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Proverbs: Words of Wisdom
II. Better Than
Proverbs 15:16-17

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One of the hardest lessons I had to learn when I went to college was how to study. In particular, for me the challenge was learning what to highlight as I read my textbooks. I had never before been allowed to write in textbooks, and this was an overwhelming new freedom. And I went yellow highlighter crazy. Whole pages began to glow in neon yellow. But I soon realized that when you highlight everything, you are actually highlighting nothing. So I had to learn to distinguish what was really important from what was merely interesting.

In the same way, one of the biggest lessons we have to learn in life runs along these same lines: learning what needs to be highlighted in our living. To learn what values need to be underlined, to discern which priorities in life are critical, to be able to identify what matters most. Of course, the world as it is doesn't make this very easy for us – and hasn't since we left the Garden of Eden. Eighty years ago, for example, the great Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, gave an illustration based upon something that had apparently recently happened at the Harrod's department store in London:

The world, as we live in it, is like a shop window in which some mischievous person has got in overnight and shifted all the price labels round, so that the cheap things have the high-price labels on them and the really precious things are priced low . . . We let ourselves get taken in.¹

But if it was hard back then to discern what needed to be highlighted, what was of true importance and what was not, I would argue that it has gotten even harder in our day. Because we have now added something the good Archbishop didn't have to face: a pace of living which is absolutely frenetic – driven by information overload, crammed calendars, and always on communications. As one social commentator puts it:

Society has done a good job teaching us how to run. We run out the door in the morning, run the kids to school, and run to work, where we run through the jam-packed day full of appointments, projects, and piles of paper. If we can break away, we run to the health club, where we mount a treadmill and run nowhere . . . Since we are running late, we run to pick up the kids, meet friends, or get to a PTA meeting. We run through dinner or grab a little carryout

“fast food” because there simply isn’t time to cook. We run through the housework and office work due to be done by tomorrow before finally dropping exhausted into bed. Exhausted is good, because the last thing we want to do is ask ourselves why we are running so hard through life.²

Henri Nouwen, the great Catholic writer, puts the same problem in this way: *“In short, while our lives are full, we feel unfulfilled.”³*

But what if there was a better way to live? What if there was a different way of approaching life – one which didn’t wear us out, break us down, and leave us empty? What if there was a way for us to discern, to know beyond question, what things in life matter most, which deserve the yellow highlighter? And what if there was a means by which we could actually live out these right priorities in real life daily – and so enter into a way of life marked not by speed but by depth, not by stress but by peace, not by being emptied out but by being filled up? And what if that better way of life is a whole lot closer to our reach than we have ever imagined?

*Better is a little with the fear of the Lord
than great treasure and trouble with it.
Better is a dinner of herbs where love is
than a fattened ox and hatred with it.*

Last week, in Proverbs chapter two, we learned that there is only one way of living which really works, which actually is best – and that the name for that way of living is Wisdom. And also we learned that this Wisdom can only come to us through the Lord God. This week, with these two small proverbs, we learn two really big lessons about what this life of Wisdom is all about, and what it actually looks like in practice. For both these proverbs revolve around the central theme of God’s life-giving Wisdom: which is that contentment in life comes, not through consuming, but through communing.⁴

“Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasures and trouble with it.” To live this “better than” life begins in letting God reorient our lives away from the impermanent and ultimately disappointing treasures of this world to the eternal treasure of knowing Him and His Kingdom. If you have your yellow highlighter handy, here’s the number one thing to highlight: relationship with the God who made us, who loves us, who saves us, who sustains us. Better than amassing a huge pile of stuff, better than winning the world’s great competition that whoever dies with the most toys wins, better than climbing the ladder and moving on up is simply this: to know God deeply, and to be in close relationship with God continually. It is better, says Wisdom, to have the real treasure of intimate relationship with God than to possess any amount of the lesser trinkets this world has placed a false price tag upon. Or, as Jesus Himself put it, it is a terrible waste of a life to gain the whole world and yet to forfeit one’s soul while doing so.

