

He That Winneth Souls Is Wise

Proverbs 11:30

“The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that winneth souls is wise.” – Proverbs 11:30.

I remember when I was first a believer and beginning Bible College to study to become a servant of the Lord, this was one of the first verse in the Scripture that I ever memorized. The Pastor of the church that I was attending at that time encouraged the memorization of Scripture on a regular basis and, as I’ve said, this was one of the first that I commended to memory. In the process of memorization, I had good reason and opportunity to think on it work its’ meaning through and it was a quite a joy and an eye-opener for me.

As we have noted before, this chapter in Proverbs is a part of a section that sets forth a contrast in life and conduct setting it forth for us in matters of work, diligence, ambition, speech, truth, stability, honesty, integrity, fidelity, guidance, graciousness, kindness, etc. It is, as one can see, quite extensive and thorough in giving instruction for us as to evaluating the worldly and life around us and giving us direction in living in a godly fashion.

The Hebrew phrase translated in most versions as “He who winneth souls” might better be translated as “**whoever captures souls**” and is used elsewhere in places in the OT where the sense is “to take life” or “to kill” (e.g., 1 Sam. 24:11; 1 Kings 19:10, 14; Jonah 4:3). However, this proverb appears to be purposely playing off the usual sense of the phrase to focus on the effect of **the fruit of the righteous**.

The particular phrasing of the verse is interesting.

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Solomon first talks about “the fruit of the righteous”. The Word of God often speaks of the truth that genuine redemption ALWAYS produces what it calls “fruit”. Just as the vine or the fruit tree, if it is healthy, brings forth fruit. The point here is that those who are redeemed, called “the righteous” by means of their way of living, bring forth such truth that communicates the truths that will bring redemption to the hearers. It is one that happens some 10 times in the Scripture.

Just a chapter later, in Proverbs 12:12 Solomon says, in much the same way:

*¹² The wicked covet the catch of evil men,
But the root of the righteous yields fruit.*

Isaiah seeking to be encouraging to his readers, used it twice, though not in quite that same fashion as Solomon, once in Isaiah 3:10:

¹⁰ *“Say to the righteous that it shall be well with them,
For they shall eat the fruit of their doings.*

...and then, a second time in Isaiah 32:16, but there speaking of the time of the Kingdom and of the results that the Righteous will enjoy, and of the peace of God’s Reign at that coming time:

¹⁶ *Then justice will dwell in the wilderness,
And righteousness remain in the fruitful field.*

The idea that Isaiah is seeking to get across to us is that Noble spiritual values were to thrive in the future Messianic reign.

Amos used the phrase in an interesting fashion as well, in Amos 6:12

¹² *Do horses run on rocks?
Does one plow there with oxen?
Yet you have turned justice into gall,
And the fruit of righteousness into wormwood,*

Speaking of their failure to obey and follow after the Lord, particularly in matters of justice, he makes the statement that Israel’s exercise of justice was as absurd as running horses on rocks or plowing rocks with oxen. He goes on and speaks, in the next verse of much the same idea, speaking of Lo Debar and Karnaim, as if they had real meaning. These were, apparently, two Syrian sites captured by Jeroboam II (cf. 2 Kin. 14:25). “Lo Debar” means “nothing” and sarcastically points out that Israel’s “great” gain will amount to nothing. “Karnaim” means “horns” which symbolizes the strength of an animal. Israel foolishly believed they had conquered in their own strength.

Paul uses the phrase (close to it) in his Epistle to the Corinthians:

¹⁰ *Now may He who supplies seed to the sower, and bread for food,
supply and multiply the seed you have sown and increase the fruits of
your righteousness, (2 Corinthians 9:10)*

Paul is here drawing on Is. 55:10 for additional support from the OT regarding what he has already said in the passage. The same God who is faithful to supply all His creatures’ physical needs and is kind to all men, is uniquely gracious to His children. He always fulfills His promise to replenish their generosity. He uses the phrase “**fruits of your righteousness**” referring to God’s temporal and eternal blessings to the cheerful giver (cf. Hos. 10:12). They were to be the “fruits” of their “righteousness”. There are 4 other uses of the phrase in the NT.

