

Sermon for Sunday, January 12, 2012
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Big Sins, Big Solutions
Proverbs 1:8-18

Prov. 1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline. 8 Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. 9 They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck. 10 My son, if sinners entice you, do not give in to them. 11 If they say, "Come along with us; let's lie in wait for someone's blood, let's waylay some harmless soul; 12 let's swallow them alive, like the grave, and whole, like those who go down to the pit 13 we will get all sorts of valuable things and fill our houses with plunder; 14 throw in your lot with us, and we will share a common purse" - 15 my son, do not go along with them, do not set foot on their paths; 16 for their feet rush into sin, they are swift to shed blood. 17 How useless to spread a net in full view of all the birds! 18 These men lie in wait for their own blood; they waylay only themselves!

1. Violence in Proverbs - a symptom of the godless life, a cold heart

If we read Proverbs from beginning to end, we see that the short, pithy sayings begin in Chapter 10, while Solomon asks his sons the great questions in Proverbs 1-9: Will you fear God? Or will you fear nothing? To whom will you listen? Your father? To God's wisdom? Or to "sinners [who] entice you"?

Solomon describes the temptress, who flatters and seduces with sensuality. We hear first from lawless young men, who say, "Come with us, let us lie in wait for someone's blood. Let's waylay some harmless soul; let's swallow them alive... Throw in your lot with us and we will share a common purse" (Prov. 1:11, 14).

As I read through Proverbs I wonder: Why does Proverbs begin with a clip of a conversation about violence? The vast bulk of Proverbs teaches how to manage daily life. It's full of practical advice on life's enduring issues: work, money, friendship, speech, marriage, parenting.

Proverbs also describes the character that make it easy or hard to follow the right path. The fool lacks self-discipline. He doesn't work hard. He spurns correction and ignores a rebuke (10:17, 15: 5, 10-12). The wise man heeds correction (15:32, 13:1). Instruct a wise man and "he will be wiser still" (9:9). The wise man listens, plans, hopes. So Proverbs lives in the practical world of daily decisions and the cultivation of character.

Why then does Solomon start by warns his son about violence? We don't face violence or the temptation to violence on a daily basis. Why start there? First, Solomon is a king and kings need to think about war and violence. Solomon's brother Absalom started a civil war and tried to kill his father. Many died. Surely he wants to keep his son away from that.

Second, violence gets our attention because it points deeper. Violence is a theme in about 25-30% of leading new stories (CNN). Protests and deaths in Syria. The murder rate in Mexico. A prison riot. The sinking cruise ship and its heedless captain. NATO soldiers in Afghanistan slain by Afghan forces. It's so familiar, we can grow numb to it. But not quite. We see violence as a sign. If official Afghan forces have attacked and killed NATO forces thirty-five times in recent years, then it's time to get out. If the murder rate is so high in Mexico, it must be a failed state. In short, violence is a weather vane, a sign of deeper evil. This is common sense and it is biblical. Let's survey Scripture for two minutes...

A biblical theology of violence

In Scripture, violence is a sign of deeper issues, a corruption of the heart. Violence is a singular mark of rebellion against God. After mankind falls, the first recorded sin is murder: Cain killed his brother Abel (Gen 4). Later, a rebel named Lamech boasted, "I have killed a man for wounding me" (4:23). Violence became commonplace before the flood, "The earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence" (6:11). Later, kings Saul and Ahab demonstrated their faithlessness when they tried to kill their own people. In the New Testament, Jesus was slapped, beaten, and killed. The apostle Paul was beaten, flogged, and jailed for his message.

Psalms says the wicked "breathe out" violence and "clothe themselves" with violence (Ps 27:12, 73:6). Solomon says the wicked "drink the wine of violence." They "crave violence" (Prov. 4:17, 13:2). God promises to bring an end to the violence of the wicked. Their violence will come down on their head (Ps 7:9, 16; cf. 11:5).

Proverbs says violence is a sign of life direction. It shows that a person has followed the wrong voice, joined the wrong group, taken the wrong path. Proverbs says "wicked men... plot violence" (24:1-2).

Proverbs 10, is a sort of second introduction to Solomon's themes. Twice it says, "the mouth of the wicked conceals violence" (10:6, 11). Proverbs joins the violent with the fool, the wicked, the scoffer, the proud. They are right in their own eyes. They listen to no one (21:1-8). They betray trusting and peaceful neighbors. God has no blessing for them. They plot evil, spread strife, separate friends, entice neighbors to sin (16:27-29) and hurt their parents (19:26-29).

