
Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck. My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent. If they say, "Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood; let us ambush the innocent without reason; like Sheol let us swallow them alive, and whole, like those who go down to the pit; we shall find all precious goods, we shall fill our houses with plunder; throw in your lot among us; we will all have one purse" – my son, do not walk in the way with them; hold back your foot from their paths, for their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed blood. For in vain is a net spread in the sight of any bird, but these men lie in wait for their own blood; they set an ambush for their own lives. Such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain; it takes away the life of its possessors.

(Proverbs 1:8–19)

Introduction

The story is told that Pastor Jeremiah Steeppek went to his first service as pastor of a new church dressed as a homeless man. Out of the thousands of people, only three said hello. People stared rudely at him and moved out of the way when he walked toward them. He sat near the front and was asked to move to the back. When the leader introduced the new pastor, he made his way to the front. People were fearful – and then shocked. The new pastor quoted Matthew 25:31–46 and then rebuked the congregation and said that they need to be faithful disciples.

This story has made the rounds. It has heaped guilt. But it never happened. And thankfully so.

We don't need to shock Christians in order for us to do the right thing. And we certainly should not lie in order to produce a righteous response. Rather, we should address such issues from the Scriptures. We should preach the Word. As we do so, increasingly we will become more conformed to the image of Jesus – who, by the way, was a homeless man – and as we do, we will grow in our appreciation for the sanctity of every life. How we view others and how we treat others will be impacted.

As is often said, our society is largely characterised, in the words of a previous pope, as a "culture of death." That is, human life is not regarded with the esteem with which God intended. The result is a whole lot of man-caused and unjustified death: homicide, euthanasia, abortion, and war. When life is cheap, death becomes the taken-for-granted norm.

For several years, we at BBC have endeavoured to observe Sanctity of Life Sunday, a day on which we bring biblical attention to this important, gospel-driven matter. The sermon in which this study is based was preached on that day in 2018.

In February 1997, former South African President Nelson Mandela signed into law the Termination of Pregnancy Act. That piece of legislation made it legal for a mother to have an abortion on demand. There were some term limits to the bill. Nevertheless, since then, hundreds of thousands – if not millions – of babies have been killed in South Africa, with legal sanction. Of course, we are not unique in the legalisation of such bloodshed. Hundreds of millions of babies throughout the world have been killed through abortion over the past fifty years of legalised abortion. The reason for this holocaust is a rejection of the biblical worldview of the sanctity of life. We therefore increasingly read of so-called “mercy killings” and “assisted suicides” and even death through negligence. (Consider the recent Life Esidimeni tragedy, in which 144 psychiatric patients died through sheer negligence.) We can add to this countless homicides, acts of terrorism, etc.

But there is another major component to the culture of death, which is often overlooked, and that is the matter of racism, ethnocentrism or tribalism. In addition to the obvious violations of the sanctity of life, we must note the general prejudice with which we tend to treat those who are different from us, in any number of ways. And this is a serious problem. It is serious because the attitudes (and related actions) that arise from the idea that one’s particular group of people are inherently more valuable than another is sinful.

It is not a long journey from this worldview to the creation of a culture of death. The genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia serve as sordid examples. But let’s not be “simple” (naïve) about the consequences of such arrogant prejudice in our own nation. Generally speaking, such attitudes have contributed to a general cheapening of human life.

Now, I do not intend to merely curse the darkness in this study. There is little need for me to convince us about the ubiquitous culture of death. It is obvious to any who have eyes to see. Rather, I desire to help us to practically develop a culture of life. This, in fact, in many ways, is fundamentally what the book of Proverbs is all about.

Proverbs was written to highlight that there are two ways a person can live, two paths on which a person can travel: the path of wisdom, which leads to life, and the path of folly, which leads to death. We might call these the path of reverence and the path of ruin. And this reverence or ruin is not merely a matter pertaining to the individual, but it pertains to the wider society as well. That is, as people, by the grace of God, walk the path of life, a culture of life is increasingly experienced in the wider society. Conversely, as people walk the path of death, a culture of death is increasingly the norm in the wider society. Our

passage points to this. The thesis of this text is simple: The covenantally faithful home creates a culture of life.

