

Sermon 66, Healthy Spirit, Healthy Society, Healthy Speech, Proverbs 18:12-21

Proposition: The wise Son sees the need for a healthy spirit, healthy society, and healthy speech.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, our text this morning deals with three sorts of health and the wisdom of pursuing each. Most of our text is about a healthy spirit, and specifically about foolish alternatives to or substitutes for a healthy spirit. But we also have instruction on the healthy society, all of which is phrased negatively, and instruction on healthy speech, which is phrased positively. What we’ll see is that the wise son keeps up his spirit, maintains his social relationships, and loves good speech, as ultimately found in Christ the word.

I. The Need for a Healthy Spirit, vv. 11-15

We begin with the need for a healthy spirit. The human spirit is a marvelous, delicate thing. We all know people who have high spirits, who are ready for anything life can throw at them. We also know people whose spirits are broken, people we would call clinically depressed, who are afflicted with such sorrow and grief that they cannot even function in this world. Sometimes the

cause of their sorrow is only too obvious; sometimes it is all too mysterious, and unguessable both by the depressed person and his loved ones. Proverbs, of course, does not directly address the mystery of depression, nor does it give any infallible rules for keeping your spirits up. Instead, it lists three things that make poor substitutes for a healthy spirit and then describes the advantages of having an actually healthy spirit. The message is clear: You need a healthy spirit. And if you don't have one, this is a reminder not to give up but rather to seek Jesus Christ, the one whose spirit was always healthy even when He was overwhelmed with sorrow.

A. Poor Substitutes for a Healthy Spirit, vv. 11-13

Well, the poor substitutes for a healthy spirit are only too obvious and common among us.

1. The Arrogance of Wealth, v. 11

The first of them is the arrogance of wealth. Who needs an active, resolute, joy-driven spirit when you can be rich and find security in money? Brothers and sisters, remember, it's the work of the human spirit that creates wealth, but wealth cannot create the human spirit. You can imagine whatever you want about your wealth, but I can guarantee that wealth cannot cure depression. Yes, researchers have found that money can buy happiness — but the only happiness it can buy is the happiness of joyful giving. If you give your grandkids a trip to Disney World, their joy in that trip will make you very happy. But of course, you actually have to have a generous heart before giving your money away will give you any happiness.

Anyway, the point is clear: money can't substitute for a healthy spirit. If your spirit is broken, it can't be sewn back together with any number of \$100 bills.

2. The Arrogance of Beating the System, v. 12

A second form of arrogance is the arrogance of thinking that you can beat the system.

Before destruction the heart of a man is haughty, And before honor is humility.

What is the scenario outlined in this proverb? There are two before-after pictures. In the first picture, the "before" is arrogance and the "after" is destruction. In the second picture, the "before" is humility and the "after" is honor. We would say that humility leads to honor while pride leads to destruction. In other words, if you honor yourself, you'll never find honor, but if you are honest about yourself, you will be praised and honored.

The glory of humility really is amazing, isn't it? We can see this truth most clearly expressed in the life of Jesus Christ, the lowly one who is now honored and praised and exalted far above all gods.

What I'm interested in talking about, though, is that period before destruction when the heart of man is haughty. Why is it haughty? What produces this feeling of superiority? I would suggest that the feeling of being superior to everyone else comes precisely from the feeling that you've beaten the system. "Everyone told me that this would end badly. The Bible said that this would end in my destruction. But I haven't been destroyed; in fact, I've never been better!"

Brothers and sisters, what an arrogant thing to say and think. But isn't it what we think every time we sin? "I'm beating the system! I'm getting the pleasure without experiencing the downside. I'm getting the fun without the pain. Sin doesn't destroy; sin is actually a blessing!"

Such a feeling feels like high spirits. It feels like a healthy spirit. But it is actually a very sick, twisted, diseased spirit. If you think the thrill of beating the system is the mark of a healthy spirit, you are very much mistaken. The thrill of beating the system is a temporary feeling that will end as soon as destruction strikes you. A healthy spirit is not found in the arrogance of beating the system, but in the humility of saying "I need to submit to the system and do what's required of me." Obviously, there are times when the system is evil and wrong. But most of the time, the system is in place for a reason and you need to submit to it for a reason. You need to be humble rather than thinking the exultation of beating the system is the mark of a healthy spirit.

The arrogance of wealth is not a sign of health. The arrogance of beating the system is not a sign of health. And the final mark of arrogance is equally with the other two the sign of a diseased, rotten spirit.

3. The Arrogance of Not Needing to Listen, v. 13

This, of course, is the arrogance of not needing to listen. You start talking, and I interrupt and tell you what you were going to say because I know I'll say it better than you would have.