Back in Proverbs, Solomon tells us that this life of the righteous leads not only to blessing for themselves but also provides fruit that “captures souls” in the sense of leading people out of the path that ends in death. So many today apply this verse to evangelism and nowhere else. But we must take care to see that it refers to our living and the testimony that our righteous lives have on all

of those around us. This is NOT to say that there is no sense of evangelism and bring souls to salvation present in the idea, but that is not the main idea.

In the majority of places that the phrase is used, it speaks of the effect of our fruit, our testimony and godliness on those amongst who we live. For similar declarations, we can think about Dan. 12:3 where this use is quite clear...as equating “those who are wise” to “those who turn many to righteousness”;

*³ Those who are wise shall shine
Like the brightness of the firmament,
And those who turn many to righteousness
Like the stars forever and ever. (Daniel 12:3)*

The start of this verse makes clear that Daniel is talking about testimony and that which those around us, and the effect this has on others. The wisdom acquired, in turn, directs the conduct and speech of the individual. Thus Daniel (not to mention all of the others that mention the idea in the Scripture). The one “wise” speaks of those having true knowledge, by faith in God’s Word, not only leaders (as 11:33), but others (11:35; 12:10). They *shine* in glory is a privilege of all the saved (cf. the principle in 1 Thess. 2:12; 1 Pet. 5:10). Any who influence others for righteousness shine like stars in varying capacities of light as their reward (as in 1 Cor. 3:8). The faithfulness of the believer’s witness will determine one’s eternal capacity to reflect God’s glory.

We can look also at James 5:19-20 where James speaks of bringing back the erring one.

19 Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back,²⁰ let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins. (James 5:19–20)

He speaks of the one “*who brings back a sinner from his wandering*” will “*save his soul from death.*”

In v19 he says that the group addressed includes “**anyone among you**”. For James discussion, this introduces a third category of people in the church (cf. vv. 13, 14) speaking of those professing believers who have strayed from the truth. (called “**wanders from the truth**”). These are those who Apostatize from the faith they once professed (cf. Heb. 5:12–6:9; 10:29; 1 John 2:19). Such people are in grave danger James tells us (v. 20), and the church must call them back to the true faith.

In v20 speaks of those in view as “a sinner”. Cf. 4:8. This is a word used to describe the unregenerate (cf. Prov. 11:31; 13:6, 22; Matt. 9:13; Luke 7:37, 39; 15:7, 10; 18:13; Rom. 5:8; 1 Tim. 1:9, 15; 1 Pet. 4:18). James has in mind here those with dead faith (cf. 2:14–26), not true believers who are sinning. Note that toward the end of middle of v20 he speaks of “**the error of his way**”. This is speaking of those who go astray doctrinally (v. 19) and it seems to imply that these will also manifest an errant lifestyle, one not lived according to biblical

principles. He also says that such folks as this will **“save a soul from death”**. A person who wanders from the truth puts his soul in jeopardy. The “death” in view is not physical death, but eternal death - eternal separation from God and eternal punishment in hell (cf. Is. 66:24; Dan. 12:2; Matt. 13:40, 42, 50; 25:41, 46; Mark 9:43–49; 2 Thess. 1:8, 9; Rom. 6:23; Rev. 20:11–15; 21:8). Remember that this is not speaking of loss of Salvation as the Word of God clearly, in a number of places, makes it clear that Salvation, once received, cannot be lost. But James speaks from the point of view of one knowing how high the stakes are and tells us that this should motivate Christians to aggressively pursue such people.

He finishes by assuring his reader that this witness and its effect on those around us will **“cover a multitude of sins”**. See Ps. 5:10.

*¹⁰ Lest aliens be filled with your wealth,
And your labors go to the house of a foreigner;*

Since even one sin is the result of being a sinner, and that is the result of being the offspring of Adam, which was communicated by the Curse of God upon his disobedience. That sinful nature results in our sinful actions and is what places us under the condemnation and coming judgement of God. The sad and frightening truth is that anyone possessing that nature and doing any resulting sin has done enough to condemn a person to hell.

We note also James’ use of the word “multitude” which emphasizes the hopeless condition of lost, unregenerate sinners. The good news of the gospel is that God’s forgiving grace (which is greater than any sin; Rom. 5:20) is available to those who turn from their sins and exercise faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:8, 9).