The Context

Our text has much to say about the sanctity of life. As it is with the rest of this book, the context is that of wisdom. “Wisdom and the sanctity of life” would be a good summary of the theme.

Verse 8 is the first instance of “Hear, my son” language, which is ubiquitous in this book. Often, we read exhortations to learn, such as “give me your heart” (23:26); “listen” (7:24; 8:6, 32; 13:1; 19:20; 23:22 (in some of these the father is the one to whom they are to listen); “give ear” (2:2; 4:20; 5:1, 13; 15:31; 22:17; 28:9); and of course, as here, “hear” (4:1, 10; 5:7; 8:33; 22:17; 23:19).

The father and mother in Proverbs represent the ideal parents—those who are covenantally faithful to God, meaning that they are obedient to God’s Word. They, in fact, have “given their ear” to God’s Torah (instruction) and therefore they can speak with great authority and expectancy that their children will heed their instruction.

Again, the assumption is that parents are wise because they indeed fear the LORD (v. 7). The nation of Israel was to hear the law of the Lord and to heed it. By doing so, the nation would experience life (see Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28). By extension, so would individual families.

The wise person listens to authoritative words and heeds them. The result is a worldview shaped by God’s word and a covenantally faithful life as a result. Clearly, this is how we should aspire our families to be

The Counsel

The counsel offered in this text may appear a little odd at first blush. Solomon warns his son not to join this who say things like,

Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood; let us ambush the innocent without reason; like Sheol let us swallow them alive, and whole, like those who go down to the pit; we shall find all precious goods, we shall fill our houses with plunder; throw in your lot among us; we will all have one purse.

(Proverbs 1:11-14)

In fact, many of the words in the opening section of Proverbs (1:8–9:18) may strike you as a bit odd. After all, the child is warned to stay clear of murderous thieves. Specifically, they are not to become murderous thieves!

Imagine a godly father sitting down with his young children to teach them how to live in such a way that will protect them, and ways in which they can live to the glory of God. What would perhaps be some things that he might say? “Don’t talk to strangers.” “Look both ways when you cross the street.” “Don’t use profane language.” “When you go to school, don’t hang around those who misbehave.” “Don’t ever cheat.”

Jill and I had such conversations with our children. But I must confess that I never did what these verses record. I never exhorted my children to not join up with a gang of murderous thieves. Such a concern was never on my radar. But it clearly is here. The question to be answered is, why? I don’t think it was because their society was any more violent than ours. In fact, these Proverbs were compiled when Israel was at her moral and spiritual apex.

No, the purpose of this counsel is to provide a deliberately extreme admonition in order to establish a worldview in the life of the learner. It establishes an argument from the greater to the lesser. After all, if you do not murder and steal, then you will be more likely to work hard for your profit. If you refuse to listen to a substitute family (i.e. a gang) then you will be more likely to listen to your covenant family. If you reject the path of folly and death, then you will be continuing to embrace a life of wisdom and life. But, fundamentally, this admonition contributes much to the establishment of a worldview that highlights the biblical teaching concerning the sanctity of life. It challenges us to treat people with the dignity God bestows on them. That is, people do not exist for your profit; they matter.

There seems to be a context of the Ten Commandments in this opening chapter. Verse 7 points us to the first four commandments. In sum, these commandments teach us to fear the Lord. But what follows these and this?

In vv. 8–9, the fifth commandment is clearly referenced. In fact, v. 9 points us to “the promise of life” attending the fifth commandment (see Exodus 20:12; Ephesians 6:2).

In sum, those who fear the Lord are wise. Fathers and mothers who fear the Lord will then teach their children to fear the Lord and hence to live wisely. A demonstration of that wisdom is that they will “hear” their “father’s instruction” and will not “forsake” their “mother’s teaching.” So far, this should be clear.

The Commandment/Crime to be Avoided

The commandment here is clear. The “son” must not allow the gang of murderous thieves to “entice” (delude, flatter or persuade) him (v. 10). Let’s note a couple of things about this commandment.

