

## Life Hacks – Studies in Proverbs

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*This sermon was preached as part of series entitled “Life Hacks: Pocket Tips from Proverbs for Better Living” preached at Gymea Baptist Church in late 2018 (It has since aired on ACCTV and can be accessed on GBC’s YouTube channel).*

*The series was designed with a few thoughts in mind. First, to teach the congregation a bit about wisdom literature and to consider how we might use these pocket tips in our day to day lives. Second, to put some of my own thinking about preaching proverbs into practice.*

*The focus is on a single proverb – Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and he will establish your plans (16:3) - and unpacks what this pithy statement of generalised truth has to say and, more importantly, when we might use it; for proverbs are meant to be used! Unlike other proverbs that I have preached on, this one is placed in a context that sheds a bit of light on how to understand it. The focus, however, remains on the single proverb since that’s how we use them – not in long lists of similar ideas, but to address a particular situation. What situation, however, would this proverb be best suited for?*

*The sermon follows the contours of my own wrestling with the proverb during the preparation, moving through the various aspect of my thinking about it until coming to what I felt was the heart of the proverb in the word “commit”. This Hebrew word, usually translated as “roll” opened up the critical image of the sermon; the concave nature of our lives and the tendency of things we “commit” to the Lord to roll back to our feet if we are not committed to continually leave them with him. This imagery proved to be powerful as it described a spiritual reality that many Christians experience; the giving over of decisions, cares and concerns to the Lord only to find – in a remarkably short time – that we have taken them back.*

*While this is a more “spiritual” use than many of the proverbs have, its applicability and the imagery made for a impactful message that encouraged a more consistent commitment of our ways to the Lord.*

I've been invited to contribute a chapter on preaching wisdom literature to a book about preaching to Australians so I've been focusing on Proverbs. I've been thinking about how we preach, how I preach, the steps, and ways in which we help people engage with this, perhaps, most practical of Old Testament Scripture. The proverb that I want to look at is actually in Chapter 16 and, later in the article, I will draw your attention to the surrounding context. At first glance, Proverbs 16:3, "Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and He will establish your plans," is a relatively well-known proverb which has a familiar ring to it.

But immediately when I began to think a bit more about the proverb, it struck me that this doesn't sound like other proverbs; at least not to my ears. A really important characteristic of Proverbs is that Proverbs are meant to be used; similar to those statements that your dad used to spout off at you or that you spout off to your children, or that uncle or that mentor, those little phrases and tips for success in life that you hear all the time. This sounds to me a little bit like a religious platitude, something you'd hear in church. But how would we use this proverb in our day-to-day lives; this idea of committing to the Lord whatever we do and he will establish our plans?

Proverbs are intensely practical. They are meant to deal with the ins and outs of everyday life and so we hear lots of proverbs that sound almost unbiblical, even the biblical ones, because they don't seem to have anything to do with the stuff that we'd expect to find in the Bible. It doesn't talk about the promises to Abraham, for instance; it doesn't talk about Moses or the Exodus; the Law or the Ten Commandments. It has very little to say about the temple or sacrifices or offerings. There are no prophets, there are no angels, there's no thus saith the Lord. It just says simple things like "even a fool is considered wise if they remain silent." It is so practical and it causes me to wonder how is that biblical or religious? Looking again at Proverbs 16:3 Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and he will establish your plans, it doesn't sound as intensely practical; it sounds more like a religious statement. How is this verse meant to impact my or your life?

This question of when would you use this proverb became all the more challenging when I began to look at the rest of Chapter 16 and the surrounding context, specifically, the first nine verses. Most of the time in the book of Proverbs the proverbs stand alone and you tend to use one proverb at a time. The proverb before and the proverb after very rarely shed any light on the proverb that you're looking at, however, in Chapter 16 the author or the editor has decided to collect a whole bunch of proverbs that seem to deal with the same sorts of things. I want to reflect on the first nine verses of Proverbs 16 and examine how they impact our understanding of committing whatever we do to the Lord.

In Chapter 16:1 To humans belong the plans of the heart, but from the Lord comes the proper answer of the tongue, with regard to committing my ways to the Lord, there's an element that I can do, or a plan or suggestion that I can bring forward, but ultimately, what I do or say will come from the Lord. So when I commit things to the Lord it's still underneath his sovereignty. Looking at verse 2, All a person's ways seem pure to them, but motives are weighed by the Lord. Once again, I thought, what does that mean for committing everything I do to the Lord? And then it strikes me that I need to be very careful about my motives. As far as I'm concerned my motivations are always right, my intentions are always good and I always have the best in mind; as do you. There's the idea that I might commit something to the Lord but my motivations might not be good and so I need to be aware of my motivations. Then on to verse 4, The Lord works out everything to its proper end — even the wicked for a day of disaster. What does this mean for committing whatever I do to the Lord? It suggests to me, again, that God is sovereign; that, ultimately, whatever I commit to the Lord, he will establish my plans, or not. He's going to figure everything out. It's not my will that gets done; it's his. We don't submit proposals to God and say, hey, what do you think about this idea? Neither would God respond with that's a fantastic idea, I'm going to action that; never would have crossed my mind to do things that way. It's his ways. And God even has the proper end for the wicked. Have you ever noticed that sometimes wicked people or those who have nothing to do with God and have no consideration for him, nonetheless have their plans established? We can't reverse engineer the proverb; we can't just say that if our plans are established then we have obviously committed ourselves to the Lord because it doesn't always work that way. Moving on to verse 6, Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for; and through the fear of the Lord evil is avoided. So, thinking about committing my ways to the Lord, it means that I need to start with the fear of the Lord; this deep respect and honour for the things of God in order that I might be obedient to Him, and not my own ways; a reference, again, to my intentions. In considering verse 7, When the Lord takes pleasure in anyone's way, he causes their enemies to make peace with them, so even if I commit my ways to the Lord, ultimately, it's the Lord's pleasure that leads to success. So what's the role of committing these things? Now, reading verse 8, Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice, I can see that if I commit my ways to the Lord, he establishes my plans, but sometimes it doesn't actually work out and I still end up with just a little bit, and I have to be content, because a little bit with righteousness is better than a lot with injustice. And lastly, verse 9, In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps and again, thinking about committing whatever I do to the Lord suggests that regardless of what I commit to Him, it's ultimately God's sovereignty that figures out what's next for me.

