

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church,
Springfield, Virginia, on Sunday, October 16, 1994, by the
Reverend Dr. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

PROVERBS 22:1

"A good reputation is a better choice than riches; esteem is more valuable than money."

(Moffatt)

PEARLS FROM THE PROVERBS

(7) How to Earn the Respect of Others

Rodney Dangerfield has made a career out of "I can't get no respect"! One of our deepest desires in life is to be respected and valued and to have a good reputation. And God says, "That's O.K." Look at Proverbs 22:1 (Moffatt). "A good reputation is a better choice than riches; esteem is more valuable than money." In other words, "self worth" is more important than "net worth." You see, there is a myth that says that if you get rich, then you're going to be respected.

Let me give you this sermon in a sentence: God says that the key to a good reputation is "character" not "image." Your "image," or your "reputation," is what others think you are; "character" is what you really are. Character is what you are in the dark. Character is what you have left when there's nothing else left. Read the Book of Job to discover how true that is.

The Bible says that man looks on the *outer* appearance, but God looks on what's *inside* (1 Samuel 16:7). Today we have all these "image consultants." I've never yet, in our society, heard of a "character consultant." We're much more interested in "image" than we are in "character," and God says that it is character that produces respect.

Now what kind of character produces respect for you from other people? Well, Proverbs is very clear about it. Solomon says there are four characteristics to be found in people we respect; and if you want to be respected, you build these four characteristics into your life. And when you do, not only will you be respected by *others*; you will also develop godly *self-esteem*.

(1) SPEAK With INTEGRITY. This is, perhaps, the most important characteristic of all. This is a major theme of Proverbs. The Bible says that integrity is much more important than image. It is the foundation of everything else.

Proverbs 17:7 (GN) says, "Respected people do not tell lies." We admire people who are transparently honest, who have integrity. "Honest Abe Lincoln." George Washington -- "Father,

I cannot tell a lie; I did chop down the cherry tree!" Jesus was "Truth" personified. He did not say, "I have the truth"; He said, "I *am* the truth." The Bible says that God cannot tell a lie (Numbers 23:19). The Bible says that the devil is the father of lies (John 8:44). So when I lie, I'm siding with the devil!

Now, integrity involves more than honesty. It involves dependability. Proverbs 25:14 (GN) says, "People who promise things that they never give are like clouds and wind that bring no rain." Have you ever met anybody like that? *Do you ever make promises you have no intention of keeping?* Here, for example, are some unkept promises:

- "I'll get on that right away."
- "I'll see to that myself."
- "I'll return it as soon as I'm done with it."
- "I'll pay you back as soon as I'm paid."
- Here's one for the young people -- "I won't go out with anyone but you."
- "I'll be home at 6 p.m., Honey."
- "I'll take you fishing some day, son."
- "We're going to get involved in the church soon."
- "When I get a raise I'll start tithing."
- And my favorite -- "I'll start my diet tomorrow."

Napoleon said, "Promise everything; deliver nothing." He could have been a great United States president!

Now, notice the results of integrity. Proverbs 10:9 says, "The man of integrity walks securely." In other words, reliability produces stability. It gives you confidence. You know, when you have integrity, you don't have to have a good memory, because you don't have to remember the lies you told other people in order to cover up!

Now, evaluate yourself on integrity. How honest am I with my wife, my children, my competitors? How honest am I with God? *Can I be counted on?* Proverbs 27:21 (GN) says, "Fire tests silver and gold; a person's reputation can also be tested." So test yourself on integrity. I wish the members of Congress would take that test too!

(2) **SERVE With INTENSITY.** In other words, be eager to help others; be enthusiastic about doing good. Be interested in serving others. Proverbs 14:22 (GN) says, "You will earn the

trust and respect of others if you work for good." "Ask not, 'What can my country do for me?' but 'What can I do for my country?'"

For years the philosophy in our society was "What can I get?" I believe things are changing, and more and more people are asking, "What can I give?" A recent Newsweek article said: "If the 1980s were the age of avarice, then the '90s are shaping up as the age of altruism. The message is, 'Get involved.' Many Americans apparently agree with President Bush's central theme when he said, 'From now on, any definition of the successful life must include serving others.' After years of apathy, Americans are volunteering more than ever. It is now estimated that in one year 80 million adults give a total of 19.5 billion hours of free service, at a value of 150 billion dollars."

Jesus said it like this. "If you want to be great, you must learn to be the servant of all" (Matthew 20:26). Mother Teresa said, "It's not what we do that matters, but how much love we put into it."