First, this is a warning against joining a substitute family. That is precisely the nature of a gang. Gangs are not a modern phenomenon; rather, they have been in existence as long as fathers have abandoned their families. The void longs to be filled, and gangs spring up where fathers have abdicated.

A church member recently gave me Mez McConnell’s memoir, titled *Is Anybody Out There?* McConnell is a pastor at Niddrie Community Church near Edinburgh in Scotland. The book details how McConnell was effectively abandoned by his parents, and found a substitute family in local gangs. God graciously saved him, and today McConnell is raising his own children so that they will not be lost as he was.

Second, gangs only *pretend* to be real families. Reading through this passage it becomes evident that the enticements to join with the gangs are self-centred. The gang simply wants the strength that comes with numbers. But once the plunder is secured, like the prodigal, there is not a lot of sharing of the spoils.

Third, though the gang promises life, the end-game is death (vv. 17–18). Young people, be careful of the false promise of life!

Finally, and most importantly for our purposes, this admonition references the sixth commandment: “You shall not murder.” The passage is dripping with bloodshed (vv. 11, 12, 16, 19). It is clear that wisdom instructs those on the path of life to stay clear of those who do not respect the sanctity of life.

The Ten Commandments, as with all of God’s Word, were not mandated arbitrarily or randomly. There is an intended order to them: first, love of God; then, love of parents; then, love of neighbour. Reverence towards God leads to respect of parents, which leads to respect of all.

“You shall not murder” unmistakably addresses the sanctity of human life. The commandment is far more than merely a prohibition against taking a life through murder and/or negligence. Rather, the command is a broad, though admittedly short, statement that teaches us how God values human life – *every* human life.

There is a specific connection between these references to the fifth and the sixth commandment and it is this: The home is where we learn about the sanctity of human life – or where we *fail* to learn about the sanctity of life. Parents are responsible to instil in

their children the biblical view of the value of human life – of every human life. Wise parents do so.

The Culture

Consider the intended original audience of these Proverbs. It was God's covenantal community. The expectation was that they would heed the Torah of God personally and corporately in their homes. And, of course, as goes the family, so goes the nation (Psalm 33:10–12ff).

As individuals and families lived wisely – in accordance with God's rules – the wider culture would, of course, be graciously affected (Deuteronomy 4:5–8). Obedience to God's law would produce a culture of life. And when you consider the early pagan surroundings of Israel, this was quite a goal. Their surrounding culture was much like ours. But by God's grace – his gospel grace – this goal can be experienced.

Other commandments are referred to in this passage as well. "You shall not steal" (the eighth commandment) is referred to because the murderous intentions are due to the desire for unjust gain. Further, greed is paramount in this passage (especially v. 19), and so we have a reference to the tenth commandment: "You shall not covet."

It is clear that the parents are equipping their children with a high view of human life by warning them about those who have a low view of human life – so low, in fact, that they see other people as merely a means to their end. As Longman notes concerning these who do not respect the sanctity of human life: "They do not even give their victims a fighting chance.... Their only object is to get rich at the expense of others."

So, what's the point?

The fear of the Lord makes us wise and therefore obedient to his commandments. And in this context, those who fear the Lord take seriously the sanctity of human life. Further, the wise home is where this worldview is taught.

A Premium on Human Life

The one who fears the Lord puts a premium on human life – all human life. In other words, those who are wise see the image of God in each human life, even in the life that they cannot see. Those who are wise value human life from womb to tomb.

When we speak of the sanctity of life, we refer to that which has been marked off ("set apart") by God. Human beings are the pinnacle of God's creation, and therefore every

human being is to be regarded in such a way. Numerous New Testament texts highlight this principle. Consider a few:

- Titus 3:1–2—Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarrelling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.
- James 4:11—Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.

Peter rebukes “those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority.” They are “bold and wilful” and “they do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones.” To the contrary, “angels, though greater in might and power, do not pronounce a blasphemous judgement against them before the Lord” (2 Peter 2:10–11). Elsewhere, Peter urged his readers to “honour everyone,” “love the brotherhood,” “fear God” and “honour the emperor” (1 Peter 2:17). The word translated “honour” means to prize. It connotes fixing a positive evaluation on something. In other words, it means to hold in regard and therefore to show respect.

