

“Foolish Companionship”
Proverbs 1:8-19
June 28, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

About a month ago, I received a letter from a third grade student at Restoration Academy, a school in Fairfield that our church supports and where several of our church members serve. This student was asked to write about an area in which she was pushed to improve. She wrote, “One area I am being pushed to improve is choosing godly friends, like we studied in Bible. I don’t want to hang around people who act ‘messy,’ or talk about people. I don’t want to be that kind of person.”

I don’t know what part of the Bible this third grader had been studying, but perhaps it was Proverbs 13:20. **“Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.”** As we continue our survey of the “little” sins of Proverbs, we come today to this sin of foolish companionship. Parents everywhere want their children to avoid friendships with those who will be a bad influence on their children and to cultivate the friendships that will have a positive effect. The writer of Proverbs is a father who is giving godly advice to his teenage son, a son who is on the cusp of full manhood. This father is also concerned that his son make good choices when it comes to his friends. As we are going to see, what’s at stake is nothing less than life or death.

We are going to look at this topic of choosing friends by considering this passage in the opening chapter of the book. The father is giving counsel to his son, and he warns him about the call of the gang, after which the father delivers his own call to his son. So much depends on which voice our children listen to as they grow. Will it be the voice of the gang offering easy money, the voice of the adulteress offering abundant, untraceable sex, or will it be the voice that leads to life, a voice that comes from the parents, but ultimately from God himself? We are going to look today at two of these voices, that of the gang and the father.

I. The Call of the Gang – v. 11-14

I notice that both of these voices that are calling to this young man, the voice of the gang and that of the father, understand the importance of vision. Vision is a portrayal of a desirable future, and vision has a powerful influence upon our present actions. If you can get people to embrace a vision, they will labor long and hard to see that vision made a reality. My son, for example, has embraced a vision in which he sees himself serving the Lord as a history professor in a college or university setting. This vision is motivating him to endure six long years of very hard work. The voice of the gang calls out to this young son and seeks to portray

to him a vision that will motivate him to join this gang. I notice three components to this vision, and these are the same three components that seek to entice the young, or anyone else, to join up with foolish companions.

There is first of all a vision of community. The first words of the gang to this young son reflect the powerful attraction of belonging to a community. **“Come with us”** (v. 11). The last words of the gang reflect the same thing. **“Throw in your lot among us; we will all have one purse”** (v. 14). I think the attraction of the common purse is that this young man could be a part of something that would give him more than he could gain all by himself. The gang offers him a camaraderie that promises to meet his need for identity.

Psychologists have confirmed what most of us have learned from experience. Adolescence is dominated by the quest for identity, and much of that identity is found in the group to which one belongs. How many times has it happened that a teenager going to a new high school will take up with the first group that shows him acceptance? The vision that is driving the teen isn't the particular thing the group stands for, but the simple fact that he can be a part of some community, and the community gives him a sense of identity. This need to belong to a community is such a powerful thing because God has created us in this way. Part of what it means to be a human being is to exist in community with others. The problem with the gang is that it is offering a counterfeit community, a community built on a lie, with the result that it will eventually self-destruct. This counterfeit community is built on the lie that a community can be built on each member acting out of self-interest. The self-interest at the heart of this gang is that of illicit financial gain, which we will look at next.

Before we move forward, let's pause for an application. If one of the attractions of the gang, the foolish companions, is the promise of counterfeit community, and if community is part of what it means to be human, I can think of only one effective way to resist this call of the gang. We don't resist it by the American call to individualism. That call says, “It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks, I'm going to stand alone and do the right thing. I'm going to do it my way despite what anyone else may think.” The answer to counterfeit community is not no community but true community. Parents, one of the reasons I would urge you to require your children and youth to participate in the children's and youth programs of the church isn't simply because of what they might learn in the process. That is certainly of great value, but it is not the only value. The other thing of value is the meeting of this need for community. Your children need to be trained to be a part of a true community that will endure. Their youth sports teams, their classes at school or their membership in the school band, all these have their place. But they cannot replace the development of a lasting and true community through the church. One reason to bring your children to Sunday School is for the establishment of the relationships that will continue to form a true community as your children grow into teenagers. True community will help protect them against the counterfeit community that destroys.

The second element in the vision of the gang is for easy money. As they plot their ambush of the innocent, the prize they anticipate is described in verse 13. **“We shall find all precious goods, we shall fill our houses with plunder.”** It is a get-rich-quick scheme that is willing to abuse others in the process. We can see in this appeal an inherent inconsistency in the call of the gang. We saw in the previous point how they invited this young man to join them in their community, with the promise that he would belong and would be able to find his identity in this group. But what kind of people are in this gang? They are the kind who are willing to swallow their victims whole in order to get what they want. If they are willing to use others so brutally for their selfish purposes, why would this young man think he would be treated any differently?

The book of Proverbs talks a great deal about the topic of wealth. We see in this passage an improper path to wealth, the desire to use people in order to acquire it quickly. The rest of the book’s instruction about wealth is needed. As in the case with community, where true community is needed to resist the allure of counterfeit community, a wholesome view of wealth is needed in order to resist the gang’s enticements to wealth. The view of wealth in the book of Proverbs can be summarized in several points. First, it teaches that character is more important than wealth. **“A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich”** (10:4). Further, character alone is not enough, because **“the blessing of the Lord makes rich”** (10:22). And this doesn’t happen quickly. **“Wealth gained hastily will dwindle, but whoever gathers little by little will increase it”** (13:11). Nor does it happen inevitably. There are many among the godly, hard-working who are poor. **“Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it”** (15:16). Those who have been blessed with money are to remember to be generous. **“Whoever despises his neighbor is a sinner, but blessed is he who is generous to the poor”** (14:21). I like the way Bruce Waltke sums it up. “Sinners love wealth and use people; saints love people and use wealth to help others.”

