

Sermon for Sunday, February 5, 2012
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God's Plans and Ours
Proverbs 16:1-4, 9; 12:15, 11:14, 15:22, 24:10

1 To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the LORD comes the reply of the tongue. 2 All a man's ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the LORD. 3 Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and your plans will succeed. 4 The LORD works out everything for his own ends, even the wicked for a day of disaster. 9 In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.

A woman is speaking: "I've met the love of my life, a wonderful man. But we have a problem: I've always wanted to be a mother and he's never wanted to have children. We've talked for a year, and each of us is resolute. I think we have to break it off, but I wonder – what if I never meet anyone else? What is God's will? What should I do?"

Another woman says, "I have the job I trained for, the job I wanted, but I've been doing it long enough to know this is not the job for me. I need to do something different, but I'm not sure what. The thought of moving on is scary; I'm not sure what to do next. Whatever it is, I know there will be new problems. How can I find the right plan? What does God want me to do?"

Today we consider this question: What's the relation of God's plan and our plans?

1. God is the Sovereign Planner – rest in him (Prov 16:1-4,9)

We all need Proverbs 16, perhaps most days. We may never master it, but we need it. There is always a decision to be made. Whatever our work, we constantly ask, "Are we doing the right thing – the right way? Do we allocate scarce resources of space, time, and money as we should?"

Work fits here: If I take this task, where will it lead? New duties and responsibilities? New frustrations? New skills? Travel and retirement plans fit here. Shall we take a trip to.....? What is our financial status?

I feel this with my side-life as a writer. There is always a burning topic: "Someone should write a book about that." But time is short and publishers need to sell copies, but the editor has doubts. It could sell - if you change it. But I don't want to change it that way. Meanwhile, something is due and it was exciting when I signed up for it, but I've lost interest. Why did I say "yes" to that? I bet you have side interests too. The message of Proverbs 16 is great comfort in these cases.

Proverbs 16 begins and ends with one thought: We plan, God rules. We devise, He decides. We formulate, He validates. Man proposes, God disposes. 16:1: The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer is from the LORD. 16:9: A man's mind plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps.

Proverbs 16:1 says it's human nature to plan. Humans plan for winter, for food, clothing and shelter. Yet our plans have limited power. We have goals and desires. We weigh the arguments for one course of action or another. We consider how to move from here to there. The heart arranges things and makes a case.

Proverbs 16:1 literally calls these the "plans of the heart." They're not the half-baked ideas from a late night bull session. These are fully formed, sober plans for a career, a cause, a family. These are things we

want, passionately. We mull them daily because we care about them. Yet we don't control the future. We present our ideas to friends. We offer them to God and he answers. Answers are from the LORD.

That's a good thing. It's good that we can't fulfill all our plans because, 16:2 says, "All the ways of a man are pure in his eyes, But the LORD weighs the Spirit." There are exceptions – sometimes people plan to do things that they know are evil. But most of the time people believe their plans, their actions are right. We may have doubts, but we *justify ourselves*. We convince ourselves that we are "pure" and in the right.

The Sovereign Lord says, "I'll be the judge of that." Scripture says the LORD weighs all our faculties - the heart, mind, disposition, motives, inner life, and will(e.g. Ps 78:6-8, Ezek. 13:3, Prov. 16:32, 2 Chr. 36:22). He uses his standards to measure our words, deeds and motives. We have no right to praise ourselves or plan our reward.

No, we plan and commit our plans to Him, as 16:3 says, "Commit your work to the LORD, and your plans will be established." Listen:

- The Lord determines the **results** of our plans (16:1)
- The Lord evaluates the **motives** that drive our plans (16:2)
- Therefore we should **commit our plans** to him, to establish them (16:3)

"Commit" your plans, says Solomon. The Hebrew verb is *golel*; it means to roll something (a stone?) over. If we say "golel" we almost hear a stone rolling. When we roll our works to God, we commit them to his care. He will assess our planned deeds. He will determine if we do what we plan and what the results will be if we do venture something. It's rare to plan something and see it accomplish precisely what we thought. The results are more in some ways, less in others.