Whatever Peter was getting at, he was clearly concerned that his readers treat *everyone* as though they are prized. When he wrote “everyone,” that was precisely what he meant! He even included the Jews, who were persecuting these believers! He meant the wealthy and the poor; the noble and the ignoble; the criminal and the law-abiding citizen; the easygoing church member meant the difficult member. He meant those who looked and talked like them and those who looked and talked differently.

Peter didn’t expect these believers to like everyone equally. He did not expect them to agree with everyone. He did expect Christians to treat everyone with dignity.

Peter even exhorted them to “honour the emperor.” When he wrote, the emperor was probably Nero! This was a tall order! (Even if the emperor *was* Claudius, it would still require a lot of effort.) Christians would do well to learn to show honour to the rulers God has placed over them. It is not always easy to do, but it needs to be done. South African Christians have no business mocking President Zuma when he struggles to read long words or numbers!

In none of this was Peter asking these Christians to play politics. No, he was exhorting them to be Christians. Christians understand the value of each life. Christians understand the responsibility to treat each individual as made in the image of God.

Wisdom is the ability (skill) to see beyond the obvious to the essential—to the ultimate. Christians need to learn to see beyond the cover of the book of a person’s life. The

Christian needs to see the image of God in every human being. As we do so, we will increasingly value the sanctity of each human life.

We value every human life because all humans are made in the image of God. What, exactly, does that mean?

For many, the answer is that humanity is made to reflect God in his ability to reason and to relate. I think that there is much in this that we can accept. Like God, we think, desire, feel, love and hate. These are what theologians call God's "communicable attributes" – those attributes that we share with God.

But, in the ancient world, the phrase "the image of God (or the gods)" concerning people meant three major things: sonship, rulership, and representation. When the Old Testament was written, "the image of the gods" was a phrase to describe those who were kings or rulers. The Egyptian pharaohs were a classic example. They were considered to be sons of the gods. They were representatives of the gods. And, of course, this gave them, they assumed, the divine right to rule.

It is interesting that Jesus, too, recognised this historic reality when he confronted his critics in an intriguing interaction (see John 10:31–36; cf. Psalm 82:6).

Let me summarise: God created man in relationship with himself in order to rule with (though of course, under) him. By doing so, human beings represented God – on earth, as he is in heaven (see Genesis 1:26–28). So, whatever else it means to be made "in the image of God," it fundamentally means sonship and kingship; loving relationship and loyal ruling (representation) to the glory of God.

Every human being born since Adam and Eve shares in this original "image-ination" – although, like Adam and Eve, we share in what is now a very broken image.

The take away principle is that every human being coming into this world, every person at the moment of their conception, is to be viewed as an individual whose original intended purpose is to be a son or daughter of God who submits and who therefore rules with him, to his honour and glory. Therefore, every person – regardless of size, shape, viability, environment, potential or whatever – is to be treated with dignity, viewed with value, and shown honour. Perhaps if we viewed with honour those whom we *can* see, we would also grow in our appreciation of the God-given honour and value of those whom we *cannot* see.

But further, God holds the home responsible to teach this.

Teach Your Children

Parents, teach your children—and teach them well—about the sanctity of every human life.

The home is the base for teaching the sanctity of life. And, of course, we are concerned primarily with Christian homes. We need to realise that our everyday talk influences our children. We need to realise that everyday attitudes and actions influences our children. The reality is that our children are, in fact, often hearing us, and what they hear is not always what they should be hearing! In many cases, they are hearing us loud and clear, yet they are hearing what we probably wish they were not hearing.

Our homes should reflect our conviction about the sanctity of life. Whom do you invite for dinner? Whom do you take in to the circle of your family? How do you demonstrate the value of others before your children?

Shut Out Enticements

We need to shut out the enticements of those who do not view human beings as possessing God-given value and therefore sanctity. In the context before us, the enticements were those of greed (vv. 13–14, 19). This is instructive.