Proverbs 11:27 says, "If your goals are good, you will be respected." That's the secret of success. *Find a need and fill it. Find a way to help other people.* I don't think there is any such thing as "great people" -- just ordinary people committed to great causes. When ordinary people are committed to great causes, it brings out greatness in their lives.

Now, what are you living for? The Bible says that if your goals are good you will be respected. Evaluate yourself. *How do you rate on service?* How many hours a week are you giving in unselfish service without any personal profit attached? Someone has said, "Great occasions for serving God seldom come, but little opportunities surround us daily." When we speak with integrity and serve with intensity, that brings respect.

(3) SHARE With GENEROSITY. People who are respected are generous people. Psalm 112:9 says, "He who gives generously to the needy, and shows kindness, will be powerful and respected." If you want to be respected, be generous.

When Andrew Carnegie died, they went into his office and they found a slip of paper in his desk on which he had written down his life goal. He had written it out in his early 20s. His goal was this: He said, "I'm going to spend the first half of my life accumulating money, and I'm going to spend the second half of my life giving it all away." And that's exactly what he did. He gave away more than 450 million dollars.

Now at the same time there were some very wealthy contemporaries of Andrew Carnegie; and in 1923 a group of the world's most successful financiers met at the Edgewater Beach hotel in Chicago. Collectively these seven tycoons controlled more wealth than was in the U.S. Treasury. And for years newspapers and magazines had been printing their success stories and urging

the youth of the nation to follow their example. Years later, let's see what happened to those seven men:

1. Charles Schwab, president of the largest independent steel company, lived on borrowed money the last five years of his life, and died penniless.
2. Arthur Cutter, the world's greatest wheat speculator, died abroad, insolvent.
3. Richard Whitney, president of the New York Stock Exchange, spent time in prison.
4. Albert Fall, a member of the President's cabinet, was pardoned from prison so that he could die at home.
5. Jesse Livermore, the greatest bear on Wall Street, committed suicide.
6. Leon Frazer, president of a great bank, committed suicide.
7. Iron Kruger, head of the world's greatest monopoly, committed suicide.

All of these men had learned how to make a living, but had failed to make a life. And apart from Charles Schwab, you probably don't recognize one of these names. Yet those seven men 70 years ago controlled more money than the U.S. had in its Treasury. They were all contemporaries of Andrew Carnegie, but you don't recognize their names. Why? Because *people are never honored for what they have received; but they are honored for what they gave away.* And that's why you remember Carnegie, but none of the other seven.

Bob Hope says that if you don't have generosity in your heart you've got the worst kind of heart problem.

Look at this verse, Proverbs 11:25: "A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed." In other words, *the more you give away, the more you get.* It's like giving blood; you give it away, and God restores it in your body. You cannot out-give God. Remember that as we approach our stewardship campaign next month. So evaluate yourself. *What kind of a giver am I?*

Someone has said that there are three kinds of givers: There is the flint; there is the sponge; and there is the honeycomb. Now, to get a spark out of a flint, you have to hammer it hard, and then the sparks fly! Did you ever know any givers like that -- skinflints?! To get anything out of a sponge, you have to squeeze it, and the more pressure you put on it, the more it gives. Some folk are like that; they only give under pressure. Then there's the honeycomb that just overflows with sweetness! Which one of these three things characterizes your giving pattern: the flint, the sponge, or the honeycomb? What

about the giving of your time, your money, your prayers, your service for Christ and for others? If I were to summarize the Christian life in one word, it would be "GIVE." "For God so loved the world that He GAVE His only Son . . ." (John 3:16). Jesus said that as you give your life away for others, you find it (Matthew 10:39). It is through service for others that you gain self-esteem and the respect and esteem of others.

(4) SUCCEED With HUMILITY. The more you speak with integrity, and serve with intensity, and share with generosity, the more you will succeed in life, and be respected by others.

Proverbs 29:23 (GN) says, "Arrogance will bring you down-fall, but if you are humble, you will be respected." Circle the word "humble." Solomon is really saying, "Stay humble or you'll stumble."

How many of you would agree that success can ruin people? Of course, it wouldn't ruin you or me, would it?! I'm reminded of the two Texans who were bragging about their big ranches. One of them said, "What is the name of your ranch?" And with overweening pride the other man said, "Well, it's the Flying W, Circle C, Rolling R, Rocking B, Silver Spur, Rainbow's End Ranch." The other fellow said, "Wow, what a name! You must have a lot of cattle." The other man replied, "Well, not really; very few of them survive the branding!"

