

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
January 10, 2016

The Company You Keep

Proverbs 15:22-33

Divine guidance comes in many forms. In last week's sermon, we saw how God provided navigation help to the magi by means of a star, the Scriptures, and a dream. This is just one of many stories in the Bible where people need lots of help from above, in very down-to-earth ways, in order to get from point A to point B. These stories are often a mixture of people's purposes and God's purposes. They bring together divine direction and human planning.

In this morning's text, there's plenty of planning going on, but not in the form of a story. Instead, we encounter a proverb, a brief saying designed to capture and convey wisdom, so that its hearers will know how to live in a godly manner. In this case, wise and godly living has to do with how we make our plans. "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed" (v.22).

There's certainly no shortage of plans, especially this time of the year. We're now 10 days into 2016, and for many people, plans are already well in motion. New Year's resolutions are already being put to the test. Intentions to get in shape, to get out of debt, to spend more time with family and friends, to quit smoking, to get organized, to read the Bible more, to pray more—all these aims, and many more, are now running into the harsh realities of daily life, where even the best plans by the most determined people can begin to crack and crumble.

Sometimes our plans fail because we're working with bad information. Sometimes our plans fail because we set unrealistic goals. Sometimes our plans fail because of unforeseen circumstances. Sometimes our plans fail because we assemble them too hastily. Sometimes our plans fail because of poor execution. And sometimes our plans fail because they're just that, our plans, as lone individuals, plans made without consulting others, seeking their advice or counsel. Some of the most fragile and foolish plans we make in life are the ones where we decide to go it alone, rather than looking to God and gathering guidance from others.

"Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed." In our lives as Christians, this piece of wisdom may take many forms. It may, for instance, look like a group of church members gathering around the table for our monthly congregational business meeting. This Wednesday evening is another opportunity for us to come together to make plans, plans about our church's mission and ministry over the next several months, and beyond. We already have a strategic plan that we adopted a few years ago. It's still in place to give us direction as we continue our journey forward. That general plan, and all the more detailed plans we make within it, never belong to just one person, but to our entire community of believers, where together we seek the guidance of God and the glory of God.

According to our text, a successful plan isn't the product of just one person's mind, but the result of collaboration and consultation. In the life of a church, we know that's easier said than done. Collaborating, consulting, seeking advice and input from others, can get difficult and messy. Browse through the minutes of any congregation's business meetings, and you'll quickly see that plans made "with many advisers" can be a challenging experience. Yet we persevere together, enabling one another to stay on the path of wisdom, so that God can steer our lives and our congregation.

The opening verse of today's text is just one of many places in the book of Proverbs where we were reminded of how much we need wise counsel from others. In their original context, these saying often had to do especially with matters of government, statecraft, or waging war. Thus, Proverbs 11:14: "For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure." Or Proverbs 20:18: "Make plans by seeking advice; if you wage war, obtain guidance." We know from our own experience with political issues that outcomes aren't just determined by those in office, but also by the advisors, consultants, and strategists who surround them.

This need for guidance and direction extends into all areas of our lives, not just matters of state. Whether the subject is how to manage our money, how to raise your child, how to strengthen your marriage, how to pick a major or choose a career track, how to care for an aging parent, or how to improve your job performance, we all regularly face situations where we need to look to others for counsel and wisdom. And the people to whom we turn for insight and direction can go a long way toward determining the course and character of our lives.

For Christians, this means that the church is the primary community where we encourage and enable one another on the path of wisdom, which leads to godly lives devoted to righteousness. If our goal is to be shaped more and more into the likeness of Christ, then it only makes sense that we connect ourselves to, rely upon, and seek guidance from others who are on the same route to the same objective, conformity to Christ. In other words, growth in holiness, success in sanctification, is impossible without surrounding ourselves with fellow believers who can advise us by their words, their example, and every other way that they embody wisdom.

In one of his books, Parker Palmer, a Quaker, tells the story of how God used some of his friends to shape his vocational path. Palmer had been offered the opportunity to become the president of a small educational institution. He was certain the job was for him, but he honored the tradition of the Quaker community, which is to call on a dozen trusted friends to participate in a "clearness committee," a process in which "the group refrains from giving you advice but spends three hours asking you honest, open questions to help you discover your own inner truth." According to Palmer, the initial questions were all very easy, until someone simply asked, "What would you like most about being a president?" He writes:

The simplicity of that question loosed me from my head and lowered me into my heart. I remember pondering for at least a full minute before I could respond. Then, very softly and tentatively, I started to speak: "Well, I would not like having to give up my writing and my teaching. . . . I would not like the politics of the presidency, never knowing who your real friends are. . . . I would not like having to glad-hand people I do not respect simply because they have money. . . . I would not. . ."