The wise man or woman rolls it to God. We don't fret or worry about the results. God will decide. We pray and live at peace. We don't even agonize over our motives. We know that some pride, selfishness or error, taints all that we do. Everything! But we believe the gospel story. Solomon teaches us to pray something like this:

“No one is righteous before the Lord; that includes me. Lord, I often want to vindicate myself. I want to be right. I want to say 'My motives are pure.' But I know better. I know that my sin, my corruption, goes deeper than I like to admit. I also know that your love goes deeper than I know. Your grace is richer than I can fathom. You forgive all my sins if I but ask. Lord, I commit sins that I try to hide from myself. You see them, test them, and forgive them. You know that I try to justify my plans and deeds. But I confess that I can't. And thank you, Lord, that there is no need for me to try to justify myself. When I trust you, your death is mine. You nailed my sins to your cross. Now your justice and goodness are mine and I'm glad my plans are in your hands.”

When we know that, we can invite and expect Jesus to test us and correct us as a loving father or friend. Our errors sadden him, yet he still smiles at us because he does love us and wants good for us – even when he vetoes our plans. That's Prov. 16:4:

"The LORD *works everything* for His purpose." Everything means everything. No loose ends. No unknown variables. No butterfly wings, no roll of the dice, no lost email or dropped phone call thwarts his purposes. That even includes the wicked, who oppose us. They cause their trouble, but He still executes his plans.

God reigns. Jesus is the prophet and teacher, the priest who atoned for sins, the king who rules the course of our lives - individually and corporately. We should savor the sweet fruit of the doctrine of God's sovereignty. Because Christ is King, we are "secure in frightful storms" and assured of "everlasting preservation no matter how many strong enemies plot to overthrow" us.

Proverbs 16:5-7 shifts from God's sovereignty in history to his sovereignty in morality. Solomon assures: The arrogant are an abomination; the wicked will be punished. By contrast, "When a man's ways please the LORD, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him" (16:7). All enemies, all times? No, but as general principle, when we're loyal, faithful, peaceful, we stay out of trouble.

The message is clear: "A man's mind plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps" (16:9). Yet wisdom literally says God has revealed his will and we can find it.

2. There are ways to find God's will

Know God's revealed will (Psalm 119:9-11)

We can know God's revealed, moral will. Psalm 119:9 and 11 says, "How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to thy word. I have laid up thy word in my heart that I might not sin against thee."

Suppose you wonder what God's plan is for you at work. How will you make a living? How will you put your skills and energies to use? How can you fulfill your desires to do something more, something better? We know that we plan and God directs (16:9). But we're not totally in the dark, because God's word reveals so much about what we should or should not do. I've adapted a list of questions we can ask about our proposed work plans - from Julian Handyman:

- Is the work honest? Are the temptations manageable, or do they strike me where I am weak (cf. 1 Cor 10:13)?
- Am I providing goods or services that are honest? Do they promote human flourishing? In society at large? Among God's people?
- Would this work or career, allow me to be a whole person, living in health and shalom? Will it let me be a faithful husband or wife, parent or child, or friend?
- Or will the structures of this work drive me away from peace, from faithfulness to vital relationships?
- Will these plans let me freely participate in the life of the church? Will I be able to give and receive nourishment and grace with God's people?

These are tough question for us. I recently read a piece by Bob Hyatt that challenged disciples for the sin of gluttony – gluttony not for food, but for "important" activities. He says he has a big appetite for recognition and importance. To be liked, appreciated, admired, for getting things done. There's nothing inherently wrong with that. But if the Spirit doesn't check our desires, our appetite to be liked and to achieve will run out of control. He asks, "When is enough, enough? When am I trying to find my identity through an ever-increasing load of ego-enhancing commitments? I need help in managing my appetite for applause and opportunity."

My hunch: many of us know exactly what Hyatt means. If he is right, then we must say, "Lord, weigh my spirit. Show me how to change if the structure of my work, if my gluttony for activity, is driving me away from health and peace.

