

JOINING THE DIPLOMATIC CORP PROVERBS 22:17-29

By Pastor John Carlini, D. Mn.

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ENTRUSTED WITH HIS MISSION AND MESSAGE.**

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This morning, we are starting the third major section of Proverbs. The first two sections have been attributed to King Solomon's authorship. The rest of the book seems to be a gathering of other wisdom literature that continues the traditions of King Solomon's works.

This morning's text is somewhat of an introduction to this third section. I think it not only illustrates the benefits of wisdom for the ancient students, it also spells out the nature of who we are as Christians. The Apostle Paul says that we are ambassadors of Christ. We are sent into the world not to get rich, not to become famous, and not to find happiness, we were sent into the world to be representatives of Jesus Christ and complete the mission He started.

If we are Christians, then our mission is to bring healing, wholeness and salvation to this broken world. Like it or not, we are part of Heaven's diplomatic corp. I don't think that I need to inform you that these days it is dangerous for people to be ambassadors of the United States serving in foreign, hostile countries. We read about people being kidnapped or killed every day.

But there is also a lot of risk in being an ambassador for Christ as well. Let me give you an example: I had been preaching a series on our responsibility as believers to be ambassadors for Christ. One of our couples got the message loud and clear.

An obviously destitute man asked them if he could come to their house and earn some money. The husband said, "Can you paint?" The man answered, "I'm a good painter." So they gave him their address and he showed up the next day. The wife gave him a gallon of green paint and said, "Here's a gallon of green paint. Go around the back of the house and you'll see a porch that needs painting." It was less than an hour that the fellow returned to the door and informed the lady he was done. The lady asked, "Did you do a good job?"

The guy said, “Yes, but lady there’s one thing I’d like to point out. That’s not a Porsche back there. It’s a Mercedes.” This couple found out that when we choose to be ambassadors for Christ, there is always a lot of risk that goes with it. Things don’t always go according to plan.

I really like today’s passage because I think it puts life in perspective for us. It answers several questions: What is my purpose in life? Why do I come to church? What does God expect of me? Why should I read my Bible and pray? The main idea of this morning’s text is: **IF WE ARE TRULY CHRISTIANS, THEN WE ARE AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST, ENTRUSTED WITH HIS MISSION AND MESSAGE.**

I think we often tend to categorize our lives: We have our work life, our school life, our play life, our entertainment life, and our church life. But it seems to me that one of the messages that the Proverbs has been sending us is that we are either wise or foolish, we are either following God or not. For us, we are either Christians or we are not. Being Christian affects my home life, my work life, and my entertainment life. You and I are ambassadors for Christ. That’s who we are. It doesn’t matter where we are or what we are doing, we are always God’s representatives.

Let’s say you were the United States’ Ambassador to Spain. It wouldn’t matter if you were in your office, shopping for groceries, or running with the bulls. You are still the United States’ Ambassador to Spain ... even if you were gored in the behind by one of the bulls.

That’s the way it is for us. Wherever we go, whatever we are doing, we are Heaven’s Ambassadors to this lost and hurting world. Like it or not, we are all in the Diplomatic Corp and we come to church to be trained in Christ’s diplomacy.

I. WHO WE REPRESENT (Vs. 17-21)
THE PURPOSE OF OUR LIVES IS TO SERVE GOD

Verses 17-21 remind us who we represent: **THE PURPOSE OF OUR LIVES IS TO SERVE GOD.** We often need to be reminded of that, don't we? I know I do. I regularly find myself serving me, chasing after the things I think will make me happy, and not very concerned about what God wants. Keep in mind, these Proverbs were originally written to the Hebrew community, but I think the lessons apply to us as believers as well. These Proverbs were written to God's chosen people. They were chosen to be God's ambassadors to their world.