Gently but firmly, the person who had posed the question interrupted me: "May I remind you that I asked what you would most *like*?"

I responded impatiently, "Yes, yes, I'm working my way toward an answer." Then I resumed my sullen but honest litany. . . .

Once again the questioner called me back to the original question. But this time I felt compelled to give the only honest answer I possessed, an answer that came from the very bottom of my barrel, an answer that appalled even me as I spoke it.

"Well," I said, in the smallest voice I possess, "I guess what I'd like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word *president* under it."

I was sitting with seasoned Quakers who knew that though my answer was laughable, my mortal soul was clearly at stake! They did not laugh at all but went into a long and serious silence—a silence in which I could only sweat and inwardly groan.

Finally my questioner broke the silence with a question that cracked all of us up—and cracked me open: "Parker," he said, "can you think of an easier way to get your picture in the paper?"

By then it was obvious, even to me, that my desire to be president had much more to do with my ego than with the ecology of my life—so obvious that when the clearness committee ended, I called the school and withdrew my name from consideration. Had I taken that job, it would have been very bad for me and a disaster for the school.¹

In the life of faith, we need others, primarily others within the Christian community, to help us stay the course called wisdom, and to follow the path that God wants us to travel in order to fulfill our calling in Christ, whatever form that takes. Sometimes that means that you, like Parker Palmer, will need "advisers" who can help you examine your motives and see your desires more clearly. Sometimes that means you'll need a trusted spiritual leader to help you gain clarity about God's direction for your life. Sometimes that means you'll need an experienced mentor who can help you navigate the challenges in a particular form of ministry. Sometimes that means you'll need a fellow believer who can just be present with you and to you, can listen to you, and can help you process God's presence and work in your life. Sometimes that means you'll need a partner, or a small group of partners, in the work of Christ, to whom you can take your ideas or make your proposals and have them assessed in constructive dialogue.

And sometimes that means you'll need an encourager, a fellow believer who can build you up in Christ and help you make progress on the path of wise living. Writer Max Lucado tells about an experience when he discovered the importance of healthy counsel. He was participating in a half-Ironman triathlon. After the 1.2 mile swim and the 56 mile bike ride, Lucado didn't have much energy left for the last part of the event, a 13.1 mile run. As it turns out, the fellow jogging next to Lucado didn't either. Lucado asked him how he was doing, and soon regretted posing the question. "This stinks," he said. "This race is the dumbest decision I've ever made." Lucado's response to him? "Goodbye." According to Lucado, "I know if I listened too long, I'd start agreeing with him."

Soon Lucado caught up with a 66-year-old grandmother, whose tone was just the opposite. "You'll finish this," she encouraged. "It's hot, but at least it's not raining. One step at a time . . . don't forget to hydrate . . . stay in there." Lucado says that he ran next to her until his heart was lifted and his legs were aching. In fact, he finally had to slow down. "No problem," she said, as she waved and kept going. Lucado's question is simple: "Which of these two describes the counsel you seek?"²

"Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed." Moving deeper into wise and righteous living, and promoting the reign of God in the world, have never been a solo affair. The presence of the church, and your participation in it, are reminders that we

desperately need one another in order to go in God's direction for us and to follow his plan for our lives. God's guidance often comes in the form of other human beings, especially those in the community of Christians who counsel you, advise you, guide you, challenge you, question you, encourage you, exhort you, and in every way possible walk with you on the route called wisdom. It's no wonder that a couple of chapters earlier in Proverbs, we hear: "He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm" (13:20).

As we continue our journey into the new year, this portion of the Bible called Proverbs comes alongside us and gives us sound counsel. It tells us that the company we keep can have a major influence on the content and direction of our lives. It challenges us to reflect on what kinds of ties we form with which folks as we follow Jesus. Questions like, with whom are you spending your time? Who are you hanging out with, whether online or face to face? Which people are you developing connections with, such that you shape them and they shape you? Now certainly, we're not supposed to spend all of our time only with fellow believers. You're called to be in God's world, engaging the culture, navigating diverse settings, forming friendships, being salt and light in the midst of those with whom you work, learn, live, shop, and play. But as you do, the church, the community of Christ's people, is still supposed to be the primary company that you keep. That's because growth in wisdom comes from joining others who are on the route toward wisdom.

¹ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) 45-46. Posted at the Preaching Today website. Accessed January 7, 2016 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2008/august/1080408.html>>.

² Max Lucado, *Facing Your Giants* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2006) 65. Posted at the Preaching Today website. Accessed January 7, 2016 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2007/january/5012207.html>>.