So, *“Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it.”* We can think of it this way: in these frenetic, overwhelmed, always on lives of ours, one of our most common prayers is for God to give us peace. Truly this is something Jesus promised us, and is indeed something we so desperately need – this peace which surpasses understanding, not as the

world gives peace.⁵ But here's what we're getting wrong in our prayers: this peace of Christ is not a commodity we get from God and then apply to our lives as they currently are, so that our lives can continue on as they are but with just a little less stress around the edges. No, the peace of Christ is not something we get from Jesus – it **is** Jesus. Peace comes from drawing close enough to Jesus, at His invitation, that we find our lives being changed, redirected, reoriented, recentered – being put on the right tracks by Him so that we are not so constantly in danger of being derailed. Peace begins to enter our lives the very moment we begin to say to Him, *“Lord Jesus, teach me how to live. Let me no longer be conformed to the world, but let me be transformed by the renewal of my mind and heart in You.”*⁶

Listen to Henri Nouwen again:

Jesus does not respond to our worry-filled way of living by saying that we should not be so busy with worldly affairs. He does not try to pull us away from the many events, activities, and people that make up our lives. He does not tell us that what we do is unimportant, valueless, or useless. Nor does he suggest that we should withdraw from our involvements and live quiet, restful lives removed from the struggles of the world.

*Jesus' response to our worry-filled lives is quite different. He asks us to shift the point of gravity, to relocate the center of our attention, to change our priorities . . . Jesus does not speak about a change of activities, a change in contacts, or even a change of pace. He speaks about a change of heart. This change of heart makes everything different, even while everything appears to remain the same. This is the meaning of “Set your hearts on his kingdom first . . . and all these other things will be given you as well.”*⁷

Peace is not something we get from Jesus – peace is what blooms in us when we highlight our relationship with Him above all other things. When we put communion with Him first and foremost on the daily agenda. And when we do this, a whole new way of living, a whole new quality of living – peace – begins to pervade every aspect of our lives. Listen to this testimony from the great Quaker writer, Thomas Kelly:

*Life from the Center is a life of unhurried peace and power. It is simple. It is serene. It is amazing. It is triumphant. It is radiant . . . And it makes our life programs new and overcoming. We need not get frantic. He is at the helm. And when our little day is done we lie down quietly in peace, for all is well.*⁸

Both these writers are speaking of a way of life that is genuinely possible for us, a transformed way of living which is well within our reach. All that we need is to heed the way of Wisdom: *“Better is little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it.”*

Which leads us to the second proverb and the second piece of Wisdom which lies beneath this new and “better than” way of living:

*Better is a dinner of herbs where love is
than a fattened ox and hatred with it.*

This proverb becomes clear if we will visualize these two tables, these two meals. Let's imagine it as two different Thanksgiving tables. In one home the table groans with the largest Butterball you've ever seen, golden brown and smelling like heaven. All the side dishes are masterpieces of the culinary arts, extraordinary concoctions even Julia Child would envy. The wine is first-rate and the silver is so polished you can see yourself in your spoon. But then the family comes and sits around the table. And before even the meal begins you can just feel the tension of arguments past and injuries not yet either forgiven or forgotten. Before even you taste that turkey, you taste the resentments in the air, long-harbored and well-tended. And when the meal begins, the talk around the table is forced and overly polite, at least until the wine takes affect and the old battles resume. And everyone is counting down the minutes till they can leave that feast and get away from one another. *"A fattened ox and hatred with it."*

But in the second house, a very different scene. The meal is far more humble – turkey to be sure, and green bean casserole along with that cranberry sauce which comes straight from the can. The wine was on sale at Walmart, along with the paper plates and plastic utensils. But as soon as the family sits down and starts to dig in, laughter begins to fill the room as the old stories are retold and new adventures are shared. Even the children at the children's table are having fun. The whole extended clan in one place, eating and talking – and while the meal may be modest, the setting humble, it's truly a feast. A feast because what's really on that table, around that table, is love. *"Better is a dinner of herbs where love is than a fattened ox and hatred with it."*

In other words, if the first thing Wisdom looks like in real life is close communion with God, the second thing Wisdom looks like in real life is close communion with our fellow human beings, and especially with those whom we love. Once again, contentment comes, not through consuming, but through communing.

But just as relationship with God is a priority which must be claimed and worked for, so close communion with those around us also must become a priority – chosen and protected and made time for in the midst of our busy days. The "better than" life of the way of Wisdom means that the people in our lives become a priority we attend to, make space for, stop rushing around long enough to enjoy – maybe even cut back on the daily whirlwind of activities and crammed calendars so that we can just simply be with one another, enjoy one another, treasure one another. Is this possible? Of course, if we have first drawn close to God, and then used our yellow highlighter to signify that relationships matter most.

