

REJOICING OR GROANING

Skillful Living Series

Proverbs 29

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Whether you're talking about people coming together under government, in a city, a community, a neighborhood, in a business, in a school, in a church or even in a family, whenever people come together they're either ultimately going to rejoice or they're going to groan, depending...to which you say..."Depending on what?" Which is what we want to talk about this morning. So, if you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs, Chapter 29. If you're visiting with us, we've, over the last few years, been just slowly going through the proverbs, kind of chipping away a little here, a little there. Typically, we take one proverb, one chapter a week, and just pick out selective verses, just kind of giving people a taste, a sense of what the proverb is all about. So, this summer we'll finish up chapters 29, 30, and 31. We find ourselves this morning in Chapter 29, verse 1:

A man who hardens *his* neck after much reproof

Will suddenly be broken beyond remedy. (*NASB, Proverbs 29:1)

This is a very common message in the proverbs. It's worded in different ways, with different word pictures, different images, but it all has the same idea. There are people that will listen and they will grow and change. There are other people who will refuse to listen, and they will suffer the consequence of that. So, it's a familiar message all the way through Proverbs. Again we open the chapter with: there are those who will listen and they will grow and those that will not listen and they'll suffer the consequence of that. The real heartbeat of what we want to talk about this morning is in verse 2:

When the righteous increase, the people rejoice,

But when a wicked man rules, people groan.

This is one of the most common themes in the book of Proverbs—this contrast between the **righteous** and the **wicked**. So it's good for us again to define terms to make sure we're clear. The **righteous** are those who are surrendered and submissive to God. They are passionate about God's vision for the world. They want the world as God intended it to be. They want what the Hebrew Old Testament refers to as *shalom*, often translated peace, but it carries the idea of fullness or flourishing, at least creating pockets of flourishing, glimpses of the world as God intended it to be. That's what the righteous, the Hebrew, *tzedek*, is passionate about. Dr. Bruce Waltke defines the righteous in Proverbs, "...as those who will even disadvantage themselves in order to advantage the greater community." It's this passion for mutual flourishing together.

The **wicked**, then, is the opposite of that. It's very important we hear this definition, because when you hear the word *wicked*—if you think about murders and rapists and thieves—then most people immediately say, "That's not me!" But that's not what the word means. The word is the contrast to the **righteous**. It's the idea of someone who is selfish, someone who is self-absorbed, someone who is full of selfish ambition, someone who is functioning as their own god. They're in it for themselves. Dr. Waltke defines the wicked as "...those who will disadvantage the community in

order to advantage themselves.” There’s virtually no chance for shalom when the wicked run the show. Again, think about this: Whether we’re talking about a government, a business, a school, whether you’re talking about a family, it comes down to whether the person influencing the environment is righteous or wicked. Verse 2 then says **When the righteous increase**. That word **increase** is not a word that means increase in number. While that’s important, it means increase *in power, increase in influence*. Literally, the Hebrew is when the righteous become great, when the righteous prosper, when the righteous have influence, when the righteous are running the show, when the righteous rule, when the righteous are in positions of influence—**the people rejoice!** Why? Because they are passionate about creating an environment where everyone wins...where everyone flourishes—mutual flourishing together.

Contrary to that, **when the wicked man rules**—when the wicked are in power, when the wicked have the influence, when the wicked are running the show, then **the people groan**. Why? Because it creates the law of the jungle. Everyone loses. Everyone’s in it for themselves. People are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves. Everything’s about winning and losing—and it’s about me first. There’s virtually no chance for flourishing in that environment.

So, let’s think about this for a minute. Let’s start at the macro level in a nation. I think everyone would agree that we are a very divided, angry nation. There’s a lot of reason for concern. We say, *“One nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”* There’s very little of that that is true anymore. We have fundamentally changed as a nation. People tend to look at the divide as right or left, conservative or liberal, Democrat or Republican. There’s a tendency to think if *“our”* team was in power: “If the Republicans were in power, we would fix this thing.” The Democrats think, “If the Democrats were in power, we would fix this thing.” Sometimes it’s deeply concerning to see how blindly loyal some Christians are to their political party. It’s almost like they put on blinders, and even though members of their party are clearly violating biblical principles of right and wrong, it’s like they put on blinders and they’re still loyal to that party, as if it’s not happening. At some point it seems like there’s more of a loyalty to the political party than there is to God. And part of what we have to understand as the people of God is: I can assure you God does not divide people as Democrats and Republicans. He absolutely does not. Here’s how God divides people: He divides them between the **righteous** and the **wicked**. When the righteous are in power, when the righteous are great, when the righteous have influence, they’re passionate for God’s vision for the world—and the people rejoice. God is for the righteous. It doesn’t matter to Him if that righteous person is a Republican or a Democrat. He’s for the righteous! He’s equally opposed to the wicked. It doesn’t matter if the wicked is a Republican or a Democrat. He’s opposed to the wicked. He’s for those who have His heart for shalom, and He’s opposed to those who are determined to destroy shalom. That’s how God views it.