A. HOW WE LEARN (V. 17)

Verse 17 reminds us how we learn. In this next section of Proverbs, 22:17 thru 24:22, we will see a new style of poetry. In addition to the synonymous parallelism where the second line echoes the first line, there will be a statement of a proposition in the first strophe, a reason in the next, and finally a result. There will be several variations of this but that would be the basic structure. Let's just look at verses 17-21 quickly. Verse 17 is the proposition, "Pay attention to the teachings of the wise." Verse 18 is the reason, "So you can have wise responses ready." Verse 19 has the result, "You will learn to trust in the LORD." Verses 20-21 parallel this same structure.

Now let's get to verse 17. We gain wisdom by paying attention. We don't need to say a lot about this because it has been a recurring theme throughout the Proverbs. We must be students, good students and diligent students. I know people who have been Christians 50 or more years and they still believe the same things they believed 50 years ago. To me that's a sign of pride. If we are studying our Bibles, if we are paying attention to sermons, if we are reading and studying Christian books, then our faith should be growing daily and what we believe should be maturing as well. One of the signs of authentic Christians is that they are growing in their faith. Here is a good self-test: If we examine ourselves and do not find significant growth in our spiritual lives, if we are not growing in faith, and if we are not changing our attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors, then there is

no reason to think we are Christians. Maybe I'm a bad example because I may be a little more sinful than the rest of you, but I have been a Christian for over 40 years, and I have so many areas I need to grow in, so many thoughts and behaviors that I have to change, that I cannot afford to stop paying attention. We must approach life with humble, student attitudes. Remember we represent God. We had better be paying attention.

Verse 17 described an attitude, humility and a thirst to learn describe how we are prepared to serve God. Verse 20 describes where we learn. Let me make it simple, we learn truth from studying our Bibles. There has been a trend in so-called Bible scholarship since the enlightenment that has reversed the order in our search for truth. We take worldly science, worldly disciplines of study, and then try to make the Bible back up those propositions. Let me give you an example; let's say I am a psychologist and I receive my training at a Freudian or Jungian institution. I learn all about psychological diseases and several techniques for dealing with them. Then as a Christian, I interpret my Bible so that somehow I feel that what I'm doing is "Christian Psychology." I know there are many Christians who approach their fields of study this way. but let me suggest another approach. First, know your Bible ... really know you're Bible. Spend at least as much time reading and studying your Bible as you do in your particular field of work, then evaluate what you are learning in your particular field by passing it through the grid of your Biblical understanding. That is the right order of study.

B. WHERE WE LEARN (V. 20)

This is a great segue to verse 20: It says, "Have I not written thirty sayings for you, sayings of counsel and knowledge?" Here is what is interesting about this verse; much of the material in this section parallels an ancient Egyptian wisdom book called The Wisdom of Amenemope. This book was written about the same time or even earlier than Solomon and there is ongoing debate

about who copied from whom. Did the Hebrew writers copy from the Egyptians or visa versa? It really doesn't matter because God's wisdom is God's wisdom no matter where or when it turns up.

Let's for a moment assume that the Hebrew writers copied from the Egyptians. Let's get back to the principle that I laid out earlier. The Hebrews had the Torah in hand and they knew the Law backwards and forwards. It seems that many scholars had the first 5 books of the Bible memorized. They knew all the civil, ceremonial, and moral laws spelled out in their Bible. Now keep in mind how we defined wisdom: Wisdom literature is meant to take the law and apply it to everyday situations. So if an Egyptian Proverb illustrated an everyday situation that fit God's law, it is perfectly useful to the Hebrew. I don't want you to miss this because our culture carries this one step further. Our culture is teaching us that all religions are equally true. Our culture tells us that what we learn in the hard sciences or soft sciences are true and we judge the truth of the Bible based on them. That is not what I'm saying. I'm saying the Bible is true first and foremost. There may be truth in other religions and other fields of study, but we determine the truth of them based on how they measure up to the Bible.

Larry Crabb calls this method "Spoiling the Egyptians." When the Hebrews were freed from their slavery in Egypt, God predisposed the Egyptians to give them all kinds of wealth: gold, fabrics, animals, and other valuables. Later on, the Hebrews used all these things to build a temple with articles to be used in worship. They ran into trouble when they took the Egyptians' religion as well and built a golden calf.