2. So violence is a sign of a selfish life and a sign of rebellion vs. God

Solomon tells his son – and tells us – that our strategic choices will dictate our life's direction. Who will guide our life? Proverbs has two female voices: the temptress or seductive woman, and wisdom, which speaks as a woman. Proverbs also has two male voices. Father Solomon says, "Listen, my son to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching" (1:8-9). But the gang says, "Come along with us; let's lie in wait for someone's blood" (1:11-12).

What voices will guide his son's life? God's wisdom or folly and rebellion? When Solomon thought of rebellion, he singled out two things - violence and adultery. Why? Because both have power to destroy. Adultery destroys marriage and family. And bloodshed destroys life and society.

The Lost History of Christianity by Philip Jenkins is a rich account of Christianity in the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Asia where it flourished for 12-13 centuries, even until 1450 in places. But the faith did finally disappeared from lands under Muslim rulers. In most of Africa and Asia, Christians and Muslims lived together side by side in substantial peace for 600-700 years. What happened? Why did the faith disappear? The answer is complex, but the main cause was bloodshed.

The first Mongolian invasions, led by Genghis Kahn around 1200, were extremely violent. As he advanced westward in conquest, his armies frequently massacred the entire populations of cities. Sometimes he gave a choice: Surrender and live. But if you resist and fail, every man, woman and child inside the city walls will be slain. And he did it, piling up skulls in great pyramids as a warning. In this way, entire Christian cities disappeared. The stories are terrible. They make us think: "There was something wrong with these people. Some spark of humanity that was missing."

You know this. Some people seem to lack the capacity to see life in a normal human way. They love to fight, they criticize everything, they have no self-awareness, no empathy. So they hurt, kill and destroy and feel no pain. So it was with the Mongol leaders – and many Mongols joined in, as Proverbs 1 shows people can do.

A number of Christian leaders made a terrible mistake in this era. The Mongol religion was Shamanism – a belief in messengers who mediate between this world and the spirit world. But the Mongols engaged in dialogue with Buddhists, Muslims and Christians. A few of them became Christians. Some had Christian advisors, spouses or relatives. Some of these Christians succumbed to the idea that "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Since the Mongols attacked the Muslims and since a few Mongols had sympathy with Christianity, some Christians tried to align themselves with the murderous Mongol. It didn't work. The Mongols still killed Christians *and* relationships with Muslims collapsed. Christians churches and towns paid!

As we read the history, we want to go back and ask, "What were you thinking? Why did you ally yourselves with these monsters? Why did you make *that* decision? Were you really Christians or were you Christians in name only?" – the way England is a "Christian" nation?

So violence shows that something has gone terribly wrong. And it has terrible results. That is why Proverbs warns about it. If a young man decides to join a gang that says, "Let's swallow them alive, like the grave" they don't see that they rob or strike *people*. The gang robs and strikes down as a game of power. The riches and plunder are almost an afterthought in Proverbs 1 (1:13-14).

In their eyes, their victims aren't even human. That is essential. Before we destroy a person we decide they aren't human. That's the root of ethnic cleansing, genocide, and class warfare, which brought so many deaths since 1930. The communist purges of wealthy farmers, the Holocaust, the ethnic cleansings in the Balkans and Central Africa in the 1990s, various forms of racism begin the same way? Someone says, "These *creatures* are different. Not like us. Not our blood. They aren't really human. So we can do whatever we wish.

You may ask why are we talking about this. We don't act this way. These are not our problems. Fair question. So let's remember that Solomon put this first in Proverbs and he must have had a reason. Again, violence is a sign, a warning about rebellion. It's meant to get our attention. The great problem sets our attention on all related problems. That is what Proverbs 1 does.

Moses did the same thing in Deuteronomy 21:28-21: "If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him, his father and mother shall... bring him to the elders... of his town [and say] 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious... a profligate and a drunkard.' If all agree, then that son is liable to the death penalty: You must purge the evil from among you."