A devaluation of human life is invariably coupled with an exaltation of the material. (Here, murder is a means to accumulation of treasure; human life is viewed merely as a means to get. Clearly, at least here, there is a contextual connection between murder and greed.) There is usually a clear association between materialism or greed and devaluation of human life.

In many cases, abortion is a matter of economics, fuelled by a worldview that leaves God out of view. But this is not merely a matter of poverty. Many abortions are sought because of a self-centred, greedy view of life. Simply, for many, children require money, and they just do not want to share. Further, robbery, hijacking, kidnapping and slavery are all alive and profitable today.

In connection with this, the unjust wages paid to many—many whose skin is of a different hue—is grounded in both a devaluation of life and the pursuit of greed.

Embracing a Biblical Worldview

When we embrace a biblical worldview of the sanctity of every human life, there will be no exceptions. We will value all life, regardless of viability, environment, potential, size, shape, economics, weakness, etc.

The Consequences

I hope we have seen that the home that fears the Lord is a home that, in unison with other homes, will promote a culture of life. But we need to bring this to a close by asking and answering some related questions: mainly, why does this matter? In addition to the fundamental reason – because this is what God intends and commands towards this end – let me not some other reasons.

A Gospel Issue

First, this is a gospel issue. The gospel produces a worldview that recognises the sanctity of life. With reference to what I said earlier about the home being essential for producing the worldview of the sanctity of human life, I must emphasise that I am talking about Christian homes. In fact, *only* Christian homes can do this because to “honour all” requires supernatural power. It requires the gospel.

In our quest to avoid the social gospel, we must be careful not to avoid the social implications of the biblical gospel. The gospel opens our eyes to the sanctity of every human life, humbles us to consider others, produces love, and enables us to think like God does.

I was recently asked about the culture of orphan care at BBC and how it came about. It all started years ago when a couple in our church planted a deep and fruitful seed by opening their home to orphans. Others adopted children, and this further watered the fertile ground. A growing biblical ethos of the value of children has contributed towards the growing culture of orphan care.

There are no doubt other factors that have contributed to this but I want to identify one more: a growing appreciation of the biblical teaching concerning the sanctity of life. I am persuaded that our culture of orphan care has been undergirded by a growing appreciation of the value that God places upon human life.

The Direction of History

Second, history is heading a place in which human life will be valued.

- Revelation 5:9–10 – And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”
- Revelation 7:9–12 – After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm

branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

- Ephesians 2:11-22 – Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Reaching Others with the Gospel

Third, if we truly value human life, we will seek to reach humans with the gospel. We will seek to deliver them from destruction, just as Jesus did with the murderous thief on the cross. The thief on the cross was guilty of everything of which Solomon warned his son in this text, and yet he found forgiveness (literally) at the cross.

Wisdom is not merely a matter of you-shall-nots. Equally, it concerns “You shall.” And seeking to live a life that is winsome because it is faithful to Christ is one of the you-shalls. After all, “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and whoever captures souls is wise” (Proverbs 11:30).

A biblical worldview produces the righteous fruit of treating all people with the dignity that our creator God has bestowed upon them. Such an approach is biblically wise and effectively winsome. By treating people with respect, we open the door to open our mouths in a way in which they will open their ears.

Conclusion

Let us conclude by remembering that there is hope! The Lord Jesus Christ turned around a murderous thief. He redeemed a man who, until shortly before they met, held little regard for the sanctity of human life (see Luke 23:39–43).

This man was one of the “sinners” that the wise father warned his children about. He had lived, perhaps all his life, with a despicable view of human beings. He viewed them as a means to his end. He lived his life on the path of death—and he was just hours, if not minutes, from experiencing the most awful of deaths: eternal condemnation. Yet, the Saviour gave up his life because of the value of human life. God deemed the thief worth redeeming. And he died on the path of life: “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

This can be you. Only those broken can be fixed. Repent and believe on the crucified, risen, interceding Saviour today. And then God can use you, along with multitudes, to create a culture of life.

AMEN