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When Solomon says this (and he says the like elsewhere as well) he is commending us to call men to come to righteousness and rescue them from the penalty of their own nature. He is telling us that such a living and calling is the natural fruit of the righteous. We note also that Solomon uses the “tree” with the implication with clear idea that the result is not a single piece fruit but that such a life, like a healthy tree, produces a good deal of fruit!

Just to note, the word here for “winneth” is an extremely instructive word with some 965 occurrences. The KJV translates it as “take” 747 of those times, as “receive” 61 times, “take away” 51 times, “fetch” 31 times, “bring” 25 times, “get” six times, “take out” six times, and “carry away” five times. It even gives it as “married” four times, “to buy” three times, and translated miscellaneously 26 times. In the form it is in (a participle) it speaks of a fact that is ongoing continually. He that is in the “process” of winning souls, not one that, perhaps lives righteously and leaves it at that.

Just as a by... “winneth souls” is lit. “to take lives,” in the sense of doing them good or influencing them with wisdom’s ways (cf. Luke 5:10). The word is also used for capturing people for evil purposes as in Prov. 6:25; Ps. 31:13; Ezek. 13:18. Here, it is very clear that it is used in a good sense. Solomon, very clearly, is intending his readers to see this as something that they are to pursue doing. It is “wise” to do so, one of the central themes in Proverbs, the pursuit of wisdom and the building of it into our lives.

Now, “winning souls” has come to mean leading to salvation or being a part of the process of one coming to Christ. It seems certain that Solomon had redemption in mind here and not (as some suggest) merely a behavior thing. Behavior change is surely a good thing, but this idea is more profound than that. Solomon is saying that it is by means of living out the fruit of belonging to the Lord, in the presence of the unredeemed around us that God uses to draw others to Christ. Surely, the content of the Gospel that tells the story of the coming and work of Christ on Calvary, but our lives and the righteous change and God-honoring choices that the Spirit uses to underscore their need for Jesus.

Just to go over, once again our interpretation here - “The fruit of the righteous” is that which proceeds from him, the outcome of a renewed heart. In temporal, still more in spiritual ways he is always communicating good to others. As the tree of life was in Paradise and will be in heaven, fruitful, nourishing, healing, even so is he in the sphere he occupies in the Church. The second clause of this sentence represents a more active and definite putting forth of energy for the special purpose of winning souls (who can doubt?) to God, in doing which a man will prove himself wise.

We can see, from the Bible, a number of illustrations that make this idea clear for us -

- It is at least probable that the “souls” which Abraham and his party “had gotten in Haran” (Gen. 12:5) were heathen servants who had become proselytes (they were afterwards circumcised, Gen. 17:27), through the holy influence of the patriarchs.
- The “devout soldier” who waited on Cornelius had doubtless been favorably disposed towards religion by his master’s example, and to him, as to the rest of his family, that good man became as a “tree of life,”
- It also seems clear that to Peter “the fisherman” (Luke 5:10) was granted the honor of winning all their souls to Christ (Acts 10:24, 44, 48). The Apostles set us the example of using every lawful means, and the wisest they knew of, to save souls, and did save many by bringing them into the fold of Christ.

By way of application we can see that life is not long, therefore let the most be made of it. Having first given myself to God (2 Cor. 8:5), let me live not unto myself but for others. If wealth and position be mine, how much may I do in the course of a few years to relieve want and misery, and thus to conciliate others to Christianity! Or if mine be an obscure lot, yet, still, within my own circle, my

influence may be beneficent. No true Christian can be as an upas tree, withering all within its shadow, nor yet as a barren tree doing nothing for others' good. The true follower of Jesus needs to take every means to resemble his Master in being, on a humbler scale, as a "tree of life," a source of blessing to many. This from the spontaneous outcome of the life within. But more - we ought to endeavor, no matter what our status in the world we may hold, to win souls to God, by our lives as our sharing of the Gospel. For many, this is not done by preaching or teaching, but by supporting and aiding those who do in all legitimate ways, and utilizing opportunities. How often may influence gained be employed for a soul's good, a doubt removed, a word in season spoken! The wife may win her husband, the godly neighbor his fellow-man. And, as Daniel the Prophet said, they who have been guiding stars upon earth shall shine as the stars (in a far wider sphere), for ever and ever (Dan. 12:3). It was one of the great Preachers of the past who asked:

The life-work of the believer, what is it but to win the lost?
