

Vanity of Vanities! All is Vanity!

Hespeler, 31 July 2022 © Scott McAndless

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23, Psalm 49:1-12, Colossians 3:1-11, Luke 12:13-21

You have heard, I imagine, the proverb that goes like this: *“Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.”* It is a saying that is usually credited to Benjamin Franklin, who did indeed include it in a book that he wrote, but he was probably not the first to say it.

The proverb has remained popular because it just seems like good common sense. If you wake up early, work hard all day and don't stay up all night in partying and frivolous pursuits, it promises, you will be rewarded, over time, with security and prosperity.

Capitalism's Promise

It is, in many ways, the promise that we are given in our modern capitalistic society – which is likely something that Benjamin Franklin also had in mind. We set up our free market, free enterprise system with the hope and expectation that it will create an environment where, if people work hard and apply themselves, they should be able to prosper. It is, in many ways, a wonderful promise.

Very Ancient Idea

But, as I say, it is not a promise that began with Franklin. The fact of the matter is that the Bible, and particularly the Book of Proverbs, is full of very similar promises.

Here are just a few: **“A wicked person earns deceptive wages, but the one who sows righteousness reaps a sure reward.”** (Proverbs 11:18) **“Diligent hands will rule, but laziness ends in forced labour.”** (Proverbs 12:24) **“The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.”** (Proverbs 13:4) **“In all toil there is profit, but mere talk tends only to poverty.”** Proverbs 14:23 **“Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established.”** (Proverbs 16:3)

So we have the same promise given in the Bible as is often made in our society. You work hard and you work smart, and you will be rewarded. And, since it is in the Bible, these Proverbs also add a certain moral promise to the idea. There is something virtuous about hard work and so the material reward that we are supposed to receive is a divine reward.

Looking from the Other Side

But there is also another side to all of this. If, as all of these proverbs state, we can be certain that virtue and hard work will *always* be rewarded with success and wealth, would that not also mean that we can assume, based on someone's situation in life, that we know how they got there. That is to say, if we see someone who is healthy, wealthy and wise, can we not assume that they must be early to bed and early



to rise hard-working types? If we see someone who is richly supplied, well then, they must have been diligent, right? Any one of these Proverbs we can take and turn around and assume, based on that, that somebody must have deserved their good fortune.

And, yes, that would also mean that if someone is poor or disadvantaged or has just never managed to get anywhere, well, that surely must be because they are lazy, unwise and foolish, right? The logic seems to be quite inescapable.

When the Proverbs fail

And here is where we see that there might be a certain problem with this kind of proverbial thinking. What do we do when things don't turn out that way, when good hard-working folk just don't manage to get ahead because of circumstances beyond their control? And what if it really doesn't seem as if the extraordinarily wealthy are more righteous and hard working than anyone else? What if, in fact, they turn out to be like that man in Jesus' parable this morning, selfish and self-centred greedy jerks? What then?

It is a question that many seem to be struggling with in these times. You may have heard of some of the unrest that is taking place in the labour market these days. You have certainly noticed, I would imagine, the stories of restaurants and other enterprises that seem to be constantly complaining about how they can't find anybody willing to work these days. Many businesses are severely understaffed and seem to be unable to find anyone willing to accept the jobs they are offering.

Turning Down Low-Wage Work

What you may not have heard about, however, is the other side of that problem. If you listen in the right ways and in the right places, you can hear the stories of the people who are not taking those jobs. And they will tell you why. They will tell you that they have been doing that kind of low-wage work for years, but, in all that time, it hasn't mattered how hard they have worked. They have been going early to bed and early to rise, but it has not resulted in them getting any healthier or wealthier. And so now they are getting wise.

They are saying that they can no longer afford to live in the cities where they are employed to serve the people who live there. They can no longer afford to live elsewhere because they would have to travel to the city, and they can't afford that. They are wise enough to calculate that if they moved to the place where the work is and took that low wage job, they would simply fall further and further behind financially as time went by. The promise of the proverbs seems to be broken. It's enough to make you think that maybe we need to throw out the proverbs altogether.

Qoheleth Understands

But if you think that all of that is just a frustration of modern life, and maybe especially of younger generations today, you might have another think coming. There is an ancient biblical author who completely understands all of that. We are not quite sure what his name was. He calls himself Qoheleth, which is left like that in some translations and in others translated to something like "the teacher." He also identifies himself as a king from the House of David, but that may just be a literary device, not necessarily an indication that he was a real king.

Certainly, the things that he writes about are not the struggles of kings who are trying to manage the rule of a country. They are the struggles of ordinary people who are just trying to hold on and make it in a world that doesn't really seem to care whether they work hard or not, they just can't get ahead.

Whoever he is, Qoheleth has obviously read the Book of Proverbs and has heard the promise that, if you work hard and apply yourself you will get ahead, and he has taken up his pen to say, "Hey, wait a minute, it just doesn't always work out like that."

Man, this is Vanity!

"Vanity of vanities, says Qoheleth, Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." And, when he says that, I imagine him much like a modern millennial who looks at the system they are inheriting – a system where they graduate from school with a massive debt, get a job that offers them no security and finds that it is financially impossible for them to ever own a home. What do they say? They say, "Man, this is a load of... vanity!" And I know they don't use the word *vanity* there, but that is maybe the closest word I could use in church.

And here I see Qoheleth echoing the sentiments of so many in the world today who have gotten so very tired of working for prosperity that never quite seems to arrive. **"What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity."** You work and you work and you work and instead of getting ahead all you get is behind on your sleep. It does sound very much like something that somebody might write today.

Both Messages in the Bible

And I really just wanted to highlight that we get both of these messages from the Bible. I know that there are lots of people who think that they can turn to the Bible and get an absolute, unchanging nugget of truth that they can hold onto forever. And the truth that we get from The Book of Proverbs would be a wonderful truth to hold onto. If you could know for sure that you deserved all of the good things that came to you and if you could be sure that people who experience misfortune deserve that, man, that would put us all at ease for so many of these anxieties that we carry around with us.

But biblical truth doesn't work like that. It is not that you can just pull out one text and say you have the perfect answer. What we are actually challenged to do is to find the truth in the tension between these two texts. We have to live with the truth proclaimed in Proverbs that everything happens because everyone gets what they deserve. And we have to live with the truth in Ecclesiastes that everything that happens is, well, vanity of vanities.

Jesus Works Out the Tension

And how you work out that tension is something that we all have to figure out for ourselves. And I do find it kind of interesting that we seem to see Jesus working it out in that parable we read this morning from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus worked it out, as he usually did, by turning it into a story. **"The land of a rich man produced abundantly,"** he said.

Here is a man who has experienced great prosperity. According to The Book of Proverbs, we should know why he is so fortunate. Obviously, he must be good and righteous and must have worked hard to deserve such prosperity. And, sure, maybe that is how things should work out. But Jesus is clearly telling a story that is grounded in real life. And he sees that, precisely because this man thinks he deserves all of his good fortune and therefore intends to rest upon it, all of that will be proven to be vanity of vanities.

What do I think that means? I think it is true that each one of us owes it to ourselves in this world to do our best. To work hard, to live the best life possible and to be good to others. It is good that we should hope to be rewarded for such things.

But the reality is that things don't always work out that way. What Jesus seems to be saying with this parable is that our greatest danger is to fall into thinking that the blessings we have received are given to us by anything but grace. So long as we begin to rely upon them, instead of on the one who is the ultimate giver, we will not find any meaning in any of it, not over the long term. We will also very easily fall into judging people unjustly when they don't succeed. And that **“is vanity and a great evil.”**