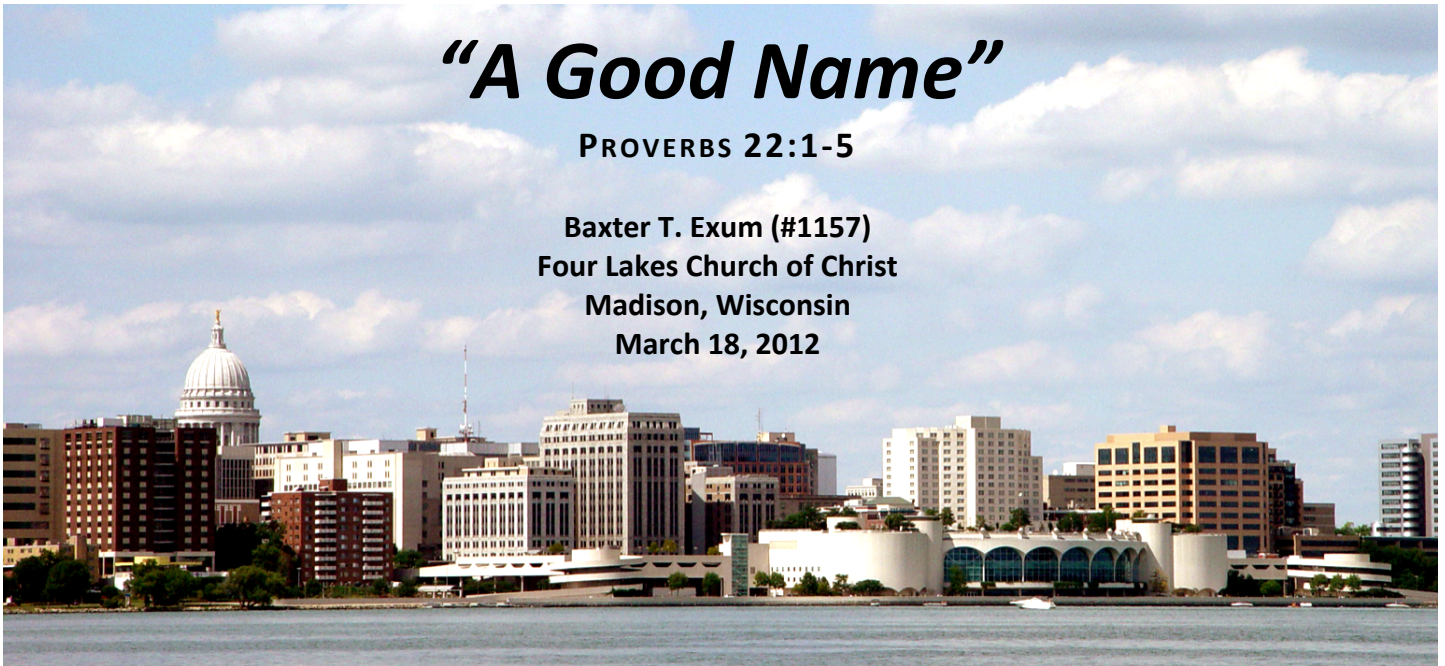


“A Good Name”

PROVERBS 22:1-5

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Madison, Wisconsin
March 18, 2012**



As we begin our study of God’s word this morning, I would invite you to think with me about the name “Bernie Madoff.” As most of us know, Mr. Madoff has been in the news over the past few years, after perpetrating the largest and most destructive Ponzi scheme in US history. My understanding is that he is has been sentenced to 150 years in prison. All together, he is accused of stealing more than \$18 billion, decimating life savings and retirement accounts of thousands upon thousands of innocent people. And yet, as most of us know, as devastating as those losses must have been, the impact was certainly felt within his own family. We know that Mr. Madoff’s own son, Mark, hanged himself on the second anniversary of his dad’s arrest. Exactly what part his son had in the deception (if any), we may never know, but one thing is certain: His son found it impossible to live with the family name.