This is one of my favorite stories, from Michael Lindvall's book, [The Good News from North Haven](#). It's fictional, and a preacher story to boot – but I think you can easily fit your own real life details into this story. Here it is: Pastor David Battles of the Second Presbyterian Church of tiny North Haven, Minnesota, is feeling depressed. He has just turned forty. *"Forty years lived and four of them in this one place and what difference has it all made?"* he wonders. He begins to add up the numbers. He has preached 187 sermons, baptized 8 babies and 1 middle-aged lady, married 17 couples, and buried 28 people. At that pace, the next twenty-five years until retirement

will bring 1,175 more sermons, 50 more babies, 6 middle-aged ladies, 104 happy couples, and 175 funerals, not counting his own. And in his gloom he wonders if any of this will really add up to anything important at all.

Which is probably why he was so vulnerable to the envelope that came in the mail emblazoned with the invitation, “*Open This Envelope and Revolutionize Your Church’s Life and Mission.*” The letter inside used the word “new” seven times, the word “vigor” twice, and the word “energy” four times. It described a program containing study books, videos, sermon illustrations, and a leader’s guide, all for \$89.95. He started to throw it away, as he usually did with such things, but just as he turned to do so he saw the “175” still flashing on his calculator – the number of projected funerals. And then he turned back around and checked the box on the reply card that said, “*Yes! I want to invigorate my church.*”

The next few weeks were a flurry of motion on his part – meetings and speeches and visitations – as he tried to whip up some excitement for this new church invigoration program. In his mind he started to imagine how six months from now people would be saying, “*Boy, things are really hoppin’ over at the Presbyterian Church.*” He pictured his photo on the cover of the Minneapolis newspaper’s religion section, under the headline, “*Visionary Pastor Awakens Sleeping Church.*” He even chose the title for the book that he would write about his success: The North Haven Story.

But when the grand kick-off event finally rolled around, a grand total of twelve church members showed up – and they were only there for the free meal. It was a complete and total flop. The next morning, Pastor Dave was so disgusted and depressed that he had to get out of the office, so he went to get a haircut from Harry at the barbershop. As Pastor Dave sulked in the chair, he and Harry started talking. One thing led to another, and soon Harry was pouring out the details of his painful relationship with his father – a pain he had been holding in for a long time. At one point, Harry quit cutting and just rested his hands on Pastor Dave’s shoulders. In the mirror in front of them, Dave could see the tears beginning to form in Harry’s eyes. He reached up and put his hands on top of Harry’s, and spoke to him words of comfort and grace.

That night he had a meeting and got home late. Annie, his wife, was waiting at the door with news that the children had stayed up waiting for him to come read to them their bedtime story. He was tired now, as well as depressed, and he just wanted to turn on the TV. But he went upstairs anyway and read to them chapter six of Ramona the Pest. They both fell asleep before he finished and he kissed them both before saying a prayer over them as he sat on the edge of the bed. And sitting there, he finally understood:

. . . it came to me that of all the meetings I had attended in the last few days, of all the sermons I’d preached, of all the programs I’d introduced or tried to introduce, the most important things I had done in all my busy-ness were to touch Harry the barber’s hands and to read chapter six of Ramona the Pest. These were important things – not because the other things were unimportant. They were important because the mark a man or a woman makes on this world

*is most often a trail of faithful love, and quiet mercies, and unknown kindnesses.*⁹

“*Better is a dinner of herbs where love is.*” Better communion than consumption, people before things.

There truly is a “better than” life out there waiting for us. This Wisdom life God would give to us is real. And it is so much nearer to us than we might think – for it is only waiting for us to turn to God and pray for it, claim it, commit ourselves to it. To say to God, “*Please, Lord, let me no longer be conformed to the ways of the world, but let my life be renewed by the transforming of my heart and mind in Christ Jesus. Teach me what matters most, and how to live for it every day.*”

For this is what Wisdom teaches: that the contentment we are seeking comes not through consuming, which is what the world tells us to do. But rather through communing, with God and with one another. And trust me on this: you can go ahead and mark that now with a yellow highlighter.

¹ Quoted in Leslie D. Weatherhead, *The Significance of Silence* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1945), p. 95.

² M. Craig Barnes, *Sacred Thirst: Meeting God in the Desert of Our Longings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001), p. 180.

³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 30.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, “What You Eat Is What You Get,” in *The Threat of Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 118. Brueggemann’s interpretation of this text provided the inspiration for my sermon.

⁵ John 14:27, Philippians 4:7.

⁶ Romans 12:2.

⁷ Nouwen, pp. 41-2.

⁸ Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1941), p. 124,

⁹ Michael L. Lindvall, *The Good News from North Haven* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), p. 25.