Here the Hebrews are free to use the Egyptian wisdom literature as long as it is consistent with the laws of God, as explained in the Torah.

One of the reasons is that the wisdom writer here in verse 20 uses the number 30. Several translations have tried to number the teachings here through chapter 24 verse 22. There is no

general agreement on how to break them down. The word 30 teachings are significant because The Wisdom of Amenemope is broken down into 30 chapters.

The point of the wisdom teacher is this: It seems as though the Law of Moses had already been written and that now wisdom is not only transmitted orally, it is being written down as inspired material, we have the Bible. Paul says to Timothy in the New Testament, “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right. It is God’s way of preparing us in every way, fully equipped for every good thing God wants us to do” (II Timothy 3:16-17 NLT).

C. WHY WE LEARN (Vs. 18, 19, and 21)

If we humbly submit ourselves to studying, hearing, listening to, and saturating ourselves with the truths of Scripture, we will be ready to serve God. Verses 18, 19, and 21 spell out pretty clearly why we learn. We saturate ourselves with the truths found in the Bible so we can be good ambassadors for Christ. Christ came to set people free from fear, from sin, from brokenness and from death. Christ came to set people free from the reign of Satan. We are commissioned by Jesus to continue this mission.

First look at verse 19 and 21 because they are parallel. Verse 21 talks about giving sound answers to Him Who sent you. If we look at verse 19 it seems to me that the LORD, Jehovah, Yahweh, is the One Who sends us. God sent Israel to be a blessing to all nations. Jesus sent us to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. People are confused and frightened today. Many of your friends are hurting from broken relationships, broken promises, and a broken society. The wisdom described in these verses is, knowing how to bring comfort, freedom and salvation to them. If we come here on Sunday mornings with an agenda to learn more about God’s truth and how we can become better ambassadors, it would be pretty hard for me to preach a bad sermon. If we spend

time reading, studying, and memorizing the Bible, while praying that God use us, we will find plenty of opportunities to be God's ambassadors. That is why God has sent us to certain jobs, to certain schools, and to particular people. We are His messengers.

I know that we have been confused into thinking that our purpose is to go to school, get good jobs, be successful and enjoy life. But the truth is: **THE PURPOSE OF OUR LIVES IS TO SERVE GOD.**

So it seems as if God is the One Who commissioned us to be diplomats, and further, it seems as though the church is really a school for our diplomatic training. Clearly we represent Christ as His ambassadors.

II. HOW WE REPRESENT (Vs. 22-28)

IF WE ARE AMBASSADORS FOR GOD'S KINGDOM, THEN WE NEED TO BE LIKE JESUS

Verses 22-28 remind us how we represent, is as important as who we represent: **IF WE ARE AMBASSADORS FOR GOD'S KINGDOM, THEN WE NEED TO BE LIKE JESUS.**

Think about if we were the United States' ambassadors to Spain. If we were rude and crude, if we took bribes, if we sexually exploited our local workers, and if we were ruthless, the Spaniards would think all Americans were like this, and more importantly, the United States government operated according to these principles as well. The Spaniards would judge the character of our nation based on our behavior.

That's the way it is for Christians. Not only are we the messengers, we are the message. How we live our lives and comport ourselves directly affects the image people have of Jesus Christ. As Christians, we are claiming to be followers of Jesus. In fact the word Christian means "little Christ." People cannot see Jesus they only see His ambassadors.

A. BE CONCERNED (Vs. 22-23)

Verses 22-23 remind us that God's ambassadors must be concerned. Let me make this very clear; when I was studying philosophy, I looked to see if any country had equitable treatment of all its citizens. I looked at democracies, oligarchies, communist governments and dictatorships and I examined several economic systems as well. I also looked at capitalism and socialism. Here is my conclusion: All governments and all economic systems exploit the poor. All countries promote prejudices of one kind or another. Since every human being is born into sin, it follows that it is in our nature to exploit and use one another. Since we live in the United States, I will use our country as an example while stating that there is no country out there that I would rather live in. It doesn't take us long, especially if we were to take a look right out the door here at Clark and Devon Ave. to see the inequities of our society. Most of us live in our own little world and have defined other people's problems according to our rules and our assessments. We have somehow come to think that the poor deserve to be poor, the down and out deserve to be down and out, and we refuse to acknowledge the problems caused by institutional racism.

