

# A Good Name

## Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

<sup>1</sup> A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.

<sup>2</sup> The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all.

<sup>8</sup> Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail.

<sup>9</sup> Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.

<sup>22</sup> Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate;

<sup>23</sup> for the LORD pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.

Parents are fond of offering bits of wisdom and little lessons for life that usually fall upon disinterested ears but are not soon forgotten. We remember from childhood: "Honesty is the best policy," "A penny saved is a penny earned," "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." "It takes a village to raise a child." "If you look for trouble, you will surely find it!" Today's reading is a collection of proverbs that fall into the category of sayings our parents taught us. Wise and true, these proverbs offer ideas and "best practices" of how to live a life of honesty and integrity where honor, justice, and good reputation are prized. If you are like me, growing up in the southern region of the United States, where the Bible is one of the most often quoted (and misquoted) books, I learned that folk wisdom often comes from Proverbs and other scriptural sources. Often it is years later, in Bible study, we I recognize how much of folk wisdom is scriptural wisdom.

Susan T. Henry-Crowe tells the story of her friend's mother had her children write the rules for summer, hoping that such rules might make life run more smoothly. She knew that if her three children made the rules, they might be more

apt to follow them. They wrote dutifully, replicating both the tone and intent of the rules of their parents:

You shall not wear flip-flops in the pool.

You shall sweep the floor after supper.

You shall only buy Mister Softee (from the ice cream truck) once a week.

Somewhat more substantive than "You shall not wear flip-flops in the pool," today's appointed proverbs offer wisdom on matters of relationships, generosity, and justice. They remind the gathered community of the significance of seeing, understanding, and relating to the poor. "The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all." In God there are no distinctions.

In contemporary culture in the United States, much of our language reflects categories of identity that connote "otherness": "the poor," "immigrants," "gays and lesbians," "rednecks," "men," and "women." Proverbs 22 says, "The LORD is the maker of them all." In a theology of equality, labeling and suspicion about otherness are morally and ethically wrong. Thinking and acting that result in unjust treatment of others leads to calamity. Justice and care result in blessing. Injustice will bring misfortune. Generosity issues blessing. The Lord will plead the cause of the poor and afflicted with consequences for the afflicters.

These proverbs are not only rules for ethical living but are also wise adages. "Do not rob the poor..., or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the LORD pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them" (vv. 22-23). Overt or covert exercise of power over others brings harm not only to the oppressed but equally to the oppressor. Many people and communities understand this dynamic. **Susan T. Henry-Crowe**

All of this reminded me that it feels that I have attended many more funerals during this pandemic, than during previous years! It is true that as I grow older, I happen to know more people who are older. So, in reality, the pandemic and

persons I know dying may be unrelated. What I do know is that as a pastor and/or participant in memorial services, I am learning to pay closer attention to the stories of a person's life. What was important to them? What were their contributions to their families; to their communities; to their country; to their faith community? A few months ago, I attended, via Zoom, the funeral of a family friend. Our scripture was used at her memorial service. The speaker helped us to understand that family and being kind to others were at the heart of the person's life.

Solomon says in this proverb that a good name and favor are of greater worth than our riches, silver or gold. It is treating people with fairness; being generous; sharing our bread; that bring blessings, rather than punishment to our lives. On this past Saturday, a family member, Lynda Cunningham, came to visit after attending a funeral. The woman's name was Miss Cherry Mae. I think she had been a nurse. She worked the night shift so she could be home during the day for her children.

Ms. Cherry had a good name. It was not just that she was a nurse, and I assumed help many people with their health challenges, but even more important was her good name of being a mother for the neighborhood youth. Lynda said at the funeral many people who grew up in the neighborhood told about how Ms. Cherry feed them, provided a safe house, encouraged them in life. You see Ms. Cherry had a good name! No one talked about money, real estate, or investment, but how she helped them along the way!

Abraham Johannes Muste graduated from Hope College and Union Theological Seminary. Inspired by the Christian mysticism of the Quakers, Muste became a pacifist and worked with many activist groups. After decades of work in civil rights, social justice, and disarmament, he sorrowfully saw the beginning of the Vietnam War. Because of his integrity, Muste was trusted by all groups and guided their efforts in ending the war. In 1966 he led a group of pacifists to Saigon.

After trying to demonstrate for peace, they were arrested and deported. That same year, Muste flew with a small team of religious leaders to Hanoi, where he met with Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese Communist leader. They were two old men meeting in the midst of war, one of them committed to the path of violent change and the other to nonviolence.

During the Vietnam War, Muste stood many nights in Washington holding a candle in silent protest outside of the White House. When asked by an incredulous reporter if he thought this would really change U.S. policy on Vietnam, Muste replied: "Oh, I don't do this to change the country. I do this so the country won't change me."

As the United States engaged in its only preemptive war at the beginning of the twenty-first century, great damage was done to the moral authority, the reputation, the credible voice, and the psyche of the United States. However rationalized or justified the intent of this war, it cost lives and damaged communities around the world. Just this week we pulled out all our troops, but the once-prized reputation of the United States for our commitment to human and civil rights has been compromised. The prophetic wisdom of Proverbs 22 cannot be overlooked: "For the LORD pleads their [the afflicted] cause and despoils of life those who despoil them" (v. 23).

The Michael Radford film *1984* opens with a scene in which workers stand in front of a screen for an indoctrination session called the Two Minutes Hate. The patriotic narrator informs the crowd that their land is one of peace, harmony, and hope. Winston Smith works in the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth, where he changes the newspaper reports of the past to reflect the present policies of the administration. Writing secretly in his journal, he says, "There is truth and there is untruth. Freedom is freedom to say two plus two is four. If that is allowed, all else follows." Meanwhile, at work he continues to rewrite the past to make it fit

with the present. When a turn of events has to be rewritten, he writes in his journal, "Past is erased, the erasure is forgotten. The lie becomes truth, and then becomes a lie again." One day Winston says to his lover Julia, "It's not so much staying alive, but staying human that's important. We must not betray each other."

This section of Proverbs is a call not to betray the family of God. Such wisdom includes the admonition to act generously, reputably, honestly, justly, and have a good name, both as persons and as citizens of a nation. **Susan T. Henry-Crowe**

Scripture teaches us "fear of the Lord is better than riches." Our good reputation is more important than our wealth. Our charity will live long beyond our silver and gold. One song writer said it this way....only what you do for Christ will last!

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