Brothers and sisters, this habit of interrupting is something the fool can never escape. And if you have this habit, you are a fool! If someone wants to ask you a question and you answer before you understand the question, you're a fool. Again, the feeling of "I can answer any question, tell anyone what they think before I even listen to what they have to say" can be an intoxicating one. If you have this feeling, you might mistake it for genuine high spirits. But it's not. Again, it is a sign of a diseased, unhealthy human spirit. There is something wrong with you if you don't listen carefully before you speak.

In saying this, I condemn myself and many of you. Brothers and sisters, do you have the humility to listen to what someone else is asking before you answer? Or are you already certain that you know the answer even when you clearly don't know the question? Jesus Christ teaches us the humility of listening. He begs us to pray to Him. He wants to hear our questions before He answers them. Why? Because His spirit is healthy, and He has no need to run roughshod over others in order to magnify Himself. He doesn't have to patch up His wounded spirit by assuming an air of machismo or bravado and by acting like He knows everything. And we, His servants, don't need to do that either. A healthy spirit is an obedient spirit, a spirit that does what the Father wants. And what our Father wants is for us to be wise children who know how to listen. Our health is found in doing what we were made to do; sickness is a result of the body being subjected to things it was not designed for or is not adequate to take on in its damaged state.

B. An Actually Healthy Spirit, vv. 14-15

But rather than directly telling us what a healthy spirit is, Solomon tells us instead what a healthy spirit does. What it is is the part of a human being that provides the motivation and that handles the communication. You could call your spirit a motivator. If you're spiritless, you have no

motivation. You have no desire to achieve anything in this world. A healthy motivator makes you want to do the right thing. An unhealthy motivator either doesn't make you want to do anything, or else it makes you want to do the wrong thing. Solomon tells us now about two good things that a healthy spirit drives us to do.

1. It Survives Physical Illness, v. 14

The first of these is that it survives physical illness. The sheer will to live can often keep people alive long after others have concluded that death is inevitable. Of course, the spirits of other people can sometimes substitute for this too, and keep you alive when you've given up hope. Thus, one can think of Theodore Roosevelt exploring the Brazilian rainforest, so sick that he was sure he would die. He kept telling his son "Leave me. I'm dying." But his son doggedly refused to leave him, kept getting him through the jungle, and TR survived — almost miraculously. Brothers and sisters, a healthy spirit survives physical illness. Now, obviously this is a light physical illness, a survivable one. People with healthy spirits can and do die all the time. But there is a spiritual component to illness; the same sickness that would finish off one person with a weak spirit doesn't harm another person with a strong spirit. On the other hand, a broken spirit can and will kill someone who physically is perfectly healthy. In other words, Solomon is saying "A healthy spirit is very important! Don't neglect it. Don't abuse it. Don't make it sick." If you do, your life is in danger.

2. It Seeks Out Wisdom, v. 15

But a healthy spirit also seeks out wisdom. If your spirit is healthy, remember, it motivates you to do good. But an unhealthy spirit motivates you to pursue evil. This book highlights wisdom as the greatest good — and so it is, for we know that Jesus Christ is the begotten Wisdom of God, and that to know Him is to know wisdom. If your spirit is healthy, it will motivate you to seek Jesus Christ!

So don't fall for the lie that arrogance and the false feeling of superiority it brings is actual well-being or a healthy state for the human spirit. It's not. A healthy state for the human spirit is when it is motivating you to do good things, including the best good of seeking wisdom.

II. The Need for a Healthy Society, vv. 16-19

But a healthy spirit is not sufficient; we also need a healthy society. This is a society where we work together to bless and help each other flourish.

A. Poor Substitutes for a Healthy Society, vv. 16-18

Solomon highlights once again the poor substitutes for a healthy society. Don't think that these principles make a society healthy; far from it!

1. "Donations Equal Access", v. 16

There are billboards standing beside our roadways here in Northeast Wyoming that say "Public lands: Donations equal access." Personally, I have always been very confused by these billboards. Are they urging people to donate land to the public? Are they saying that you will receive an amount of access corresponding to the amount you donate? Or are they simply saying that without people donating, no one will be allowed on public land? What are you supposed to

donate, if that's the case? And don't our taxes pay for public lands? Anyway, I'm confused. But for the purposes of this sermon, I'm going to take that slogan, "Donations equal access," and apply it to the concept of greasing the wheels with gifts. Hear me carefully here: A society where donations equal access, that is, a society where there is no chance of telling the great anything unless you've presented them with a nice little present first, is an unhealthy society. A society where people in charge use their position to extort gifts from those who need their help is a sick and messed-up society. Are you with me? I don't know what our public lands bureaucrats mean by "donations equal access." But I know that literally speaking, when applied to public officials (and this very much includes campaign contributions), the slogan is completely and totally evil. Brothers and sisters, you better not require donations before you will consent to hear an underling. If your employee knows not to ask for time off without giving you a plate of cookies or a Prime Rib gift card or something else along those lines, you are part of a sick society. In fact, you are the germ sickening society. You are making the culture at your workplace toxic. If you hold elected office and you are much more willing to hear from those who donated more than \$5 million to your campaign than you are to hear from those who donated \$0 to your campaign, you are sick and sickening.

