

PROVERBS 1: 8-19

- Hear, my child, your father's instruction,
and do not reject your mother's teaching;
⁹ for they are a fair garland for your head,
and pendants for your neck.
¹⁰ My child, if sinners entice you,
do not consent.
- ¹¹ If they say, 'Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood;
let us wantonly ambush the innocent;
¹² like Sheol let us swallow them alive
and whole, like those who go down to the Pit.
¹³ We shall find all kinds of costly things;
we shall fill our houses with booty.
¹⁴ Throw in your lot among us;
we will all have one purse'—
¹⁵ my child, do not walk in their way,
keep your foot from their paths;
¹⁶ for their feet run to evil,
and they hurry to shed blood.
¹⁷ For in vain is the net baited
while the bird is looking on;
¹⁸ yet they lie in wait—to kill themselves!
and set an ambush—for their own lives!
¹⁹ Such is the end of all who are greedy for gain;
it takes away the life of its possessors.

At first read, this passage seems to offer some basic advice. Even though God is not mentioned, the values and principles of the 10 commandments are clearly reflected. We learn such values and principles from those who teach us. In a healthy family environment we learn them from our parents and when the lessons are internalized deeply, they become foundational for grounding us and even restraining us when temptations to harm other people for greed's sake confront us. Caring for others, being honest and fair with others, protecting others rather than harming them and taking advantage of them... It's about loving our neighbour as much as loving ourselves.

But there's more here, much more. Verses 17-19 offer us a deeper insight and wisdom. Even though on the surface the passage may seem to emphasize the loving others as much as ourselves part of the commandment, verses 17-19, bring it back to us and how we may better love ourselves. Caring for others and protecting them rather than taking advantage of them and harming them may appear to be about "them," but according to the wisdom being taught here it's actually about us. Committing an evil act harms the actor spiritually as much as it harms the victim in other ways. We may think we're gaining money or advantage or winning in the game

of competition any which way we can, but the loss of integrity, of humanity, of basic human decency is as great if not an even greater loss.

Ponder the metaphorical imagery offered in these verses: “for in vain is the net baited while the bird is looking on”. Who is the bird? Is it God? Is it the soul? Is it our conscience? Is it wisdom herself? And even though they/we may think they/we have won something over someone else, “they lie in wait – to kill themselves! And set an ambush – for their own lives!” What we lose is far greater than anything we may think we gain.

And what is it that we lose? “Such is the end of all who are greedy for gain; it takes away the life of the possessors.” Our very lives and all that makes us who we are, are at stake! Evil swallows us up and the bait it sets is for us, even as we may imagine we have set it for someone else. We are the biggest losers when we give in to greed in any of its varied manifestations.

And one final note. While the language of this passage may point to more overt forms of greed and harm done to others, the intention of this passage is also for self-reflection on more subtle ways we do harm to others and how that chips away at our own humanity. The ways we do things, say things, think things, obsess over things; the way fear, worry, anger, resentment, indifference and despair shape our outlook and the ways we relate to the life around us... All of it is reflected here. Caring for others rather than harming them; sharing and giving to others rather than just taking from them... this is about self-care as much as it is other-care. Do we hear the ancient and profoundly simple wisdom of these verses? Do they apply to you as much as they apply to me?

PRAYER: Come to us, O God, and protect us from our worst temptations... If we have given in to them, rescue us... Many things can cause us fear and worry, O God, and many things cause us to be upset, angry, hurt, or hopeless... And sometimes the ways we react and respond toward others come from bad places within us... Thank you for reminding us that our very humanity is at stake... Thank you for challenging us with the wisdom of Proverbs to rise up to better become who you made us to be - those who can love others well as we may better love ourselves... We pray in the name of the one who is wisdom embodied – Jesus our Christ... Amen.