Just think about our judicial system. If we have money enough to buy a good lawyer, we can get the judicial decisions we want, whether or not we are guilty or innocent. If we are poor, there is not much chance that we will find justice.

Think about divorce cases where husbands can afford expensive lawyers and leave their wives and their children with nothing. These poor single mothers cannot afford to keep going back to court.

Listen, I expect society and government to act like this: If we were really to examine the lives of all the so-called civil rights activists, we can easily see that they to exploit the poor for their own benefit.

However, this morning, we are here gathered together in God's diplomatic corps training school. Jesus was deeply concerned for the plight of the poor, the marginalized, and the outcasts. It doesn't matter what conclusions you have personally come to; if we are Christ's ambassadors then we are called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and welcome the sick, the stranger and the outcasts. If you have come to think that everybody has what they deserve, then come to me, I'll give you several books to read. We should understand the problems of the poor, we should understand institutional racism, we should understand the problems that face people today and then, if we are truly ambassadors of Christ, we should be concerned for the poor. The reason is this: Jesus is concerned for the poor and if we are not, then we will find ourselves on the opposite side of God.

B. BE WISE (Vs. 24-27)

Verses 24-27 instruct us to be wise. Verses 24-25 advise us to stay away from angry people. It seems that angry people always have some ax to grind. They feel as if their boss is unfair, their teacher has it in for them and life is out to get them. The funny thing about hanging around people is that we tend to pick up their thought patterns and their mannerisms. I'll tell you, I think I am a pretty lucky person, I feel as though God has given me far more than I deserve. I can't stand to be around negative people. They disturb my spirit and cause a lot of anxiety in me; it takes all of my energy just to be around them. Look and take seriously the warning in verse 25. If you hang around negative people, you will start to think and ultimately act like them. And, the real problem is that once you get there, you're trapped. It's hard to break a negative thought pattern. God's ambassadors are blessed so they should be positive. If you are a negative, angry person, then it's time to ask yourself why, because God's people are positive.

Verses 26-27 remind us that we are to be wise in how we handle our money. There are all sorts of get-rich schemes out there. Don't be fooled and don't get into business deals with fools. The late Larry Burkett used to say, "If you don't fully understand something, or someone, don't invest." We must be wise in how we handle our money. Christ's ambassadors are not very impressed by money; they know it is simply a tool to further His kingdom. Good money managers know when to be frugal and when to spend like there's no tomorrow. If money matters do not consume us, we will be wise in our handling of it.

C. BE HONEST (V. 28)

And verse 28 commands us to be honest: In ancient Israel, each tribe and each family was apportioned a parcel of land. It was to be their family's land and passed down through the generations as an inheritance. The land was to be considered a gift given directly from God. To tamper with the boundary lines in any way was considered the same as stealing from God. Listen, as ambassadors of Christ, we are to be perfectly content with what He has given us. We are not to be envious or jealous of anything, anyone has. Again, we are working for Jesus. We are not here to get rich or famous. I think this section is critical for us to understand, as individuals, and as a church body, integrity is everything as an ambassador. People will see Jesus as they see you. What kind of Jesus are you presenting to the people you come in contact with? Are we portraying an angry, judgmental Jesus? Are we portraying a Jesus who is unconcerned about justice? Are we portraying a Jesus who is unconcerned about the poor? Are portraying a Jesus who is only interested in money and power? A Pope once showed Thomas Aquinas all the treasures the Vatican had amassed. He said to Thomas, "No longer can the church say, 'Silver and Gold have I none,' Thomas." And Thomas' reply was this, "And no longer can the church say, 'Take up your mat and walk.'"