Solomon is observing, yes — but by implication, especially by placing this verse between two that talk about listening and seeking knowledge, he is also commenting. A gift works. No question. But the people who require gifts are fools with sick spirits who will not find the truth, because they only listen to one side of the dispute.

Christ takes no campaign contributions. You can't bribe God to give you priority access over some poorer Christian who has less money or fewer good works or fewer attendance points at church or something like that. God shows no partiality and will not take a bribe. Your gifts won't bring you before Him. And if gifts will get people into your presence — even tiny gifts, like requiring that your children come and ask you about your day before they get a hug and a snack — then you are not a wise son. You're a fool.

2. The First to Present Is Always Correct, v. 17

Well, the fool is known not only by his eagerness to receive donations in order to get access to his presence; he is also known by his habit of only listening to one side of the story. Brothers and sisters, if you hear one side of the story only, the more fool you if you believe a word of it! You don't know what happened until you've heard both sides of the story. One of the cops in this congregation has told me about a woman who called the Sheridan County Sheriff's Office and said that she had been abducted and taken to New Mexico by an abusive boyfriend who was on drugs. She knew because he would go in the bathroom for hours to trip.

Well, the sheriff's deputies caught up with this fellow; his side of the story was that she had come to him for help because she had an abusive boyfriend that she had to get away from. She begged him to help her move to New Mexico. He drove her car while she rented and drove a U-Haul. And the drugs thing? His side of the story was that she talked incessantly and that to get some peace and quiet he would go hide in the bathroom!

Two sides to the story. A very different picture emerges when you hear the second one, eh? Brothers and sisters, the idea that you can find the truth without hearing all sides of the story is as poisonous to a healthy society as the idea that only campaign contributors matter. The idea that the woman is always right, that the black person is always right, that the white person is always right, that *anyone* is always right, is totally pernicious and detestable. Biblically, you don't know the truth until you've heard all sides. Hence the Scripture's insistence on settling everything with at least two witnesses. A single witness means nothing.

3. A Coin Toss Can Settle Anything, v. 18

Well, a third poor substitute for a healthy society is the idea that a coin toss can settle anything. Obviously this is an absurd way of thinking.

Now, in Solomon's historical context, this proverb probably refers to the practice attested in the Bible of giving major decisions into the hand of God because they were beyond human skill. Thus, the territory of the promised land was divided among the 12 tribes by lot. That was certainly a better approach than letting them all fight it out for the nicest territory. The 12th apostle, Judas' replacement, was chosen by lot, because the other 11 didn't know how else to make a decision that only God could make. And so this proverb is ultimately telling us positively that submission to God's decisions is a foundation for a healthy society. It can stop conflicts between the mighty such as are inevitable in any system where might makes right. "When the elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers," says the African proverb. When the mighty don't have an agreed-on approach to decision making, they fight, whether physically or in the courtroom. Either way, the results are bloody and a huge waste of human potential and societal resources. Really, then, the proverb can be taken two ways. One way looks at the role of chance in decision making in a modern context. After the selection of Matthias as Judas' replacement, we never again see the lot used in Scripture to make decisions. Rather, we are taught to use our heads to make decisions based on the information that we have before us. Certainly that information- and principle-based approach to decision making is much more satisfactory to the mighty in our own social context. We can (generally) agree to abide by the outcome of applying neutral rules to agreed-on information.

The other way to look at the proverb is to major on the meaning of the lot. This way, the proverb is not just pointing out the need for an agreed-on system of decision-making, but also adding the further truth that people will only get along when they are both willing to submit to God. If you are willing to submit to God's providence in your life, as exemplified by (say) the IRS' decision that you need have your returns for the last five years audited or (say) your spouse's decision to undergo a sex-change surgery, then you won't fight what can't be fought. You'll submit to God. And really, then, this proverb is not saying "Decide everything by flipping a coin." That's not the point. The point is rather the need for a decision-making system, and the even broader need to submit to the decisions of that system in the fear of God. Without both of these elements, society will not function because it can't. If every decision is contested, if no one can submit, then we quickly devolve into the war of all against all.

B. Major Threats to a Healthy Society, v. 19

That war begins with the breakdown of family relationships.