The final vision of the gang as they call this young man to join them is the idea of secrecy in their commitment of this crime. They can “lie in wait for blood” and “ambush” the innocent. The idea behind this is that they can remain hidden and undetected while committing their crime. The owner of the goods they are pilfering will be put out of the way, leaving them clear to plunder at will, as if these things were theirs to do with as they pleased. But they can hide behind this veil of secrecy. I notice that the adulteress of chapter 7 also relies on the promise of secrecy as she seduces the young son. She says to him, **“For my husband is not at home; he has gone on a long journey”** (7:19). The appeal of secrecy while committing a sin is a powerful one, and we have all known foolish companions who have made this appeal. “It will be okay, no one’s going to know.” But the young man who will learn wisdom will do so by learning the fear of the Lord. The gang may succeed in all their efforts, ambush their victim, escape observation from all others, and come to enjoy the plunder in the privacy of their

own homes. But they have forgotten about the one who is still to be reckoned with, the one from whom nothing can be hidden. Those who fear the Lord will remember this one and not be swayed by the promise of secrecy in the committing of sin.

II. The Call of the Father – v. 15-19

The father presents an alternative vision to his son. The desirable future he describes in his vision also has three components. First of all, he envisions his son walking a different path from the gang. **“My son, do not walk in the way with them; hold back your foot from their paths”** (v. 15). The father knows that the young go astray not abruptly, but gradually. Have you ever noticed how one train track will veer off from another? A train is unable to make a 90 degree turn, so the tracks have to veer off gradually. For a time after having veered off from one another, the two tracks will run close enough that both tracks are in plain sight. But since they are headed in different directions, the passage of time will lead them further apart. So the father says to his son, “Don’t leave the tracks I have set out for you in order to get on those other tracks. It may seem to be a small compromise at first, but it will eventually lead you far from home.” He is talking here about a proper biblical separation. The father’s vision is for his son to be separate from the world, not sharing its values and perspectives. God calls us to be in the world, but not of the world. While Christians have often over-separated and withdrawn needlessly from the things of the world, it is also possible to over-assimilate. So the Junior High student is invited to be part of the popular gang at school, a gang that ambushes outsiders with their tongues, is told that she must join in the ridicule given to other students not in their group. To do so would be to walk in their path, and consequently to drift far from the Lord. The same could be said for the parent who believes that advancement at work requires some shading of the truth. Don’t walk on their path.

The father also wants his son to see that the path of the gang has a bad future, one that is characterized by death. **“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”** (v. 18-19). Birds are not known for a high level of intelligence, but the average bird is smarter than this group. He makes the point in verse 17 that anyone wanting to catch a bird in a net has to sneak up behind the bird. Birds are smart enough to fly away if approached in plain sight. But this gang of youth is not so smart. They are walking straight into a trap of their own making.

This deed-consequence reasoning is very common in the book of Proverbs. The father who is speaking here has great wisdom, enough wisdom to know what the gang will be saying to his son. And he also knows that sin will lead to harm. This is the first of many times when he warns about the consequences of sinful behavior. Later in this chapter, he says that sudden and irreversible calamity will

come upon those who ignore the call of wisdom. He warns against laziness, saying about the sluggard, **“poverty will come upon you like a robber”** (6:11). And of those who succumb to the call of the adulteress, we read **“many a victim has she laid low, and all her slain are a mighty throng. Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death”** (7:26-27). These are warnings, not threats, and there is a big difference between a warning and a threat. If you tell your child, “Don’t cross the street without looking both directions or you may die,” that’s a warning, motivated by your love for your child. If you say, “Don’t cross the street without looking both ways, or I’ll kill you,” that’s a threat. Many people get angry at God because they read the warnings of the Bible as if they were threats. “Trust Jesus, or you will be condemned to hell” is not a threat but a warning. God is not saying, “If you don’t do it my way, I’ll teach you by making you pay forever.” He is giving a gracious warning about sin and its consequences.

As important as these warnings are, they are insufficient for real change. It is possible, and frequently the case, that a person sees the damage done by his sin, and continues anyway. So there is one final point the father wants to make known to his son, and it can be found in our memory verse this week. **“Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm”** (13:20). To be truly wise, we must find a wise person to get to know. But where can a truly wise man be found? It wasn’t Solomon, the author of this book. By the end of his life, he demonstrated his lack of wisdom as he led the entire nation into idolatry. When Jesus went into his hometown of Nazareth to teach in the synagogue, those he grew up with were amazed when they heard his sermon. They asked, **“Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?”** (Matt. 13:54). Jesus is the wise man with whom we need to walk. Let’s consider what that means as we prepare ourselves for the Lord’s Supper.

CONCLUSION:

To walk with wise Jesus means to lean on the cross and to sit at his feet. It means first to lean on the cross. When Jesus died on the cross, he took the outcome of sin the father warned his son about in Proverbs 1. The deed-consequence pattern so prominent in Proverbs, in which our evil deeds lead to our calamity and death, is surprisingly fulfilled at the cross. The truly wise son whose faithfulness deserves only life gets death. Jesus is paying the price for our sin, that we might enjoy the benefit of his faithfulness. And then secondly, to walk with wise Jesus means to sit at his feet, submitting to him as Mary did when she sat at his feet. We submit to him by obeying his commands. As we share in communion this morning, we face the same situation as the son of Proverbs 1. We are to choose life by choosing Jesus.