

WISDOM: LIVING SUCCESSFULLY IN A TREACHEROUS WORLD Acquiring Respect

“A *good name* is to be more desired than great wealth, favor is better than silver and gold.”
—Proverbs 22:1

R • E • S • P • E • C • T

Respect. Everyone wants it. Its perceived lack is one of the most common causes of conflict. Unhappy husbands point to a “lack of respect” from their wives as justification for anger. Prodigal children claim that it was a “lack of respect” from parents that drove them to leave home, while parents who expel their children from the home cite a “lack of respect” as the justification for their tough love. A recent Georgetown University survey of 20,000 employees found that “workplace respect” was the most important behavior to expect from a boss, yet the number of workers claiming a lack of respect in the workplace increases each year. Social activists shut down city streets, claiming a “lack of respect” from governing authorities. Countries threaten war against one another if their interests are not “respected.”

Scripture is not silent on the issue. On the one hand, it teaches about *owed respect*. This kind of respect is due those who have positions of delegated authority. Wives are to respect husbands (Ephesians 5:33); children are to respect parents (6:1-3); slaves are to respect their masters (6:5-8); citizens are to respect governing authorities (1 Peter 2:17); church members are to respect their leaders (Hebrews 13:17); and believers are to respect one another (Romans 12:10; Philippians 2:3) and all men in general (1 Peter 2:17). As the Apostle Paul writes, “Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax *is due*; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor” (Romans 13:7).

Scripture also recognizes *acquired respect*. This kind of respect is not something that is due by virtue of a title or responsibility; it is something that must be attracted. It is the kind of respect that takes time to develop and is earned, not demanded. It is something to which all men should aspire to attain.

An example of acquired respect can be seen in Paul’s description of a qualified candidate for church leadership: “An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, **respectable** . . .” (1 Timothy 3:2). The Greek word translated “respectable” (κόσμιος, *kosmios*) describes one that possesses “characteristics or qualities that evoke admiration or delight.” The qualified candidate must merit such respect not only from believers (3:2) but from unbelievers as well: “And he must have a **good reputation with those outside the church**, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil” (3:7). Even Jesus, the true and archetypal man, was described during His earthly development as “increasing in wisdom and stature, and **in favor with God and men**” (Luke 2:52).

Admittedly, the effort to acquire respect is fraught with dangers. It can easily turn into the *fear of man* wherein one lives in constant anxiety over what others think and in the constant effort to please those whose opinions seem most valuable. It can lead to *self-righteousness* wherein one lives for the accolades of men and equates human admiration with righteousness. It can also lead to *idolatry*, when one becomes consumed with self-image and the pursuit of approval. In light of dangers like these Augustine cautioned,

Two things there are whereof every man should be especially cautious and tender—his conscience, and his credit [reputation]. But that of his conscience must be his first care; that of his name and credit must be content to come in the second place. Let him first be sure to guard his conscience well; and then may he have a due regard of his name also. Let it be his first care to secure all within, by making his peace with God and in his own breast. That done—but not before—let him look abroad if he will, and cast about as well as he can, to strengthen his reputation with and before the world.

In other words, in the effort to acquire respect, men must never be made big and God must never be made small.

Since the book of Proverbs is about skillful living, it naturally instructs its readers in the way of earning respect, favor, or a good reputation—both from men and God. A survey of the book yields at least **four lessons about acquiring respect from others.**

THREE KEY TERMS IN PROVERBS RELATED TO REPUTATION:

חֵן, *hēn* = “favor” (e.g., 3:4)

כְּבוֹד, *kābôd* = “honor, *gravitas*” (e.g., 3:35)

רַצוֹן, *rāṣôn* = “favor, delight” (e.g., 8:35)

1. A good reputation is to be sought.

It is not unusual to hear some say, “My conscience is clear; I care not what anyone else thinks of me. I please no one.” While this saying can reflect a praiseworthy commitment to give the fear of man no place in life, it can also be an expression of prideful self-sufficiency—the kind that is intoxicated with one’s “own understanding” and is convinced in his “own eyes” that he is wise (see Prov 3:5, 7). This imperviousness to the opinions of others can be a blind, naïve self-confidence that rejects correction and is convinced in the rightness of one’s own character and convictions (12:15). As Proverbs states of such a man, “There is more hope for a fool than for him” (26:12).

While Proverbs does teach that God alone is to be feared (3:7), it also exhorts readers **to seek a good reputation in the eyes of others.** This is no passive pursuit.

- **22:1** – “A *good* name is to be more desired than great wealth, favor is better than silver and gold.”

In fact, the wise man is to seek this favor and good repute **from both men and God.**

- **3:1-4** – “My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments . . . so you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and man.”
- **8:34-36** – “Blessed is the man who listens to me [Lady Wisdom], watching daily at my gates, waiting at my doorposts. For he who finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD. But he who sins against me injures himself; all those who hate me love death.”
- **12:2** – “A good man will obtain favor from the LORD, but He will condemn a man who devises evil.”
- Romans 12:18; 2 Corinthians 5:9

Consequently, wisdom dictates that **how one views one’s self is of little value.** In fact, commending oneself is a chief characteristic of vain thinking.