One more question from Handyman: Could I put my emphasis where Jesus does – what could I do for the weak, the poor, the least of these? Apply the question here: How does a large, professional church help the poor? We minister here with divorce recovery and pre-marital counseling that is open to all. In our city we minister in jail and with refugees. In our nation, in church plants and disaster relief. Abroad, in education and evangelism to unreached people. In all we share the gospel of God's rich grace with those who are poor in spirit and hunger for God.

Test your desires (Matt 26:39)

When we consider our plans, we need to remember that our desires tend to drive our plans. Generally, we decide what we want and go for it. I want to go to Yosemite, to France. How can I get there? Away I go. Sometimes we stop to examine our desires only when we arrived and hate it. So we must test our desires, even good ones for family, healing, work or relief.

Yes, Psalm 37:4 says, "He [God] will give you the desires of your heart," but that's half a sentence and half sentences often give the wrong impression. Recently, a politician began a long sentence like this: "I don't care about poor people..." His full sentence showed he *meant*, "My focus is on the middle class." If his foes say, "He says he doesn't care about poor people," they misrepresent him. And when we take half a verse from the Bible, we misrepresent God.

I knew a man who liked half of Psalm 37:4. He wanted a BMW and a cool girl friend and expected to get it because "God will give us the desires of our heart."

In context Psalm 37 says, "Don't worry about evil men. They will fade away." Yet anyone who has worried about evil men knows we can't just switch off our concern: "OK, I'll stop worrying about my enemies." No, we must replace dark thoughts with a new focus. Therefore, Psalm 37: Trust in the Lord, do good, enjoy the security he provides. Delight in him. Roll your burdens onto God: commit your way to him, trust him, and he will vindicate you: "He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn" [so] "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him."

In that context David says, "He will give you the desires of your heart." That is, he will grant our purified desires. If we want our foes to die in agony, He won't grant that. We must test our desires. If we trust God, delight in Him, commit our way to him, we won't want evil things. He'll be free to grant our desires.

Someone once asked, "Will I see my dog in heaven?" Reply: There will be animals in heaven and dogs are wonderful animals, so I expect dogs in heaven. I don't know about your dog, but if not, God will provide something better than your dog. And if not, you won't miss your dog because all our desires will be good and perfectly attuned to God's plans." But we're not there yet, so today, we test desires.

Even when our desires are good in themselves, we may need to wait. It's possible to want something good – marriage, friends, a good job, a family – that isn't God's plan for us now. In Gethsemane, Jesus expressed the normal human desire to live – to let the cup of suffering, agony and death on the cross pass him by. Yet he prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet *not as I will, but as you will*" (Matt 26:39). And that is how we should pray.

So, when we plan, we try to be sure we rest in God's plan and will. Then we state our plan and say "Lord, this is my will. But as much as I pause to say it – If my plan is wrong, set me on another path, as you will, and please be clear."

Heed loving correction (Prov 12:15)

To make the right decisions, we need laws that keep our duties before us, but we also need more than laws. Laws say: We must preserve life, not take it. We should promote the truth, as best we can. But the rules, by themselves, can't lead us to all the right decisions or plans. We need the facts and we need to interpret them correctly. We need to have our eyes open. We need healthy feelings. We need empathy for our fellow humans.

Suppose we're in a big city, late afternoon, on a subway that's full. An older woman steps in. She is small and she carries a large bag of groceries that bulges ominously and starts to slip from her grip. There are no empty seats, but there are several teenagers sitting, talking, laughing, texting, near the door. She looks at them as the bag slips again. One boy sees it, looks up and they make eye contact, but he doesn't move. Why not? At a certain age, teenagers seem to see through anyone older than thirty-five. He's not evil; he just doesn't see her and her need.

The lady is small but tough, with an acute sense of justice. She is almost angry at this kid, but she controls herself and asks him a question: "Young man," her bag starts to slip again, "has your family taught you to respect your elders?"