So let’s think about it in a little bit different way. It seems to me, as a nation there is a growing resentment toward the rich and the powerful. You’re hearing this more and more. And the solution is: there should be some sort of a redistribution of the wealth in order to fix the problem. I can assure you 100% that redistributing the wealth will fix nothing. The reason is because it has not accounted for the problem of the wicked. This is not a promotion of democracy. It’s not a promotion of capitalism. It is not a promotion of one form of government over another. It’s not political at all. When Proverbs was written, it was a monarchy under a king; that’s how most of the governments were. It has nothing to do with the form of government. It has to do with an understanding of the righteous and the wicked, and no matter what you do, if you haven’t accounted for the wicked, it will be chaos. You could redistribute wealth and the next day it will be chaos again. It will be the law of the jungle. It will be winners and losers because there’s no accounting

for the wicked and the damage they do to shalom. When the wicked are in charge, there is no form of government that can compensate for that. That's why the text is saying, "*When the righteous become great, when the righteous have power, when the righteous are in leadership, when the righteous have influence, the people rejoice,*" because they have God's heart for shalom and flourishing. That's how God views the world.

So let's bring it down to even a smaller level, to us together as a church. I would suggest to you there are many in our congregation that I would count among the righteous. They love Jesus; they want God's vision for the world. That's their heart and their desire. So then let's imagine that you are the poorest person in the room—that you live in deep poverty—you have less than anyone else. The attitude of the culture would be to resent those that have more—with the idea it would solve the problem if all those resources were just redistributed. You have to understand: if that was done, it would not address your situation and your poverty at all. Almost immediately it would revert back to what it has been. What the proverb is saying is the solution is for the righteous to prosper, for the righteous to become great, for the righteous to be in positions of influence, for the righteous to take over. Why? Because the righteous are passionate for shalom. The passion of their heart is to create a culture where everyone flourishes together. The only hope you have as the poorest person in the room is that the righteous succeed; the righteous prosper; the righteous become great. If you are the poorest person in the room, you should be the loudest cheerleader for the righteous to succeed, to become great, to prosper, because they're the only ones that are going to create an environment where you can flourish as God intended for you to flourish. That's what the proverb is saying. It's a completely different way of understanding what's happening in our culture. That's the basic idea there; and then it's illustrated in different ways. So verse 4 for example:

The king (so he's talking about a righteous king—the Tzedek, who is the king) **gives stability to the land by justice,**
But a man who takes bribes overthrows it.

So the idea is that if you have a righteous person in power—in this case a king—then there will be true justice in the land. That word **justice** is often tied to the idea of the righteous and the wicked. It's the Hebrew, *mishpat*, a really important term. Basically it means fairness—true fairness, regardless of the color of your skin, regardless of your social economic status, regardless of whether you're male or female, which in the ancient world was a big deal. In an ancient culture, justice was unheard of...it was just unheard of! For people to imagine a culture where there was true justice, where there was really fairness in the land, it just didn't happen. The poor were abused; they were used; they were taken advantage of. In most cultures, women had no voice—no say. There was just no chance for justice. So imagine how powerful this proverb is when it says, "If the one in charge is among the righteous, then there would be true justice, true fairness in the land."

Contrary to that—a **man who takes bribes**—there's some discussion this Hebrew word could mean bribes or *taxes*. It's the idea of either taking bribes or over taxing the people for personal gain. In other words, to disadvantage the larger community in order to advantage himself. As long as the wicked are in charge, it's going to be chaos and the people will groan. You have it again in verse 7:

The righteous (the tzedek) **is concerned for the rights of the poor,**
The wicked does not understand *such* concern.

