

PURPOSE

OF GOD'S WAYS

DATE

July 11-12

WEEK

6 of 10

OVERVIEW

Proverbs 14

KEY VERSE

Proverbs 14:12

SETTING THE STAGE

If we could sum up the book of Proverbs we would say that Proverbs is wisdom through principle. It is a book of short sayings or maxims that pointedly convey truth. According to 1 Kings 4:32, Solomon spoke 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs. And while he wrote most of the proverbs in this book, later chapters indicate that he was not the only author of the book. ¹

The purpose of Proverbs is to provide wisdom for living through special instruction on life: folly, sin, goodness, wealth, poverty, the tongue, pride, humility, justice, family (parents, children, discipline), vengeance, strife, gluttony, love, laziness, friends, life, and death. It is touted as the most practical book of the Bible in terms of wisdom for daily living.

The underlying theme of Proverbs is that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. (Proverbs 1:7a). To 'fear the Lord' is to stand in awe of His holy character and power. The book of Proverbs explains that true wisdom leads to the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 2:1-5). The absence of a fear of God, however, leads to an unbridled and foolish life.

Throughout the book of Proverbs and all of Scripture, it is evident that obedience to God is a foundational part of wisdom. From the time of Adam and Eve, we see that disobedience to God never ends well and often results in severe consequences. Thus, Solomon shares that true wisdom produces true obedience. Proverbs 14:12 falls into a larger section of the Proverbs (10:1 - 15:33) written by Solomon in which he contrasts the godly and the wicked.

LESSON OUTLINE

1. The Seemingly Good Way of Self-Effort
2. The Seemingly Good Way of Works
3. The Seemingly Good Way of Religion

THINGS TO KNOW

- The Hebrew word 'Mashal' is translated "proverb" or "allegory." ²
- The basic meaning of the Hebrew word 'Mashal' is "a comparison." ³

PURPOSE

OF GOD'S WAY

Introduction

If you are anything like me, you love shortcuts while driving. I pride myself on knowing shortcuts to get me from point A to point B quicker than the 'normal' route would take. Admittedly, there have been times when I thought my shortcut was the correct way, only to find out that I was wrong. This shortcut, which I thought was good and would get me somewhere fast, only led to me being lost, late, and let down. The funny thing is that there have been times I was not totally convinced that my short cut was correct, but I went anyway; usually to the dismay and frustration of my wife. Once down the road I soon discovered the way I thought was right turned out to be wrong!

We all have our shortcuts — roads in life that we are convinced will lead to something great.

Life is like that sometimes. We all have our shortcuts — roads in life that we are convinced will lead to something great. We have relationship roads. We have career roads. We have money roads. We even have religious roads. Many of us have found out the hard way that these roads we were so convinced would lead to something great, lead to the opposite. Solomon's words ring true, "*There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death*" (Proverbs 14:12).

In other words, there is a way that seems so right to us, but this seemingly good way actually leads to something bad. Why? Because we are going it alone. God is not on the road with us.

There is a way that seems so right in our relationships, but as many of us know without God in a relationship it will likely fail. There is a way that seems so right in our careers, but as many of us know, without God we will always be searching for another road. The road of money can become a highway of idolatry without God. Even when we think about the very Gospel of Jesus Christ, there are seemingly good things we do, but many times leave us hurt, frustrated, and lost because we operate in our own strength, doing what we think is best. We could sum up Proverbs 14:12 with one big idea:

Any seemingly good way without God is a bad way.

When we live disobedient lives and walk separate from God it leads to one outcome: death. To understand the importance and purpose of God's ways let us look at what can distract us. Seemingly good things that we may be chasing down the roads of life could potentially be bad, separating us

¹ Three sections of Proverbs are ascribed to Solomon; chapters 1:1-9:18; 10:1-22:16, and 25:1-29:27. However, the proverbs in the latter section (25:1-29:27) were selected from Solomon's collection by King Hezekiah's committee (25:1). Proverbs 22:17 refers to the "sayings of the wise," and 24:23 mentions additional "sayings of the wise." Proverbs 22:17-21 serves as an introduction which suggests that these sections stem from a circle of wise men, not from Solomon himself. Chapter 30 is specifically attributed to Agur, son of Jakeh, and 31:1-9 to King Lemuel. Lemuel's sayings contain several Aramaic spellings that point to a non-Israelite background.

² Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary OT*, David C. Cook, 2007, p. 1055.

³ Ibid.



from God. Three come to mind when thinking about the Gospel:

1. The seemingly good way of self-effort.
2. The seemingly good way of works.
3. The seemingly good way of being religious.

1. THE SEEMINGLY GOOD WAY OF SELF-EFFORT

PROVERBS 14:12 *There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. (ESV)*

The writer of this proverb is speaking truth and reality. The reality is there are ideas and concepts in this world that ‘seem right.’ There are books with titles that ‘seem right.’ Some speakers have podcasts where the content ‘seems right.’ And the truth of the matter is that people believe the book titles, podcasts, speakers and authors at face value.

Many people believe that to come to God they must be perfect. In other words, have a clean life, perfect family, everything put together. Now, as Christ-followers we know that is not true. It is actually impossible to be perfect. It goes something like this, “I want to go to church, but I need to clean up my life first,” or “I like the thought of Christianity, but you do not know what I have done; can God really accept someone like me?” What is being expressed in these statements and many like them is that we need to do something to make ourselves ready for God to accept us. This plays out in life as self-effort, a form a self-improvement or behavior modification with a Christian twist.

The way of self-effort in and of itself is not bad, but it is hopeless without obedience to God. The Gospel is an inside-out movement, not the reverse, yet many live on the road of self-effort, trying to do good things on the outside to improve themselves on the inside in their own strength and on their own terms. The problem is that no matter how much self-effort a person makes, it does nothing to change a heart. But once a heart changes everything else follows as the Gospel is inside out. Trying to change your heart by changing your behavior will only lead you farther down a way that seems good but will continually end in frustration and heartache.

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Years ago, a movement swept evangelicalism by storm. It was the WWJD movement. It stood for “what would Jesus do” and was printed on bracelets, shirts, bumper stickers, etc. The goal was to wear the bracelet and when you were faced with temptation to ask: “what would Jesus do?” The goal was for people to ask this and not make bad choices because Jesus would not do whatever was tempting you. Though it helped many, it also caused a lot of frustration. Many could not change their behavior and therefore they continued to struggle. No matter how much self-effort they put in, nothing was changing. Here is why- changing our behavior will never change our hearts. However, when your heart is changed, your behavior will change.

While WWJD is a great question to ask, a better one to ask is WDJJ: “what did Jesus do?” He died a death you should have died. He took your place. He took your punishment. Three days later He rose from the grave and defeated the power of death forever. This is Good News. No amount of self-effort could have ever accomplished this.

If you find yourself on the way of self-effort — *a way that seems good to man* — pull the car over, get out and stop trying harder. Self-effort might be a seemingly good way, but it is not God’s way. Jesus has done everything we need to be made right before God. When we put our faith in Christ the Spirit comes into our lives and starts to form us and shape us from the inside out. So, the answer to the question, “Can God really use someone like me knowing what He knows about me?” is an overwhelming ‘Yes!’ Not because of our efforts, but because of His grace! Not because of what we

have done, but because of what His Son did!

Closely related to the seemingly good way of self-effort is the seemingly good way of works.

2. THE SEEMINGLY GOOD WAY OF WORKS

PROVERBS 14:12 *There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. (ESV)*

There are a lot of people who do really good things for others. There are a lot of people who give a lot of hard-earned money for the good of others. They do good works regularly and it seems right, but its end is the way to death.

It does not always make logical sense. If someone truly helps another person, that should earn them points with God. If someone gives a lot of money to a non-profit charity, that should earn them points with God. It seems right. Admittedly, those volunteer work hours and financial support do help a lot of good people in good ways that change lives on this earth. However, when someone rests on the works that they accomplish as what will make them 'right' with God, then they have taken a different path than following God's ways.

Remember that it is the change of the heart that changes the behavior. Here is how Paul explained it to the church in Ephesus.

EPHESIANS 2:8-9 *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (ESV)*

There is no amount of money or good works that will get someone into heaven. It is simply and profoundly through faith in Jesus Christ. It is truly a 'gift of God.' There are a lot of people in our culture who believe that their good works both literally and figuratively are going to get them into heaven. As the proverb reminds us, "*There is a way that seems right to a man.*"

Good works are just that, 'good.' They are not life-changing for eternity. The money and volunteer work hours donated to a non-profit charity are good, even great; however, it does not open the gates of heaven without a change of heart in having faith in Jesus Christ. Now that does not mean that those who have a relationship with Jesus do not do good things, donate money, or help other people. Again, let us look at how Paul explains it to the church in Ephesus.