This morning, then, I would like for us to study what the Bible teaches about the value of a good name, and our text for this morning is found in Proverbs 22 (p. 1032). As we turn to that passage, I would point out that Madoff is certainly not the only person to bring dishonor to the family name. We can think about names like Sandusky and Chadima, or maybe Osama and Hitler, or (from Bible times), names like Jezebel and Judas. Very few of us will ever meet any children with those names. I have read that many members of the Hitler family now live in the United States, but they have changed their names, and very few people ever really knew who they were. This morning, then, let us look at the value of a good name – our passage is found in Proverbs, a book written by King Solomon, one of the wisest men who ever lived, Proverbs 22:1-5,

- ¹ A good name is to be more desired than great wealth,
Favor is better than silver and gold.**
- ² The rich and the poor have a common bond,
The Lord is the maker of them all.**
- ³ The prudent sees the evil and hides himself,
But the naive go on, and are punished for it.**
- ⁴ The reward of humility and the fear of the Lord
Are riches, honor and life.**
- ⁵ Thorns and snares are in the way of the perverse;
He who guards himself will be far from them.**

I. **As we look at these five verses, I would like for us notice, first of all, THE VALUE OF A GOOD NAME.**

As King Solomon said (in verse 1), ***“A good name is to be more desired than great wealth,”*** and that, ***“favor is better than silver and gold.”*** So, yes, a good name is valuable. But how much value? We could ask Alliant Energy, and they would give us a figure of \$6.3 million – that was their original agreement back in 2000 to rename the Dane County Expo Center for the next twenty years. Names are certainly very important. In *Othello*, it was William Shakespeare who said, “Who steals my purse steals trash; ‘tis something, nothing; ‘Twas mine, ‘tis his, and has been slave to thousands; But he that filches from me my good name robs me of that which not enriches him, and makes me poor indeed” (Act II, Sc. 3, Line 131). It was Benjamin Franklin who said, “Glass, china and reputation are easily cracked and never well mended.” A good name, therefore, is better than great wealth. We know that many things can make a person rich, but establishing a good name can sometimes take a lifetime. And as we also know, it may take a lifetime to build a good name, but that reputation can be destroyed in just a few seconds. I remember my grandfather saying, “It is strange that people go to great lengths to guard their money (putting it in banks, and so on), but they don’t really do too much to protect their reputation.” That is a paraphrase, but he was communicating this idea from Solomon that a good name is to be protected. A good name is valuable, but also very fragile.

When we go looking for a car, we know that a name sometimes means everything to us. Most of us have our own opinions of certain car companies that are good and certain companies that should probably be avoided. Some of you know that our car is getting up there (getting close to 180,000 miles now), so we’ve been keeping our eye on the market. And I know that when I’m looking online or looking in the local paper, there are certain brands that I will not even consider. Due to my upbringing, and due to my own personal experience, certain brands (certain names) are on my “Do Not Buy” list, while other brands (or names) are considered trustworthy. We know that companies will go to great lengths to protect their good name. We think of what Toyota went through several years ago with the acceleration issues. No effort was spared, and that company spent millions protecting its reputation. Names and reputations, therefore, are very important to us.

Sometimes, of course, a person may start out with an unusual name and may not come to see the value of it until a little bit later in life. We think of the song written by Shel Silverstein and made famous by Johnny Cash, “A Boy Named Sue.” The kid went through life getting picked on, and set out on a mission to kill his dad for naming him Sue, and yet when he finally caught up with his dad, they got in a fight at first, but the young man finally realized that the name had toughened him up. Dealing with that name had given him character that he would not have had otherwise.

I think the most famous example of this in our part of the world is the woman from Beloit who was given the name Marijuana Pepsi. I mean, this is the stuff of legend! We even heard about this girl as I was growing up down in the Chicago area. I didn’t realize it until this week, though, that she is almost exactly my age, born in 1972 – so, she will be 40 years old this year. And I did not realize this until a year or so ago, that she also went to UW Whitewater, where my wife got her bachelor’s degree, and where I did some graduate work. We got the alumni magazine a year or two ago, and there was a feature story on Marijuana Pepsi (Jackson) Sawyer. Obviously, there has been a lot of speculation concerning why her mother gave her the name in the first place, but the article explained that she left a difficult home situation at the age of 15 and graduated from Beloit Memorial High School before making her way to UW – Whitewater. She graduated with a degree in education and then went on to get a master’s degree in higher education administration. At the time the article in the alumni magazine was written, she was working as an academic advisor in UW – Whitewater’s Academic Advising and Exploration center. The article also explained that she was hoping to start working on a PhD in

