You will be snared by sin if you pursue it. That is the thing to remember whenever temptation comes knocking. Maybe it says “You need to yell at your child just this once so he knows how important this issue is to you.” Maybe it says “You need to lie to your spouse just this once so she doesn’t reject you.” Maybe it says “You need to join a gang/embezzle from your employer/lust after your coworker.” But the voice of wisdom says, “You need that like you an eternity in Hell!” The wise person sees the fruit of the way that temptation offers. He sees that to sin is suicidal.

D. How Greed Handles You, v. 19

How does greed handle you? It takes away your life. If you live to acquire stuff, and if you are willing to break God’s law to get it, then you are greedy. You love gain!

Now, you can have a conference on dealing with sexual sin and tons of people will come. But in our culture, there are very few conferences on greed. Why? Because greed is one of our national sins! Our culture has elevated greed into being almost a virtue. To want more money, to live for a good-paying job, to measure your children’s success by their salaries, is drummed into us from an early age. If someone’s only making \$30,000 a year then he’s probably a failure! That’s simply how we think in this culture. Brothers and sisters, the opposite of greed is called contentment. It’s a willingness to settle for what God gives you. It’s a willingness to trust that what He provides is enough.

It’s easy to think that cheating on your taxes is totally different from joining a gang and going out to commit armed robbery. “I will just not report xyz to the IRS, and presto! I have an extra \$5000 to play with.” But this verse tells us that *everyone* who is greedy will die just like the most egregious members of MS13.

So how do you respond to a message like this? Well, realize that if you are in Christ, you can hear the Father's voice. You can listen to parental instruction and the instruction of God's word because Jesus has opened your ears by His Spirit. Yes, you should fear God and accurately describe temptation to yourself. You should respond to it correctly. You should cultivate gratitude, which is the antidote to greed. And above all, you should recognize the wealth you have in Jesus Christ. You don't need to sin to get more! You don't need to worship money and evaluate people (including yourself) by their salary. You need to listen to your Father's instruction and obey the law of your mother. You need to recognize that sin kills, but that the righteousness you have in Christ delivers from death. Amen.