

“In Vain is a Net Spread in the Sight of Any Bird”

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Texts: Proverbs 1:10-19

It is strange that we have to wait until v. 17 in Proverbs to encounter our first bona fide proverb. On the way there we have passed through an exhortation, a stretch of parental advice and a cautionary tale: don't be seduced into a life of murder and plunder by enticers. Of course, this is an invitation to sin, to sin of a very blatant and distasteful kind. If this allurement was intended to be subtle, it fails remarkably. One would think that something this wicked would be so off putting that it would be a very hard sell. (At least I fervently hope so!) This is so hideously far down the road of envy and covetousness: **Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood. *The evil in the suggestion should cause us to vomit . . . in revulsion.*** Unfortunately, fresh recruits to car-jacking, a florid example of modern highwayman robbery—shop-lifting, looting and arson seem to be very numerous in our urban centers. Violent crime is, as reported, soaring. The chants of “Defund the police” have resulted in vicious disabling of the police and protesters inflict bodily harm on them. It strains the English language and the credulity of our citizenry to hear that riots where police are injured, building looted and businesses burned are “mostly peaceful!”

One wonders, given the human condition of sin, why such an extreme enticement to theft, robbery and murder is where our cautionary tale begins. **My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent** to their plans, schemes of plunder, and easy wealth through violent plunder. Thievery and murder are the expressions of covetousness and of disobedience to the command, **Thou shalt not steal** and **Thou shalt not murder. *And this, not to mention the unneighborliness and lack of love in these proposed actions.*** It is cold-bloodedness. It is thuggish. It doesn't matter if the perpetrator came up with the idea on his own, or if the president of a country invites his soldiers to help themselves to whatever they want from the civilian population.

Curiously, the son in view, the one being warned about armed robbery,, is Solomon. If David saw something in Solomon that led him to conclude that he needed an admonition of this sort; we might well wonder just what that was. It is interesting to consider that when David was fleeing Saul and offered protection to the sheep of Nabal—they prevented sheep stealing (poaching?) and “nothing went missing.” Of course, Nabal accuses David of being an outlaw/bandit, a rebel but that doesn't mean his accusation was accurate. Even our Lord was falsely accused, slandered and insulted.

The offer is quite extensive. Houses full of plunder, a shared purse . . . it sounds very like Robin Hood and his merry band of thieves. Robin may have been a hero to the poor who he helped, but it wasn't his wealth that he was redistributing—I guess these days we call it “transfer of wealth” and perpetrate it through taxation. “Robbing the rich to pay the poor” is a notable slogan, but does it legitimate thievery? Robin was no hero to those he robbed and certainly not to those who lost loved ones in the transaction. The word of God condemns this whole scheme. (vv.11-14) **Do not walk in the way with them, hold back your foot from their paths, for their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed blood.** (Vv. 15-16)

David's instruction may have been propelled forward by the high incidence of such criminal activity in ancient Palestine. Some authorities claim that there are a hundred such

allusions in the history, psalms and the prophets. I have not thought of the word of God as a rap sheet; but there appears to be some truth in the suggestion. The countryside was full of brigands and assailants. We recall that on the day that Jesus was crucified, two such murderous villains were also executed. And, wondrously, one was saved and the other was not: **Lord, remember me** was all it took! The evidence of faith was slight, but the outcome was immeasurably great. How many might be saved, if they were to learn about salvation by grace through faith alone?!

If a traveler wanted to be safe he had to hire a cohort of Romans to secure safe travels. *There is something to be said for a police presence; or the presence of uninformed federal agents on an international flight. **And the absence of statistics about this is unnecessary.*** Police on the streets prevents much more crime than it causes. Regardless, in Jesus' day, these scoundrels were tried and executed with regularity and, biblically, there are no statistics on the deterrent effect of crucifixions, or public executions. The roads into the cities were lined, at times, with the rotting corpses of thieves and robbers whose careers had been terminated by the courts.

In the Cambridge Bible (commentary online at [biblehub.com](http://biblehub.com)) we find this comment on Proverbs One: "Two hundred years ago (18th century?), when young men even of birth and education (read "socially advantaged") were to be found in the ranks of the highwaymen who overran the country (England). (See Macaulay, History of England, Vol. 1, ch. iii.), the warning was no less apposite (i.e. apt, pertinent, appropriate, or fitting!) in England in our own day (20th century), *even in the special form which it here assumes*, the warning, in view of the gangs of desperate men, poachers and burglars, to be found still in towns and the country, has not come to be superfluous . . . it is of universal application."

We may rightly assume that the sinners of v.10 are identical to the "evil" men of v. 16. *Let that reality sink in—evil is real and those who perpetrate crimes are evil.* Soft on crime starts with being soft on criminals, with a refusal to acknowledge the evil that sin is. Those who steal are evil. Those who murder are evil. And as the citation from the Cambridge Bible illustrates, the myth that education promotes morality simply does not hold up. What we have in reality are educated thieves, are felons who can quote great literature, felons who hold a college degree. Education is good, a positive gain, and the opposite, ignorance is terrifying. But education is not redemption and it is not a reliable salvation. Education has not even produced better citizens, as in moral and upstanding men and women of integrity who can be trusted to lead. I am afraid that an educated thief is . . . well, an educated thief. Rehabilitation is our hope—after all we renamed our jails to be correctional centers. Doesn't that mean that we have solved the social problem of crime, or thievery and murder? No, it doesn't. I think what we need is conversion and regeneration—a new heart will go a long way towards keeping violent criminals off the streets. Bible study, any one? We need citizens who can contribute, who can serve, who can tend to their callings as mothers and fathers, who can elevate the family to its God-ordained place once more—who are willing to be brothers and sister in Christ. Evangelism reduces the need for incarceration . . . seriously, think of it as public service!