The passage says all efforts at discipline have failed. The young man is stubborn and rebellious, a glutton and a drunkard, a danger to his family and to society. If he behaves this way in his youth, with no hope for amendment, what will follow? He has repudiated all authority, so that both parents feel compelled to summon the authorities to stop him, for he is a threat to all. No record, no hint that this law was ever put into practice. We can barely imagine that parents would actually bring a child to the city elders and say, "He's so bad, so dangerous..." But the passage is like a tornado siren, calling out, "Take

cover. Beware! Beware! Rebellion could lead here." So the extreme speaks to minor cases. It says "take heed of lesser sins that could lead here."

So the Lord takes us to extreme cases and says, "Don't start down this path." That's Proverbs 1. But sometimes it considers the small sins and where they lead.

C. S. Lewis said, "Hell begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others... but you are still distinct from it. You may even criticize it in yourself and wish you could stop it. But there may come a day when you can no longer. Then there will be nothing you left to criticize, the mood or even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself, going on forever like a machine. It is not a question of God "sending us" to hell. In each of us there is something growing, which will be hell unless it is nipped in the bud." (The Great Divorce)

We feel the truth in this. This principle led city police departments to reduce crime by stopping small infractions: broken windows, public inebriation. Stop the small acts of lawlessness because they can lead to great ones.

Anger, even a critical spirit can slowly build to murder. Jesus said, "You have heard... 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment... Anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the fire of hell" (Mt 5.21-22).

As a small child, five or so, I sometimes did something naughty and ran away. This drove my mother, truly a noble woman, to utter dire threats: "Danny, when I get my hands on you, I'm going to wring your neck!" I imagined that she would pick me up by my feet and swung my head back and forth like a bell. Not bad. One day, it was time to slaughter a chicken on grandpa's farm. A discussion ensued; shall we use an ax or wring its neck? I realized that I had missed something... my mother had threatened to twist my neck until my head popped off. Oh! No, she didn't mean it, but it's not the best way to talk, is it?

Jesus says anger is the cousin of murder. Take a small thing, Jesus says, and see where it can lead. Angry or hateful talk is a form of murder, in our hearts. "He's killing me! She's ruining my life! I could kill him." Even if we would never dream of harming someone physically, it is a kind of violence. When we talk this way, we do not get it out of our system. When we hear ourselves talk angrily, we feel angry all the more.

No one goes straight to murder – or to any major sin or crime. We build up to it. The drug addict starts with marijuana, a prescription drug that felt very good. The alcoholic started with beer and wine. The gambler lost \$100 long before he lost the money for the rent or the mortgage. Murder begins with the smallest violence – a harsh word, an exaggerated criticism, a bitter complaint. That's why we need to take care, guard ourselves.

When someone wrongs us in a small way, we need to mind our reaction. For we all suffer minor indignities most days. We're not included in a dialog loop. We did not get the memo, the e-mail. We were not put in the group, the team. Your rank or service was not recognized. Do you get angry then? A little? A lot?

I was Dean of Faculty at Covenant Seminary for eight years. Many an outsider referred to me as the Dean of Students. The Dean of Students holds students' hands after romantic disasters. The Dean of Faculty oversees curriculum and professors. The choice: Get upset or let it go? Why should they

understand academic titles? Forget tiny snubs, perceived lack of respect. We need to guard against petty anger because it leads to greater anger, if not checked.

So Jesus says small sins partake in great sins and lead to more sins. Beware small sins, for they lead onward. And beware of great sins, like violence, for they cause terrible harm. Don't take a tiny step down that road. Never dehumanize another person. Don't reduce them to their function or their flaw.

Live this in small ways. When you walk or run past someone, say hello. Greet your neighbors. Wave to the cars as they pass. If someone's dog wanders into your yard, greet the dog and find the owner.

The violent youths of Proverbs dehumanize. They don't see other people as *people*. They are playing a *game*. They say, "Throw in your lot with us. Be part of *us*, not *them*." If they are different, we can do as we please.

This is precisely the opposite of Jesus. Remember the Incarnation. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us! He could have said, "They are different from me." Instead, he said, "I will be with them." Instead of hating his enemies, He forgave his enemies and gave himself for them: "When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son" (Rom 5:10).

Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." And "do good to those who hate you" (Matt. 5:44, 6:27).

3. God is a warrior and he is willing to go to war to win peace

Clearly, God opposes violence and war. Yet, there is another element in God's counsel. There is a time to resist evil, to fight evil, for the sake of the innocent. When the Egyptians were trying to exterminate Israel, God delivered them from them. When they escaped the Egyptian army that wanted to slay them, they sang:

"I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea. The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him... The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name."

