

PROVERBS 16:1-12
HONEST SCALES

What is the most dangerous thing a Christian can do? Here's one suggestion! Put a sticker on your car that advertises the fact that the driver is a Christian! You know the things I mean, some of you have them: the fish symbol that some people either have as a bumper sticker or on the back of the car to tell the world of our Christian faith. It is a great way of witness, to show the world and be unashamed of our faith; it is now parodied by the atheists, so it must have some impact! Why is it dangerous? It commits the driver to being good! We should be good anyway, but this sticker tells the world that I'm a Christian so I'm committed to stay within the speed limits and to being courteous, considering other road users; if I don't drive well, then not only will other drivers blame me, but they will say "see these Christians... they say one thing, but do another!" *Thank God its Monday* is the title of a book by Mark Greene; there used to be a copy in the library, and there is still a copy around; Mark Green wrote it for preachers to help us understand what work is like, or what the world of work that most people live in is like! It is all about Christians in their Monday-place, their working life, their daily world, rather than our Sunday-life and Sunday-world. The basic idea is that Christianity, the gospel and grace shape the way in which we do our Monday-life and our Monday-world as well.

Last week, we looked at wisdom: we described it as "an art of steering, the art of piloting oneself through the confusion of life." (Von Rad) We looked at two big-life marker qualities, loyalty and trust: these are part of the big picture of life, the qualities that shape the kind of people that we are, qualities that apply to all kinds of situations and shape life as we live it in general. By these qualities we can steer our way through life, being loyal to other people and to God, trusting the Lord in all our ways. Proverbs, over and over again, takes these two qualities and reminds us how important they are for wise living, for a good and happy life. There are times when we need these reminders: what shapes our life? What are the important qualities? As Christians we know that we are to love the Lord and to love other people, to love and serve the Lord; but so often we're not altogether sure what that means? Is that about Church life? Is it about giving to charity? Is it about - what? It can't possibly be about the way in which I drive my car, can it?

Wisdom in Proverbs is about the big-picture qualities, but it is also about some very particular situations. The Christian is to love and serve the Lord and to love my neighbour - do I want to know what that means? Then one Bible place that will spell out in some detail what it means to love and serve the Lord is the book of Proverbs. It is attributed to Solomon, the great wise king of Israel, famous for his wisdom, so much so that people came from miles around to ask him deep and meaningful questions, knowing that he would give them wise answers. Whether he wrote all of Proverbs himself, or whether he collected the sayings together in one place for people to read, it doesn't seem to matter. We have them in the Bible and they give us a great picture of what it means, in practice, to love and serve the Lord and to care for our neighbour. If cars had been invented, there would have been wisdom here about driving my car; oh, but there is! Go and have a look for it. We're going to look at just one verse today, one wise saying, to see what it says and to see how many different situations to which it can apply!

"Honest scales..." (Proverbs 16:11) Three or four times a saying like this appears in Proverbs. It comes straight from the market-place and is all about how to conduct business in your market stall. Everything on your market-stall was done by weight: the goods I bought from you were weighed in the scales and not the scales like you have now in your kitchen, but the scales you might have had before with two pans

and the weight goes in one pan and the wheat, or the apples, go in the other pan. When I pay for my purchases there is no coin to count, or credit card facility, but even the money is weighted out in the balances. Every trader had a bag of weights, usually stones, of different sizes. There was some standard: the king had given authority for some standardization of weights and the stones were stamped with the royal seal of approval.

Honesty: that's the key quality on the market-stall, to be an honest trader, giving out the right measures, charging the right price. We think that the king has already marked that standard, but here Proverbs takes it back a stage: the market-trader is to steer his way through business honestly because this is what pleases God. Honest scales and weights are a gift from God and so as the market-trader you are to be honest as a mark of respect, and reverence for God. There is a very simple way of taking this into Monday: be honest in your business. If you work in a shop, make sure everyone gets charged the right price for the right amount of stuff; they are not charged too much; they are not sold short measure. Filling in your expense claim for mileage: 10 miles, 15 miles - how long was that journey? Charging someone for services rendered - 1 hour, 2 hours? How much time did we give them? You are contracted to work 12 hours in the week - have I worked 12 hours? As the boss, do I expect people to work for more than 12 hours? When they work over, do I pay them for working over? Honesty!