- **25:27** – “It is not good to eat much honey, nor is it glory to search out one’s own glory.”
- **27:2** – “Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips.”
- Luke 14:11; 2 Corinthians 10:18

“To be sure, reputations are not always accurate. Yet, in the long run we usually get a reputation that is close to what we deserve. The inner man shows himself often enough that our reputation at least roughly matches our character.” —Dan Doriani, *The Life of a God-Made Man*, 150

2. A good reputation can be acquired only through the application of biblical wisdom.

Once again, the law of cause-and-effect (of sowing-and-reaping) is brought to the forefront. A favorable reputation is not acquired suddenly, haphazardly, or arbitrarily. There is a reason why some have one and others do not. A good name comes as a *harvest*—the consequence of a life dedicated to the pursuit and

application of wisdom. As Steveson aptly states, “A good name comes as an outgrowth of good character, not as a deliberate attempt to build a reputation” (*Proverbs*, 297 fn. 1). This is evident in the cause-consequence logic of the following proverbs:

- **3:1-4** – “My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you. Do not let kindness and truth leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and man.”
- **3:35** – “The wise will inherit honor, but fools display dishonor.”
- **8:18** – “Riches and honor are with me [wisdom], enduring wealth and righteousness.”
- **11:27** – “He who diligently seeks good seeks favor, but he who seeks evil, evil will come to him.”
- **13:15** – “Good understanding produces favor, but the way of the treacherous is hard.”
- **22:4** – “The reward of humility *and* the fear of the LORD are riches, honor and life.”
- **29:23** – “A man’s pride will bring him low, but a humble spirit will obtain honor.”
- **3:16; 8:34-36; 10:32; 11:1, 16, 20; 12:2, 22; 14:9, 35; 15:8, 33; 16:13; 18:12; 20:3; 21:21; 28:3.**

Conversely, those who do not give themselves actively and purposefully to the daily pursuit of wisdom will never reap respect. The idea of giving such men honor would be itself foolishness: 21:10; 26:1, 8.

Respect and a good reputation cannot be acquired apart from first pursuing the wisdom of God. Honor—personal *gravitas*—is one of wisdom’s most precious fruits. To disregard the beckoning call of wisdom and remain steadfast in one’s own intuition and confidence is the surest way to forfeit the respect of others.

3. A good reputation is more valuable than earthly riches.

To emphasize the importance of seeking an honorable reputation, Proverbs contrasts its acquisition with the acquisition of riches and concludes: *there is no comparison*.

- **22:1** – “A *good* name is to be more desired than great wealth, favor is better than silver and gold.”
- **Ecclesiastes 7:1** – “A good name is better than a good ointment, and the day of *one’s* death is better than the day of one’s birth.”

Not only is a good reputation worth more than money; it is also more durable as well.

- **10:7** – “The memory of the righteous is blessed, but the name of the wicked will rot.”

This reality cannot be affirmed by word only. A man’s priorities, convictions, and objectives should reflect his recognition of the value of a good name. Abstract professions must be translated into the practical.

4. A good reputation is destroyed by careless actions.

Like all things most precious in life, a reputation is difficult to acquire. Yet despite the time and effort required to attain it, a reputation can be quickly destroyed through careless decisions and actions. Proverbs points to several ways a man’s honor can be replaced with shame:

- (a) Sexual sin: **5:7-14; 6:32-33.**

“One of the most destructive sins for the husband and the family is that of sexual lust. This sin opens the door to all kinds of degradation. . . . This sin *can* and *will* destroy a man’s life and his marriage relationship as no other.” —Scott, *Exemplary Husband*, 283

- (b) Pride: **11:2**.
- (c) Spurning reproof: **13:18**.
- (d) Impulsiveness: **18:13; 25:8-10**.

“Nothing will ruin a good reputation faster or more permanently than a deliberate breach of ethical integrity. People will forgive practically any other kind of error, negligence, or failure — but ethical bankruptcy carries a stigma that is almost impossible to rise above.” —*John MacArthur*

Some Final Counsel

How does the believer acquire respect and a good name? Here is some practical advice:

1. Foster as your ultimate motivation a lifestyle of thought, speech, and action that *truly pleases God*.
2. Arrange your priorities, decision-making processes, and lifestyle to reflect the reality that a “good name is to be more desired than great wealth” (Prov 22:1).
3. Beware of the ever-present dangers along the way: *fear of man*; *self-righteousness*; and *idolatry*. Rely firmly on God’s grace and give Him all the glory for successes.
4. Exercise patience. That which is most valuable always takes great effort and time to acquire.
5. Be motivated by the fear of disqualification and the joy of reward.
6. Cultivate a sensitive conscience and a receptivity toward correction.
7. Embrace the notion of living in a glass house—of living your life as an open book where nothing is hidden.
8. Remember that it is never too early or too late to begin.

“When reputation (which is what everybody knows about us) becomes more important than character (which is what God knows about us), we have become hypocrites!” —*Warren Wiersbe*

For Further Reflection

- Continue to read one chapter of Proverbs each day. Memorize Proverbs 22:1.
- In the effort to acquire a “good name,” how can one avoid the dangers of *fearing man’s opinions*, *nurturing self-righteousness*, and/or *establishing the idol of self-image*?
- Why is it necessary for a man to listen to the assessments of others? Point to several proverbs that would emphasize this necessity.
- How would you rate your “name” in the eyes of your coworkers, neighbors, men in your small group, and family members? Explain your assessment.
- Think back to the last time you were confronted by another brother in Christ. Were you receptive to his words of correction and counsel? If not, why not? Do you have biblical justification to reject his admonition?
- Consider the things in your life right now, that—if publicized—would destroy the current reputation you enjoy with others. What will you do to change?

Audio & Notes: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: May 17 – “Trusting God”