The powerful Philistines also tried to wipe Israel off the map. David had to fight them to defend his people. Later, in Psalm 18 he sang, "I love you O LORD my strength... The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer... He rescued me from my powerful enemy... who were too strong for me" (18:1-2, 17). The Lord also cares for the weak: "Who is like you, O LORD? You rescue the poor from those too strong for them" (35:10). And Jesus went to war – He defeated Satan, who held the power of death over humanity (Heb. 2:14).

The Bible is realistic. A few believers have embraced pacifism, the vast majority understand: there is a time to fight. That's why David praises God for helping him defend Israel, "He trains my hands for battle" (Psa. 18:34, 2 Sam. 22:35). Since the Lord knows we're prone to fight, he limits the use of force. ¹

¹ Augustine, Art Holmes

First, military action must have a just cause. Governments defend their people. Armed attack against a peaceful people should be resisted, according to Scripture (cf. Judges 18:28, 1 Sam 17). It is right to try to stop an invasion.

Second, motives count. An army should act out of love and justice, not hatred of enemies. The goal is political peace, not vengeance. Even in war, armies should use the least possible force. We resist with inward love and pray for our foes. We want to stop the invasion because it's bad for *them*, not just us, to kill the innocent.

Therefore, warriors should resist the temptation to dehumanize an opposing people by giving them slanderous or racist labels – Japs, Gooks, Ragheads (though it's surely hard to resist this).

Third, we use force as a last resort, when other options have failed. We only fight when we believe resistance will do more good than harm (contra Mongolians) and when there is reasonable hope of success (not a suicide mission).

Private citizens don't use force. We work through appointed authorities. Paul says the magistrate "Does not bear the sword in vain." He stops evil-doers. This is a practical point. If someone suffers domestic violence, they should go to the authorities. If someone is bullying your child at school, go to the authorities. God appointed them to stop violence - dispassionately. Friends, use them.

God's people are warriors too and fight the good fight of the faith

Nonetheless, we primarily fight spiritually. We "Fight the good fight of the faith" Paul says (1 Tim. 6:12, 1:18). Our defenses are spiritual; the gospel of peace prepares us for battle. Paul says, "Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil... Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground..."

In 2 Tim 2:3-6, Paul compares the disciple to three vocations. Like farmers, we must work hard, then wait as God ripens the fruit and rewards our work. Like athletes, we must compete according to the rules. Like a soldier, we "endure hardship" and seek "to please [our] commanding officer."

4. We're willing to fight, but the real battle is spiritual and the real goal is peace through Christ

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers." When he said that he blessed himself, for he is the true peacemaker. At times, Jesus met someone troubled by long illness or guilt over sin. When he heard their faith or repentance, he said, "Your faith has saved you, go in peace" (Luke 7:50, Mark 5:34). He also told his disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you... Do not be afraid" (John 14:27).

Would you like to have that peace? You can. The Bible says, "Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). By faith we join God's family. Jesus is our brother and friend. The gospel of peace brings us peace with God. If we have peace with God, we should ordinarily have more peace within. Causes of distress remain – deadlines, money, bosses. But the great issues are resolved.

And we live in a family dedicated to making peace. Not peace at any price, but peace. So we read, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Rom. 12:18). So we try to make peace. We watch ourselves for anger. We shun wickedness. We don't dehumanize. We aren't violent.

Proverbs singles out violence because it's so damaging. If a thief steals, the victim can rebuild. If a good woman is slandered, people consider her life and think, "I have a hard time believing that." But if you kill someone, it's final, for this life, at least.

Still, Jesus says, watch your anger, your speech. Don't call people idiot, moron, worthless, good for nothing. Don't say "Fool" or "I hate him," or "She's useless" it's like murder. When we nurse grudges, when we say, "She's not like us," we kill them a little. When we blame people for things they didn't do we kill them. There was a little ice age across Europe from 1300 to 1325. Crops failed, trade failed, people starved. And people looked for scapegoats – vulnerable minorities. They blamed minorities for the weather, and sometimes people killed them.

Solomon says, "Do not plot harm against your neighbor, who lives trustfully near you." He is your neighbor, he lives in peace. Honor his trust (Prov. 3:29-30). Don't join a gang that says, "Come let's lie in wait for someone's blood." Fear the Lord. Love him and his gospel of peace. Live at peace with him and the world around us.