The Bible says, "Clothe yourself with humility" (1 Peter 5:5). And, folks, when you're clothed with humility, you are dressed for success. Proverbs 15:33 (GN) says, "You must be humble before you can ever receive honors." And Proverbs 16:18 reminds us that "pride goes before destruction." If you're not humble, you'll stumble.

I heard about this minister who was conducting a wedding service, and he was getting along famously. The words were flowing, and he thought to himself, "This is going so good!" And he got full of pride, and he was just finishing his wedding sermon when he happened to look down, and he saw that in his rush to get ready for the service, he had not zippered his gown all the way down. So when he finished the message, he said, "Let us pray." He bowed his head and zippered down. But, horror of horrors, he caught the bride's gown in his zipper, and it got stuck, and he couldn't get it out! And the more he pulled up and down, the worse it got. So he kept on praying and praying and praying -- "God bless the poor people in Bangladesh and the Shah of Iran; may the Stock Market rise; bless the 30 missionaries we support in this church," and he named them one by one. And then out of the corner of his eye he saw the groom looking at him belligerently, so he said "Amen," and looked at the congregation and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Mr. and Mrs. John Jones," and he whispered to the newlyweds, "Just keep walking fast, and he walked out with them! Pride goes before a fall!

What's ironic is this: We think that the way to be respected is to pretend we're perfect. We think that the way to be respected is to put on an image of success and perfection, and we dress a certain way, and we have a Rolex watch and a Mont Blanc pen and pencil, and the right kind of car and earrings and hairdo; and we think that the "image" creates respect. But God says that arrogance turns people off. It is humility that is attractive. Nobody likes to be around ego-trippers.

Now, how can you spot a humble person? Proverbs 27:21 (NEB) says, "Praise is the test of character." Did you know that every time you are complimented, you are being tested? How do you handle praise? Somebody said that praise is like bubble gum; you ought to enjoy it, but never swallow it. Someone else said it's fine to accept praise, so long as you don't inhale!

Humility is not putting yourself down. It is not denying your strengths; it is being honest about your weaknesses. It is realizing that so much of what you are and have you owe to God and to other people. So humility means sharing the credit with God and with other people.

So you succeed with humility. Evaluate yourself on humility. *Do you ever secretly feel that you are better than other people?* Do you share the credit for your successes? Look at Proverbs 10:7 (GN) -- "Good people will be remembered as a blessing, but the wicked will soon be forgotten." Let me ask you a very important question: What do you want to be remembered for? Let me put it this way: What are you going to be remembered for? What are people going to remember about you when you die? Fathers, what are your children going to remember about you -- that you were never around; that you were impatient; that you had a temper; that you were unreliable? Wives, what are your families going to remember -- that you nagged a lot; that you were never content with what you had; that you were moody? When you die, wouldn't it be great if people could say about you -- "I was so blessed to know her . . . I was so blessed to know him. That person made such an impact for good on my life. My husband was an incredible spiritual leader . . . My wife enriched me more than any person I ever knew . . . "

Wouldn't it be great to have something like that said about you? It could be. You see, *it's your choice*, because character is always a matter of choice. Your character is determined by the choices you make on a daily basis. Your "image" can be changed overnight. Just ask O. J. Simpson about that. But character takes a lifetime to develop. What are you more interested in -- "image" or "character"? "What does God think about my life?"

Romans 8:29 tells us that God's purpose for your life is to make you like Jesus Christ. God wants to use every circumstance in your life to develop character, and Jesus is our Model. He spoke with integrity, He served with intensity, He shared with generosity, and He succeeded with humility; and God wants you to be like Him. He wants you to be a servant. Jesus said, "I came

to serve, not to be served" (Matthew 20:28), and that is the exact opposite of the "What's in it for me?" philosophy.

The problem is that we Christians want to be servants of God, but we don't want to be servants of anybody else. It's an honor to be God's servant; it's ennobling to serve God; but when we serve other people that's humbling! How do you know if you have a servant's heart? It's simple. *How do you react when people treat you like a servant?* Serving others is the way Jesus did it, and you can not serve God without serving people.

Is God calling you to make a radical change in your life this morning? Is He calling you to give your life to a great cause? Remember, ordinary people committed to a great cause become great people.

This coming week find some areas of service in your world that desperately need Christians, and get involved *pro bono* -- at no personal profit. There are lots of areas that need your help. Ask God to show them to you -- and then get involved.

I challenge you, in Christ's name, to give your life away, and as you do that, you will find meaning and purpose and significance and self-esteem and respect from others, because the Bible says that respected people are those who speak with integrity, serve with intensity, give with generosity, and succeed with humility.

Amen.