higher education leadership. What an amazing example! Here is a woman who overcame the challenge of having a very unusual name and is now doing a lot of good in this world. By the way, when I got this article, I sent a copy to my parents, along with a note, "Thank you for naming me Baxter!" But truly, as King Solomon said, ***"A good name is to be more desired than great wealth."***

II. **As we continue looking at this little section in Proverbs 22, I would like to ask: HOW DO WE GET (OR MAINTAIN) A GOOD NAME OR REPUTATION?**

And from the Bible, it seems rather obvious that a good name is something that we choose. A good reputation is something that we earn over time. A good name is not something that our parents just give us when we are born, but a good name is something that we work on for years or even decades. Think again about the car companies – those names and reputations are earned over many years. In the same way, what our name means to other people is established by the kind of life we've been living. And so, as Solomon said, a good name is something that is to be ***"desired."*** Or, as some translations say, a good name is something that can be ***"chosen."*** As we think about desiring or choosing a good name, I would like to point out two very basic ideas here:

1. **First of all, developing a good name starts when we decide to FEAR GOD.**

We notice in verse 2, for example, that, ***"The rich and the poor have a common bond, the Lord is the maker of them all."*** One of the first steps in developing a good name is to recognize this, to recognize that whether we are rich or poor, we are all accountable to God. And then, down in verse 4, where Solomon says, ***"The reward of humility and the fear of the Lord are riches, honor and life."*** Solomon says, then, that ***"honor"*** comes as a reward for fearing God. Certainly the Bible says quite a bit about how important it is to develop a healthy fear (or respect) of God. In Proverbs 1:7, for example, Solomon says that, ***"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."*** We find in Proverbs 14:27 that, ***"The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, that one may avoid the snares of death."*** We learn in Proverbs 19:23 that, ***"The fear of the Lord leads to life, so that one may sleep satisfied, untouched by evil."*** Over and over again, Solomon tells us how important it is to fear the Lord. In fact, at the end of his life, Solomon closed the book of Ecclesiastes by saying, ***"The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil."*** First of all, then, we choose to develop a good name by developing a fear (or respect) for God.

2. **There is another key aspect to developing a good name in this passage, and that is: WE ARE TO TURN AWAY FROM EVIL.**

In verse 3, King Solomon says, ***"The prudent sees the evil and hides himself, but the naïve go on and are punished for it."*** One translation puts it this way, ***"A prudent person foresees danger and takes precautions. The simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences"*** [NLT]. Another translation puts it this way, ***"A prudent person sees trouble coming and ducks; a simpleton walks in blindly and is clobbered"*** [Message]. One preacher has put it this way, ***"The prudent fast-forwards his thinking and takes action; the dumb just ignores that thought and gets slammed"*** [Todd Pope]. And so the basic idea is that if we want to protect our good name, if we want to preserve our good reputation, then we will try to look ahead at the possible consequences of what we are doing, and we will steer clear of making some very bad decisions.

In practical terms, think about the temptation to flirt with a coworker. In that situation, we can try to look down the road, and hopefully we will be able to see the possible downside of making that decision. Hopefully we will be able to see the consequences, and that will allow us to avoid the situation altogether. We could say the same thing about the temptation to fill our weekend with all kinds of staying out late and drinking, and hopefully we will have the wisdom to look at the long-term consequences of that way of life, and hopefully we will be able to protect our good name now instead of trying to undo some serious damage down the road a few years. When we are tempted to purchase a house or a car or some other item that is really out of our financial reach, hopefully we will have the foresight to look down the road a little bit. Yes, someone out there may give us a loan, some guy behind a desk somewhere will say, "Oh, no problem, you can afford this," but hopefully we have the foresight to say, "But do I really need to be a slave to this company for the next five, or ten, or thirty years?" According to King Solomon, the wise person sees the evil coming and hides himself, but the naïve continue marching on and are clobbered for their decisions. The result is the loss of a good name (when we miss those payments, when our marriage falls apart, when we are arrested for drunk driving, and so on).