People being people, we find ways round this to our own advantage. There are at least three ways of being dishonest on the same market-stall picture. First, we can give short measure: the stone weight is slightly smaller than it says on its side; it is short of the ephah that it claims to weigh and so the shopper goes away with less wheat than he thinks he has; he is cheated. Secondly, we can over-charge: I have another weight in the bag, the great shekel weight for weighing my money and it is just a bit heavier than the Weights and Measures Department has authorised, so I'm charged more for fewer apples; I am cheated twice. Thirdly, the sweepings from floor are used to boost volume: towards the end of the day and wheat has fallen on the ground from the stall and now you sweep it up and it is mixed with dust, and you put it back in the bag and when I come to buy from you at the end of the day, the wheat is mixed with sweepings from the floor, the quality is less than the best and I'm charged full price; I am cheated three times over.

This is part of what angered Jesus when He wrecked the tables in the Temple. There was a side to His anger that was about a place of prayer being a market-stall, but there was another part that was about cheating and swindling! The Pharisees rented out the space in the temple to traders meeting the pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem to worship. The pilgrims need animals to offer as sacrifices, and the market-traders were there to sell them to the pilgrims at a price, a grossly inflated price, but the pilgrims had no option but to buy them. These same pilgrims have to make money offerings, to pay the temple tax, but it needed to be in the correct currency, but not the currency you have in your pocket; the money changers will change your money - at a price! They will take a huge commission and the pilgrims have no option! Jesus sees people being cheated, abused, and exploited by these market-stall traders; He is angry and throws them out! Honesty in business, in the way you treat people, in the shop you run - honesty gives glory to God.

There are other places and situations where honesty is vitally important. The Justice system: some symbols of justice carry a set of scales, just like the market-stall we described and this justice is meant to be even-handed, Some symbols of justice are also blindfold to suggest that no matter who or what you are, you are treated honestly and fairly by the justice system. Most of time that works well in our society, but there

are a few celebrated cases which have been described as miscarriages of justice when it would appear that people are treated unfairly. There are many poor people in our world whose access to justice is firmly based on who they are and how much they can pay, so the justice system of their society is far from fair and honest, but corrupt. We can't ever take this for granted; we should pray for those who administer justice, that they will always be honest and fair.

Hidden agendas! Here's an example from Christian mission of how we can fall foul of this principle even from the best of motives. As Christians we want to make new disciples, to share good news with other people and first of all we have to create opportunities to meet people. We meet people who are not Christians so that we can share the gospel with them; we get to know them; we listen to their stories and we try to understand their lives and their situations. But here's the question: do we love these people simply because they are people to love, or do we love them because we want them to respond to our message and if they will not respond to our message, we discard them? If love them only as gospel-fodder and only as long as they are interested in us, then we are being dishonest and we're working with a hidden agenda! Hidden agendas are always dishonest; they always suggest unspoken motives. The world is full of hidden agendas; sadly the church is full of them; so often it is what is not said that creates tension and unrest simply because we are dishonest with one another! Simply tell the truth; tell no lies; spread no gossip! It sounds simple and obvious, but so often the Christian faith's big principles have been marred because Christians have got these little things so wrong and we have developed a reputation for lies, gossip, hidden agendas!

Prejudice is part of our culture. Witness the reaction from some when the campaign was launched to have Jane Austen on the English £10 note and some were subject to the most awful abuse; there are some who are still paid less for the same job simply because of their gender. There are people who live in fear of a brick through their window simply because of their political opinions. There are people across the world who are badly treated either because of the colour of their skin or their nationality. Children are bullied at school simply because they are different from the rest for a whole host of reasons. We should treat everyone in the same way. Prejudice is about treating some people worse because they are different. Those who are poor are so often victims of prejudice because there is no-one to stand up for them, they have no access to justice and so are down-trodden, in chains; and those who are strong and powerful can treat them in any way they like. Are there people we look at and no longer see the person, but a thing? Are there people we look at and all we think only about ourselves? We should treat everyone in the same way, no matter who they are! That's honesty and fairness.

Being honest: there are all kinds of ways in which that touches our Monday-life. Here's one way by which to steer our way through life wisely. God is honest, just and fair and so His people should be honest, just and fair. Honesty is to be the way in which I run my market-stall; in way we go about our business; in the system of justice; in the way we treat other people. This is what God is like; this is what Jesus loves and this is what it means to love and serve the Lord. Tomorrow some of us will be spending a couple of hours with some children – we need to treat them as Jesus would. Where will you be tomorrow? Let our Monday-life reflect Jesus to world! Let our Monday-world be shaped by the gospel, by grace, by wisdom. God calls us to this wise life; He helps us live it out, sustained by the Spirit, guided by the Bible; it is all for the glory of Jesus!