Who is it that introduces another person to drug use? Or pornography? Usually, another user. “This is so cool! You are missing out. Everyone who’s anybody is doing it.”<sup>1</sup> Why? They are recruiting. Here they are called enticers. Here they are described as those “taken with crime, thievery or murder,” who want others join in, to feel the allure of it. The thrill of it, the thrill of danger, yes, the thrill of evading getting caught and, even the depraved thrill of murder—whether motivated by rage, envy or revenge. Societal revenge, as advocated by social justice warriors, often dons the mask of “reparations.” And behind that is terrible face of temptation.

Think of these experienced thieves as “groomers,” and mentors and trainers. But do not fail also to think of them as “users” and what they are using is other people . . . “as cannon fodder in their war on God?” They do not care, those they mislead are “expendable;” but all this keeps the underworld going. They support drug trafficking as an economy, they peddle potential arrest (social death?) to fund their own habits, and so take what rightfully belongs to someone else for “redistribution.” And it works; success, if you can call it that, gives out gratifying things like status, power, influence, money and admiration. Crime pays in an evil culture which has gone a long way down the road of glorifying evil men and women, violence and destruction are its entertainment drugs of choice. Super heroes have status because they seem to kill more people, and to inflict immense damage . . . “Oh, the thrill of conquest, or simulated victory.”

Application: the reason it is vain to spread the net before your prey is that smart birds will avoid an obvious trap. We have tried to make obvious the wiles (the tricks of the trade, the techniques of recruitment) of the wicked who would entice us into evil, into sin. Resisting recruitment is what saying “no” does. However “Just say ‘no’” has to have more behind it for it to be effectual. That is why even liberals mocked Lady Bird Johnson’s anti-drug use slogan!

Such as what? Such as heeding the admonition of a parent, as wisdom from God: **Do not consent.** The father’s instruction and the mother’s teaching are godly influences which elevate wisdom (in moral considerations) above folly—folly is the pursuit of worldly things, the lusts of the flesh, the natural inclinations of a sinful heart. Wisdom results in righteousness. No matter how you dress it up, no matter what costume you put on it, and no matter how stupid and bad you make law enforcement look, a thief is . . . evil.

Think “The Pink Panther” and contrast either the maniacal Chief Inspector Dreyfus, or the disheveled and clumsy detective Jacques Clouseau versus the suave, urbane, debonaire Sir Charles Lyton, the admirable, smart arch villain/anti-hero who is evil.) That’s the crucial point, if we are led to think that Sir Lyton is admirable, heroic—everything that law enforcement is not(!)—we will be seduced into thinking what is evil is good and what is

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<sup>1</sup> The reality is that not everyone is doing recreational drugs. Yes, many are and many are dying from fentanyl laced substances (“carrier” drugs, homemade on the street drugs with additives). This resembles the stratagem of the tobacco industry to enhance the addictive character of tobacco—which formerly had great social approval behind smoking. With regard to marijuana use, the increase of marijuana related traffic accidents (the decreased reaction time alone!) ought to get the attention of would-be users who are driving. But “Don’t smoke and drive” bump[er stickers aren’t very prolific. Awareness remains tangentially related to drug use. The cry for more and earlier education goes up, but the outcomes remain dismal. This trust in education borders on the idolatrous.

good, evil. That is a woeful condition of moral confusion where folly is mistaken for wisdom.

This is not an isolated instance. In Victor Hugo's classic Les Misérables is a French historical novel by Victor Hugo, first published in 1862, considered one of the greatest novels of the 19th century has the same conflict between Jarret and Jean Valjean (the police officer versus the peasant boy who stole bread to feed his starving family—and went to prison for petty theft!) An act of desperation occasioned by the callousness of “capitalistic” society (fixated on law and order) make Jean Valjean the pitiable victim. *This is folly!* As his desperation increases, the petty theft ends up assaulting a priest and stealing from the church. Of course, once a thief, always a thief. Except, and this is the greater story line, for Jean's redemption! The priest astoundingly turns the theft (of church wealth) into a gift (“You left the candlesticks!”). *This is wisdom.* The case that the police had against a felon dissolves in the priest's offer of a chance to do good. And Jean goes under cover, doing just that, and emerges as a successful business, a factory owner, who actually cares about his workers. The “redeemed” versus “the condemned” but the pursuit and capture of the former felon becomes the obsession of detective Jarret. The man commits suicide because he cannot escape the rigidity of his law and order mindset. He dies to end the pursuit which, it now appears, has become “evil” This is folly, too. Wisdom would include the possibility of repentance and the softening of law and order. The Scribes and Pharisees were all about law and order—as long as it served their purposes—and that is evil, too. Justice with mercy is wisdom from on high.

Les Misérables is a great Christian masterpiece—right up there with Defoe's Robinson Crusoe and Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities. Unfortunately, Les Misérables on Broadway suffers from a focus on human depravity, and the injustice of society to the point of disgust, and to the eclipse of the redemption story. Both Robinson Crusoe and A Tale of Two Cities—you may perhaps be familiar with them both—are novels in the “prodigal son genre.” Both feature a retreat from depravity and Robinson Crusoe doesn't even have a romantic love interest (I know, how boring) unless, one considers Robinson's solicitous care for man Friday's soul a loving concern—a view that I ascribe to. Defoe wrote the book to detail his conversion in an attempt to return home to his broken-hearted father. That is wisdom of the highest sort! Proverbs 1:10-19 helps guys keep our eye on the ball. Let's make sure we do so! A snare's a snare . . . a snare. We live as prey.

**Amen**