Let us, then, Solomon says, pay attention to where our decisions right now are taking us in the future. For an example of someone who failed to do this, we only need to turn back a few chapters to Proverbs 7. In Proverbs 7, we have the picture of Solomon looking through the palace window overlooking the city of Jerusalem as he sees a woman seducing an inexperienced young man. Solomon, of course, was speaking from experience here, but this is what he observes, starting in Proverbs 7:21,

- ²¹ ***With her many persuasions she entices him;
With her flattering lips she seduces him.***
- ²² ***Suddenly he follows her
As an ox goes to the slaughter,
Or as one in fetters to the discipline of a fool,***
- ²³ ***Until an arrow pierces through his liver;
As a bird hastens to the snare,
So he does not know that it will cost him his life.***
- ²⁴ ***Now therefore, my sons, listen to me,
And pay attention to the words of my mouth.***
- ²⁵ ***Do not let your heart turn aside to her ways,
Do not stray into her paths.***
- ²⁶ ***For many are the victims she has cast down,
And numerous are all her slain.***
- ²⁷ ***Her house is the way to Sheol,
Descending to the chambers of death.***

Solomon, then, could see the end, but the young man either could not or refused to look down the road a little bit, and so he made decisions that led to spiritual death and certainly the loss of his good reputation. A wise person, though, looks into the future and prepares for it, making good decisions over the long term, for years, even decades. This is as true today as it was nearly 3000 years ago when King Solomon wrote the book of Proverbs. For a positive example, we only need to look at a young man by the name of Daniel. Daniel, of course, lived a life of integrity for many, many years. And then, when Daniel was an old man, his habit of daily prayer was known even to his enemies. Remember, the leaders in Babylon made a special law, just for the purpose of nailing Daniel, and so the Bible says in Daniel 6:10, ***"Now when Daniel knew that the document was signed, he entered his house (now in his roof chamber he had windows open toward Jerusalem); and he***

continued kneeling on his knees three times a day, praying and giving thanks before his God, as he had been doing previously.” In other words, Daniel was known as a man of prayer, and he continued doing it, even when threatened by the government. Daniel was a man of integrity. In fact, as far as I can tell, Daniel is one of only a small handful of Bible characters of whom nothing bad is ever said. The only other name like that that comes to my mind is Joseph. Like Joseph, Daniel also had a good name, both men had good reputations, and those reputations were built up over many years by turning away from evil and always doing what was right.

That is what Solomon is encouraging us to do here in the opening verses of Proverbs 22. ***“A good name is to be more desired than great wealth,”*** and, ***“...favor is better than silver and gold.”*** We establish a good name by looking out for evil on the horizon and steering away from it.

Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on this passage, I would point out that in a world that seems to be filled with more and more Bernie Madoff’s, and Sandusky’s, and Chadima’s, and others, our influence, our good example, makes even more of a difference. That is what Paul was talking about in our Scripture reading this morning, ***“Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world”*** (Philippians 2:14-15). When people all around us are losing their honor, those of us who still have it stand out like lights in a very dark world.

And then, even if we have messed up in the past, there is still hope. We think about the apostle Paul, who at one time was famous for tormenting the early church – Paul had a change of heart, he obeyed the gospel, and he eventually restored his good name. The same is true of Peter, who at one time (in a moment of weakness) denied even knowing the Lord. Peter was also forgiven and (like Paul) dedicated the rest of his life to preaching the gospel. So, if we have blown it in the past, there is still hope restoring our good name.

The most important name we can wear, of course, is the name of Christ. The Bible teaches that we put on Christ in the act of baptism (Galatians 3:27). We turn away from sin, and then we allow ourselves to be briefly buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, we hope you will be willing to study with us. If you would like the church to pray over a situation in your life right now, we would encourage you to write it down and bring it to the front. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

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