This affirms what I said before: If you are the poorest person in the room, the only real hope you have is that the righteous succeed. Why? Because they genuinely care. They genuinely want to

see you flourish. They want a culture where you have a chance, where your situation can change. That's their heart; that's their passion. You learn a lot about people in power by how they respond to and take care of those who have virtually no chance to repay them. Not because they're voters, not because they can gain anything from them, not because they can gain an advantage from them or use them in anyway, but simply because they are people made in the image of God and they deserve to be treated with compassion and dignity. That's the heart of the righteous. The righteous have that concern for the poor. **The wicked**—the proverb does not say the wicked is not concerned—it says the wicked *does not even understand that concept of concern*. In other words, it's even worse than not being concerned. The wicked—they are so selfish, they are so self-absorbed, they are so ambitious for self, they're so willing to disadvantage others to advantage themselves—they don't even understand the concept of being concerned for the poor. Verse 12:

**If a ruler pays attention to falsehood, (meaning lies)
All his ministers become wicked.**

It's just the idea that whoever is at the top influences the culture, whether you're talking about a government, you're talking about a business, you're talking about a school, or you're talking about a church. Even if you're talking about a family—whoever is in charge, whoever is running the show is going to influence the culture. The culture will become like the person in charge. That's what verse 12 is saying. Verse 16:

When the wicked increase, transgression increases; When the wicked become more powerful, when the wicked become great, when the wicked are running the show, there's more sin! That's just the way it is. As our nation has drifted farther and farther from God, we're more and more secular. There's more sin; there's more anger. It's not a coincidence. When the wicked are running the show, then there will be more anger; there will be more sin.

But the righteous will see their fall, meaning at the end of the story, the righteous still win.

So with that in mind, that's kind of an overview of the culture, so then the question is, "Well, how do we live skillfully in such a culture?" Well there are a couple of verses that are helpful to that. So back to verse 8:

**Scorners set a city aflame,
But wise men (the righteous) turn away anger.**

So who are the **scorners**? The scorners are those who would laugh, make fun of, dismiss everything I've just said. Imagine a purely secular environment and I said to them what I just said. They would laugh; they would make fun; they would dismiss. Those are the scorners. What do they do? They *set the city on fire*. Literally, the Hebrew is: *they blow an ember into a flame*. The whole idea is when you are selfish, when you are self-absorbed, when you are so willing to disadvantage the community to advantage yourself, it's a fight. It the law of the jungle. It's every man for himself. It's every woman for herself. It creates conflict; it creates this anger; it begins to just destroy whatever environment is defined by the wicked.

Contrary to that—the second part of verse 8—*but the wise (skillful) turn away anger*. This is really a common message in the book of Proverbs. We don't contribute to the anger; we don't add to the anger. Rather, we turn a different direction. Whether we're talking about face-to-face or whether we're talking about social media, it's not helpful to get on and *go off*. There's a tendency, I think,

for Christians to think, “I’m taking my stand.” What I hear from so many Christians is, “I won’t let them take my country from me.” So, you’re doing what? You’re contributing to the destruction by your anger. Do you really think someone out there is listening and saying, “Oh, I never thought of that; I completely change my mind.” You know that’s not happening, so then you have to admit all you are doing is venting, and that does not create shalom! What the text says is, “We don’t need more anger; we don’t need more fighting. What we need is to offer people another direction.” I would suggest to you people are so hurt and so weary of the anger and the fighting and the confusion, that a little kindness goes a long way—an opportunity to say, “Wait a minute, we’re different.”

What if the people of Lincoln Berean were known across our city as the most kind, the most loving, the most gentle, the most compassionate, the most caring people in the community? What we’re offering people is a different way. It doesn’t have to be like this. Everybody doesn’t have to hate each other. Everybody doesn’t have to be so angry with each other. There is a different way. God intended for people to flourish together; and there is a different way. But to get there, the righteous have to become great...the righteous have to grow in power...the righteous have to have influence. The righteous have to be in positions of leadership in order to create this—**and the people will rejoice**. You have a similar proverb in verse 11:

**A fool always loses his temper,
But a wise man holds it back.**

Again, you think if this idea—the fool, the wicked—if I’m so selfish, if I’m so self-absorbed, if I’m all about selfish ambition, if I’m all about me winning, everything’s a fight. I’ll disadvantage whoever I have to, to advantage myself. You put ten of those people in a room—you don’t come out with shalom. What do you come out with? You come out with a fight, because everybody’s in it for themselves. **The wise** (the righteous) **holds it back**. It’s a really interesting Hebrew word. It’s only used three times in the Old Testament—twice in the book of Psalms, and once here in Proverbs. Both times in the book of Psalms, it’s specifically used to describe the stilling of a storm—it quiets the storm. So imagine this picture of Jesus on the sea of Galilee with the great storm coming up, and Jesus steps up and He calms the sea, and the disciples ask, “Who is this man that even the wind and the sea obey Him?” That’s the picture. As a Christ follower, we’re in the midst of the storm, and the storm is raging, but the Christ follower doesn’t contribute, doesn’t pour gas on the fire, but steps in and calms the sea—calms the anger; calms the hatred; offers people another way to live. It doesn’t have to be like this. That’s what he’s saying in verse 11. Verse 20:

**Do you see a man who is hasty in his words?
There is more hope for a fool than for him.**

Hasty in his words is describing someone who’s always right on the edge of *going off*—a little short fuse, and all it takes is the slightest provocation and off they go. These people are in our homes; they’re in our neighborhoods; they’re in our place of business; they’re in our government; there are people where it takes nothing to set them off. *There’s more hope for a fool than someone like that!*

It is entirely possible there are a few of you here this morning and your temperature’s going up. You are upset by some things I have said, and you can feel the temperature going up and up, and you can’t wait to get home and get on your computer, and you are going to send me an email, and you are going to straighten me out—to which I would say, “Hey, there you are, verse 20.” (*laughter*)

Now come on, be honest. Before you've had the opportunity to even think about what we've talked about, to even consider the possibility that God may be right and there's a better way to live, you're ready to go off. That's what verse 20 is saying: *There's more hope for a fool than somebody who acts like that.* Verse 25:

The fear of man brings a snare, (So, if I think man is ultimately the solution to our problem, that's going to create a trap that I'm going to fall into.)
But he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted.

That word **exalted** means either a tower or a mountain top. It's the idea of refuge. If I think the solution's coming from man, I'm going to end up in trouble. If I understand it's from God, I find my place of refuge in Him. But:

Many seek the ruler's favor (Why? Cause I think man ultimately will solve our problem.)
But justice (mishpat) **for man comes from the LORD.** (Vs. 26)

At the core of this discussion is whether or not you think the ultimate solution that is going to change our culture is going to come from man, going to come from government, going to come from the Democrats, going to come from the Republicans; is that where it's going to come? Or do you understand and believe ultimately the only hope for change—for true justice in the land, for real flourishing—will have to come from God? How you choose to behave is going to give evidence of which you believe. The last verse is back to verse 18:

Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained (out of control),
But happy is he who keeps the law.

Now this verse has often been misunderstood. It doesn't have anything to do with a vision statement, a mission statement, a purpose statement for a church or a business; it doesn't have anything to do with that. What it does have to do with is where there is no vision—that's the Hebrew word for revelation—where there is no vision for God's Word, where there is no vision for God's truth, where there is no vision for the world as God intended it to be, the people are unrestrained; the people are out of control. In other words, where there is no vision for the world as God intended it to be—the wicked rise; the wicked increase in power. The wicked are running the show, and everybody will groan, because everybody loses. The way back is not through anger. The way back is not through lectures. The way back is not by going off. The way back is recapturing a vision—God's revelation for the world as He intended it to be—and to help people understand there is a different way, a way that is so different from all this anger and all this hatred that is destroying people's lives, and it's our responsibility in the midst of the storm to calm the sea and show them the way.

So, a couple of things to think about as we wrap this up. Number one: it's very important to understand all of us are a part of this calling. Wherever God has called you, as the righteous we need you to be excellent in what you do. We need you to be successful in what you do. We need you to give your best in what you do—because what we need is for the righteous to prosper. We need the righteous to grow in power. We need the righteous to grow in wealth. We need the righteous to be leaders. We need the righteous in government. We need the righteous in politics. We need the righteous in business. We need the righteous in the trades. We need the righteous in the schools and in the homes and the neighborhoods and the communities—not hiding in the shadows, but influencing the culture. Wherever God has placed you, we need you to prosper; we

need you to be good at what you do. We need you to move into positions of influence if anything is really going to change. It's also true that we just need more righteous people to penetrate our city, and that can only happen when people encounter the resurrected Christ. No one can be righteous apart from life change through an experience with the resurrected Christ. That's where it has to start, which goes back to our conversation the last four weeks—that we need to be diligent stewards of the gospel. We need to penetrate every corner of the community and influence those who today are among the wicked, that they might become part of the righteous. Don't make this more complicated than it needs to be. You just need to *be kind*; you need to *be present*; you need to *be brave or courageous*; you need to *be Jesus* to them into every corner of our city—that the righteous might prevail, that people might flourish, that the people might rejoice. **When the righteous become great, the people will rejoice!**

Our Father, my prayer is that You would raise up an army from among us to penetrate every corner of this city, representing Your vision for the world, moving forth as the righteous, submitted and surrendered to You, with a heart's desire that every place where we have influence, people would flourish together. Lord, may that be so. In Jesus' name, Amen.