She summoned the lad to see her, to help her, to get up and give her his seat. To make the right decision, this lad must see the woman and listen to her. If he really listens, his eyes may stay open to situations like this for the rest of life. It may shape his character and all he does. To find God's plan, we must heed correction.

Solomon says, "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice" (12:15). And "Rebuke a wise man and he will love you" (9:8, 19:25). That's how we grow wise.

Gather prudence (Prov 11:14, 15:22)

Wes is about sixty-five. His wife has severe Alzheimer's. She recognizes no one, says nothing, stares into space all day. Wes visits his wife daily for five years. His friends and family see that it's killing him. His business is collapsing. He's becoming a depressed, grim, joyless hermit. He wonders if he is right to spend hours watching this shell of his wife, dying inside every day.¹

The rules of life say: A husband and wife should spend time together every day. We should especially visit our spouse in the hospital. But it's killing him. His friends and children see it and tell him, "You need to take some days off. Go out with some friends. Have a little fun. Re-engage with life." He needs to examine himself, his duties, and his life. He can't abandon his wife, but something has to change. He needs to listen to people who know him.

Proverbs says, "For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure." And "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed" (11:14, 15:22). We need advisers for complicated situations. Wes needs help for family life and we need help as we make our plans.

We also need help for assessing plans we make for our work, our activities. A disciple will ask questions like these: Where has God equipped me to work in his kingdom? Where are the needs great? Do my main gifts and great joy match any place where the workers are few?

¹ Smedes, Choices, 32-42, edited

If work is painful and we think we need a change, if we have fresh options, we may also ask: “Will I contribute to a healthy system? Can I make a weak place strong? A good place stronger? Or is my work within a system that is so corrupt that, even with the best motives, I could absorb more evil than I conquer?” We need counselors, advisers, to gather prudence for decisions like these

Accept the need to wait

Psalm 90 says, “[Lord] a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by... [So] teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” Sometimes we have to wait.

3. God' plan follows the way of the cross of Jesus, the Christ (24:10-12)

Proverbs teaches us to rest in God's plan. We can find God's plan by knowing his revealed will – his commands – by testing our desires, by heeding correction, by gathering wisdom. But perhaps the great reason why our plans clash with God's is this: We expect everything to be easy and that is not His way.

God's way, Jesus' way, follows the path of the cross. As Peter said, "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps."

Some people think: If I find God's will for my life, my life will be enjoyable, pleasant, and hassle-free. I'll buy the right car and it will never break down. I will marry the right person and we will never disagree. After going to the right college, I will find the right job, and it will be significant and satisfying. I will always live in cool cities (since I'm cool). I'll hardly even need God any more!

But in this broken world, God's way is the path of the cross, a path from suffering to glory. Once sin entered this world, once mankind rebelled against God, once the world was disordered, once we became liable to death and judgment, the only way to glory is through suffering. We're in a universe at war.

In John 12, Jesus says, "The prince of this world [aka the prince of demons] will be driven out." He stands condemned, but he has a certain hold on us. We have habits of sin. We have guilt we cannot atone for. Death has us in its grip. And the only way for us to find release from sin, guilt and death is through the cross and the resurrection. He bore our sin, He forgives our guilt, He grants us life, because He faced, suffered and defeated all three. This is God's paradigm. There is no other way to defeat evil, to undo chaos. Later, a voice came to John from heaven, saying, “Now have come the salvation and power and the kingdom of our God, and of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death” (Rev. 12:10-11).

Whatever the exact shape of your plans, I hope that one major component is this: to defeat sin and hack away at evil, and to fill our corner of this world with more truth and justice, more kindness, compassion, and love. If so, this pattern will determine our steps – suffering, then glory. Sore battles with evil and chaos and some victories, through Christ, who died and rose, who suffered, then tasted the glory of overcoming.

Proverbs 24:10 says, "If you faint in the day of affliction your strength is small." So let us plan and not grow faint. Submit plans to him, test desires, heed counsel, and rest in Christ, in his pattern of suffering and glory, come what may.