1. The Breakdown of Family Relationships, v. 19a

The contentions of the mighty, the previous verse said. You want to see contentions of the mighty? Don't look at great powers engaged in conventional warfare. Don't look at weapons of mass destruction unleashed on an unwitting world. Look at domestic violence. Look at family conflict. The corruption of the best is the worst, and the breakdown of the closest relationships is far more taxing, emotionally, financially, and socially, than the loss of world peace or most-favored-nation trade status. Conquering a city is easy comparing to finding reconciliation with an offended family member. And of course, this is most true in relationship to the closest of all human relationships, marriage. It was easier to take Iwo Jima than it would be to put a marriage back together after a nasty divorce. The 3rd, 4th, and 5th Marine Divisions together were capable of conquering that island. Do you think that they could repair a broken marriage? Brothers and sisters, we talked about a healthy spirit a moment ago. Just as you can't live without a healthy spirit, so you can't live without a healthy society. If your closest relationships are in ruins, there are very few ways in which your life can go right after that. And if you've got a whole society of people whose closest relationships are destroyed, you've got a society that's going to self-destruct. It virtually has no other choice.

So put a lot of effort into maintaining and keeping your closest relationships. Don't let them fall apart. Your marriage is important; watch over it and protect it. Your relationship to your church is important; spend the time and effort necessary to maintain it. Otherwise, like the politician who has no time for anyone who didn't give to his campaign, you will be the germ sickening society.

2. Strife in General, v. 19b

Contentions between the mighty, civil wars in which various factions line up against each other, are the ultimate downfall of human society. We can't get along because our lusts drive us to fight and kill each other. Truly, these things are major threats to a healthy society. Brothers and sisters, how do we overcome family strife and strife in general? By submitting to Jesus Christ, the prince of peace! Wisdom internalized gives peace. So do you want a healthy spirit and healthy society? Then pursue Christ. He will supercharge your motivator, such that you want to do what's good. He'll make you a faithful member of society, someone who keeps up his relationships instead of severing them like the loner in the first verse of our chapter. And He will change the way you talk.

III. The Need for Healthy Speech, vv. 20-21

Our passage this morning ends by talking about the need for healthy speech.

A. You'll be pleased with your own words, v. 20

It first has another observation rather than an evaluation. The observation is this: everyone likes their own opinion. If I didn't like it, it wouldn't be my opinion. Right? Whatever you say, you'll find it very satisfactory. I think that's the obvious meaning here.

But the reason it's a proverb is because the other side is true too. We have basically seen this proverb twice before:

Pro 12:14 A man will be satisfied with good by the fruit of his words, And the deeds of a man's hands will return to him.

Pro 13:2 From the fruit of a man's mouth he enjoys good, But the desire of the treacherous is violence.

Both of these versions of the proverb indicate that you will have to eat your own words. So when you first say them, you think they're pretty good. But will they still be good when they come back around for you to eat? Words change things in the world, and those changed things will come back to you and affect your life. The mouth is the perfect dual-purpose organ to represent this. It puts out; it takes in. It does both, in about equal measure. It puts out words and takes in food. It reveals the soul and keeps the body alive.

So you'll be pleased with your own words; or will you? If they are from a healthy spirit, and they work to create a healthy society, then yes, you will. But if your words come from a foul, putrid spirit, and they create a foul, putrid society, I don't think eating them is going to be so pleasant.

B. Words can kill or make alive, v. 21a

And despite the "words can never hurt me" garbage of our little ditty, the fact of the matter is that words are far more powerful than sticks and stones. The tongue has the power to kill: "You're so fat and worthless. I don't even know why you exist." It also has the power to make alive: "Damsel, I say to you, arise." But even on the human level, you can tell someone something that will power them for the rest of their life. People relate stories of the teacher who said to them, "You can be a writer." Those words give life.

So think carefully about what you say. You'll like it when you say it, but you're going to have to eat it later. Will you like it then?

C. Lovers of the Word will find satisfaction, v. 21b

But our passage ends with a final word about healthy speech: those who love it will eat its fruit. What is the "it"? It seems that it can only be the tongue. Those who love the tongue will enjoy what it produces. But as we just queried, will they? I think they will, if we understand the tongue in the sense of loving language, even loving the word, the incarnate Word. If you love Him, you will enjoy the fruit He creates. Even to love language and use it well is a blessing; how much better to love the creator of language, the Father's Word?

So brothers and sisters, we see in all three of these quests for health — the healthy spirit, the healthy society, the healthy tongue — that true health can be achieved only through knowing Jesus Christ. He can teach your spirit to motivate you to do right. He can teach you to bless society by submitting to His providence. He can teach you to say what is right and will be enjoyable the second time around when you love Him in His identity as the Word.

So love Christ. Seek Him. Ask Him to make your heart healthy so that your words and your society can be healthy. Don't be the arrogant, prayerless person who delights in the poor substitutes for a healthy spirit and a healthy society. Instead, know the Christ who heals spirits, renews societies, and grows the best fruit — the fruit of the Spirit. Then you will be healthy. Then your soul will live. Amen.