EPHESIANS 2:10 *For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (ESV)*

Notice which comes first in this equation; created in Christ Jesus. Everyone who receives the free gift of God described in Ephesians 2:8-9 should realize that salvation is "*not a result of works.*"

Yet because of that relationship, because of that salvation, we have been created anew in Jesus Christ and there is a purpose for our new life in Christ. Ironically, to do good works. These good works are not to **establish** a relationship with Jesus, but **because** of the relationship with Jesus. Martin Luther said, "We are saved by faith alone, but never by a faith that stays alone."

If there was something that we could do to work for our salvation then it could not be free. The one who works is owed a paycheck, but grace is a free gift. The seemingly good way of works is a road that leads to disappointment, disobedience, and frustration in life. What is worse is that some of us have traveled the way of works for so long, we have missed the fact that God has made His grace available through Jesus, His Son, and our Savior.

Remember the words of Jesus, "*I am the way, truth, and life. No one comes to the Father except*

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through me” (John 14:6). There is only one way to the Father, and it has nothing to do with our works. It is owed to no one, but by God’s grace available to anyone.

Up to this point, we have seen two seemingly good ways that without God are in reality ways of disobedience:

The seemingly good way of self-effort.

The seemingly good way of works.

Last, we will look at the seemingly good way of religion.

3. THE SEEMINGLY GOOD WAY OF RELIGION

PROVERBS 14:12 *There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. (ESV)*

Religion or the practice of doing religious things, like self-effort and works, flies in the face of the grace that is freely offered in the Gospel. Tim Keller explains that religion says, “Obey and God will love you.” On the other hand, the Gospel says, “God loves you, now obey.”⁴ The motivation of obedience is totally different with the Gospel. There are “religious” people who do a lot of seemingly right things but who are walking contrary to the Gospel. Why? Because they think by doing right things and religious deeds (going to church, going to mass, tithing, daily confession, etc.) they are accepted by God. The Gospel teaches the opposite of this type of religion. It teaches that God offers salvation not to those who earn it as a reward but to those who are unworthy and receive it as a gift, entering into a relationship. (*Ephesians 2:8-9*) Obedience is in response to the gift of grace.

So often people will go through the motions of attending church or a small group Bible Study class. They can check all the boxes of what it looks like to be a Christ-follower on the outside. But the outside is not the part that matters; it always comes down to the matter of the heart.

Obedience is in response to the gift of grace.

Jesus dealt with this issue on several occasions, but one in particular to a group of Pharisees, who were the most religious people in the first century. They knew the words of the prophets, the law of Moses and the Psalms and Proverbs. But it was just something that impacted them on the surface as they focused on the seemingly good way of religion.

In Matthew 23, Jesus says this to a group of Pharisees.

MATTHEW 23:25-27 *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. ²⁷”*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. (ESV)

Jesus knew the truth of Proverbs 14:12, that the things that seem to be the right way lead to death. The Pharisees were fooling themselves in thinking that just because they were religious on the outside, they were in a relationship with God. Yet, the Pharisees rejected Jesus face to face; even though Jesus was the living fulfillment of the Scripture they had memorized.

A relationship with God through Jesus Christ is not based on external rules and regulations, it happens from the inside out, it begins in the heart.

⁴ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, Penguin Group, 2008.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

There are those who like to take shortcuts in life; but as Proverbs 14:12 reminds us, “*There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.*” (ESV)

In His grace, God has given us a road map that is the GPS to eternity. Think of the letters GPS and let it remind you that the Bible shows us God’s Path to Salvation. None of us want to settle on what ‘*seems right to a man,*’ a mere mortal. Each of us wants to know the God of creation in a personal way. God has made it clear in His Word that He wants to know each one of us in a personal way.

It comes down to whether or not you want to try and take a short cut that will most certainly lead to death in terms of separation from God for eternity. Or you have a choice to follow the GPS found in Scripture. Salvation is a free gift that comes from having faith in Jesus Christ. And as a new creation we have a new purpose, to trust and obey His Word in such a way that His light shines through us for the good of others.

Another proverb brings attention to the fact that if you want to know the purpose of God’s ways, it begins in the heart.

PROVERBS 3:5-6 *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. ⁶In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make straight your paths.* (ESV)