(Video):

Bob Seeger: So I'm actually on staff here at the church and a lot of time I'm wearing my work uniform and it says *Lincoln Berean Church* just right there on the name, so anywhere I go outside of work, people are seeing, "That person works for the church; that person must be a Christian, that person must be representing Christ." So, I'm sitting down at lunch and the waitress comes up and just kind of is making small talk; she mentioned her family and her kids and some of the stuff that was going on from there. It was just a passing phrase, but I had this moment where I could either decide to let that moment go or to maybe use that as an opportunity to get to know her more. I take that moment; I look up, and I say, "Oh, so you have kids?" And that moment gave me the opportunity to get to know her more, to find out more about her story, and to share a little bit about my story. And what's also cool is it gave us that thing that when I come in later, I can ask about it and I can just kind of get to know her more through that. One thing the book *42 Seconds* says is, "Just be engaged with what's really happening. Enjoy each person you meet and show the person in front of you that they mean more to you than your plans." You never know what might happen next.

Rod Zach: Yeah, so one day my wife and I were driving home. We look over, and there's a guy who's fallen on his driveway while he's shoveling, and he's crawling up. I go out immediately and say, "Can I help you?" He says, "Things are fine; I just need to get up to my garage." I stay to help him get to his garage. I leave him and go back to the car, and my wife immediately says, "You get back up there!" He was an older gentleman, so I get back up there. I help him until he gets enough help and then I leave. The cool thing about this was I gave him my number. He called me and told me he was in Madonna, and I was able to go visit him and then eventually my wife and I visited him when he got back home. So most of us won't see somebody lying on their driveway and meet them that way, but because of that passage in the book *42 Seconds* where it says, "Make people a priority, not a project," I've really taken time to see my neighbors. And now whenever they're out, I say, "Hi", go talk to them, ask them things, and that way I've gotten to actually meet and talk to at least fifteen of my neighbors so far.

Whitney Bybee: All right, so I'm an introvert, and with that I like to just do my own thing—watch people—don't like to get out of my comfort zone. My section party was having a picnic—a get together at a park—and I get introduced to this lady from Iraq and you know, I didn't really...I just kind of wanted to observe. I didn't really want to get too involved in conversation or anything, but I decided I'm going to put myself out there. I'm going to ask a question, be present with her. And so I notice she's holding her baby and I also have a baby, and so I ask, "How old is your baby?" and they are about the same age, and we just started getting to know each other. The next day was Easter and there were tons and tons of people, and I happened to see her, and you know we said, "Hi," and I said, "I'm glad that you are here." If I hadn't had that conversation the day before at the park with her, we wouldn't have even said hi to each other. She wouldn't have recognized me; I wouldn't have recognized her. It wasn't the most life-changing conversation, but it set the stage for that next step. In section 2 of *42 Seconds* it says, "That being fully present for and with people changes everything."

Kevin Cousino: We've been in our neighborhood for four years and you know how you hope to have a really good neighbor and good neighborhood. Well, we have the "problem" neighbor and we were out doing a bonfire on our back porch, and just out of the blue he came over and started telling us, "Hey, you're breaking rules here; this shouldn't happen." And we said, "Okay, thanks," and "Yeah, we're good." And then he left but it wasn't long after that—you know that sound when you hear that big truck stopping with those big air brakes squawking and squealing—and he called the fire department on me! (*laughter*) They came and checked it out and we were okay, but that really set up a lot of anger. I wasn't very happy with the neighbor coming into my space and telling me what I'm not supposed to do when I was doing everything okay.

It was honestly about a week later; I got this book *42 Seconds* and it hit me. I just opened the book and read the first few words, and like a two-by-four upside my head, it hit me: Be kind! And I shouldn't say "it" hit me. God the Spirit said, "You're not being kind; you're not doing what you should be as a neighbor." And I got convicted and it was as simple as New Year's Day we're driving by and I said to my wife, "I've got to stop; I've got to stop this anger." And I said, "Hey, neighbor, Happy New Year!" That's all I did. I didn't expect, you know, God to just be, "Boom! Done! there's your answer to what you did," but I come home one day, and we had snow on the ground, and my sidewalk was shoveled. I was kind of blown away, and a short time later he knocks on the door and he's asking my wife if I'd help him with a project at his house. God works in mysterious ways—and I didn't expect it!

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