We have often become powerless and useless as individuals and as a church, because we have forgotten what our purpose is and who we represent: **IF WE ARE AMBASSADORS FOR GOD’S KINGDOM, THEN WE NEED TO BE LIKE JESUS.**

III. WHY WE REPRESENT (V. 29)
GOD WILL RICHLY REWARD US FOR SERVING IN HIS DIPLOMATIC CORP

I would like to sound all noble and everything, I would like to say that I serve Jesus simply because I love Him. I do love Him, and I do want to serve Him out of love, but there is more. Verse 29 reminds us why we represent Jesus as Ambassadors. We represent Him because we love Him and because He loves us, He will reward us: **GOD WILL RICHLY REWARD US FOR SERVING IN HIS DIPLOMATIC CORP.**

A. HARD WORK (V. 29a)

God Himself will evaluate our work as ambassadors. Either He will say, “Well done good and faithful servant,” or He will say, “Get away from me. I never knew you.” The first phrase in verse 29 demonstrates that God values hard work. The Apostle Paul reminded the Colossian church of this principle. He said, “Work hard and cheerfully at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people” (Colossians 3:23 NLT). Again, it doesn’t matter if we are at school, at home, at work or at play, as representatives of Christ we are to give every task our best.

B. HARD WORK PAYS OFF (V. 29b)

The second line in verse 29 reminds us that hard work pays off. I want us to take a moment and think about this: Based on what we just learned, the fact is that we are ambassadors. We are working for God. If I am a janitor, a ditch digger, a dishwasher, a teacher, a doctor or a lawyer, in reality I am still working for God as an ambassador. Ambassador is my real job, so we should not grumble about our jobs. If we are there, then act as an ambassador of God.

C. HARD WORK DOESN'T GO UNNOTICED (V. 29c)

The last sentence reminds us that hard work doesn't go unnoticed. We may think nobody sees our work. We may think nobody cares. But the fact is that God sees and God cares. Our bosses may not give us the credit we deserve. We may be better employees than our co-workers who are getting promoted. But let's keep it all in perspective. God Himself notices our good work and He is the One Who will someday say to us, "Well done good and faithful servants." That is what I'm working for. Those are the words that I want to hear ... and not just for myself but for all of you as individuals and for all of us as Devon Church: **GOD WILL RICHLY REWARD US FOR SERVING IN HIS DIPLOMATIC CORP.**

I know that many of us are not comfortable as we come to realize that we are ambassadors for Christ. Nevertheless, it's true. We represent Jesus by the way we think, speak, and act. The only Jesus people will know is the Jesus they see in us. That is a huge responsibility we bear if we want to claim the name Christian: **IF WE ARE TRULY CHRISTIANS, THEN WE ARE AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST, ENTRUSTED WITH HIS MISSION AND MESSAGE.**

I'd like to tell you a story about a woman who finally realized that.

Marian Preminger was born into a Hungarian aristocratic family. She had everything: maids, tutors, governesses, butlers, and chauffeurs. While attending school in Vienna, she met a young doctor, fell in love and got married at age 18. The marriage ended a year later. She then became an actress, fell in love with the famous director Otto Preminger, and married him. When Marian became successful, she also became full of herself. She started to live the sordid, Hollywood life. When Otto found out, he divorced her.

Marian returned to Paris to live the life of a socialite ... until one day she met Dr. Albert Schweitzer. She spent the day with this simple, dedicated man. He talked her into going to Africa with him to work with him on the mission field. She did, and there found herself. There, in an African outpost hospital, the girl born in a castle and raised like a princess, who was accustomed to being waited on with all the luxuries of a spoiled life, became a servant. She changed bandages, bathed babies, fed lepers ... and became free. Marian wrote her autobiography and called it "All I Ever Wanted Was Everything."

I'm not sure how happy, content, and fulfilled you are today, but I do know this. If we are truly Christian, then we have no other purpose in life than to be ambassadors of Jesus Christ. We are to be ambassadors at work, at school, at home and at play. We are ambassadors of Christ everywhere and at all times ... because that's simply who we are. Remember, the only Jesus people will see is the Jesus they see in us.