Coming back to verse 3, all I have now is a proverb with a whole bunch of conditions and clauses and times when it's not true. So we might say it this way, "commit to the Lord whatever

you do and he will establish your plans” except when he doesn’t because sometimes your motivations are wrong and sometimes it’s just not his plan and sometimes it’s the wicked who get their plans established. But don’t worry, it’s going to be okay ‘cause the wicked are going to have their day in the sun, in the wrong kind of sense, and sometimes you will establish your ways but it won’t be nearly what you thought it would, but just be content. And all of a sudden I’ve got this proverb that I can never use because I have so many provisos around it.

This is the fun of Proverbs; Proverbs are meant to make us think and actually engage us. Yes, they’re short, pithy statements of generalised truth, but they’re like dehydrated truth and the longer you soak in them, the more the truth comes out. From my perspective as a preacher, and this might give you insight into my character, this is fun. I got to this point with no idea what to do with this proverb; we’re never going to use it, it’s just going to remain in the Bible as this wonderful thing that we should say from time to time instead of being a way to live our lives.

So I went back to the proverb, Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and He will establish your plans and began to do a little bit of thinking around the words that were used. Firstly, I looked at the fact that it says commit to the Lord whatever you do, in terms of your works, and he will establish your plans, or your thoughts. I thought a little bit about that; is there any distinction between what I do and what I think, between the things that I’m actually actively involved in and the plans that I have? Not really; so that doesn’t help me. I thought about the word established and the idea that creation is established; it’s made firm, it’s made secure, you can put your trust in it. I thought that’s kind of helpful but it didn’t unlock the proverb for me. I still wasn’t exactly certain how or when we would use this proverb. So I returned to the word “commit” because when I began to think about it again, I realised that the advice of this proverb lies in the first part of the verse. The second part of the verse is God’s business; God will do it, he will establish your plans. The only thing that you and I can really do, the wisdom of this proverb, is in the first part of the verse, commit to the Lord whatever you do.

Let me ask you a question. If you were to guess how many times the word “commit”, in the sense of commit yourself to the Lord or commit your ways to God, is used in the Old Testament, how many would you think? Of course, you’re probably thinking, I don’t know, I have no idea. So let me ask you another question. Would it surprise you if I told you that this word that’s translated “commit” only occurs 18 times in the Old Testament? It surprised me. I mean that’s one every two books; I’m pretty sure there’s more in the Bible about it. I’m not much of a Hebrew scholar but I can use the tools. So I began to look again at this word “commit” only used 18 times. But what’s really interesting about the word is that it’s only translated “commit” three times. Its usual meaning is to roll; not in a spiritual, metaphorical way, but literally just like rolling stuff. So in Genesis, there’s a stone on top of a well and Jacob rolls it away; it’s not mysterious

or super-spiritual, it's just rolling something away. What an interesting metaphor to use in talking about committing our ways to God, rolling things to the Lord.

I began to think a little bit more about it. I realised that from time-to-time in my spiritual journey, and this may be true for you, I have had to roll something to the Lord, to commit something into his hands. The most significant of those examples, for me, occurred when I had finished high school in Canada and I was very determined to become a teacher and teach English and Drama to high school students. Oh, what a wonderful, wonderful way forward; a great plan for my life! And I was equally committed to attending Queen's University in Canada, which at that point in time had the best concurrent education program in the country so I was working pretty hard at my subjects to get the grades I needed for it. I don't remember losing sleep over it or being particularly stressed, but I do remember a close friend of mine, a few years older with whom I had a spiritual mentorship, said to me, you need to lay that down. And for those of you who have been around the church for a while, that's a great phrase that has absolutely no meaning when you get right down to it. You just need to lay that down; you just give that to God. I'm like how do I give a desire to God? What is that all about? But I also knew he was absolutely right. And, as I said, I don't remember being stressed out or losing sleep but I do remember being in tears as I prayed a prayer that went something like this: God, I don't know exactly what it means to lay something down but to the best of my ability, I lay this down. Amen. That was my prayer. The remarkable thing that happened, and this is where some of you might relate to me even though the circumstances are different, is that a couple of months later I received a letter of acceptance from Queen's University into their concurrent education program and I read it with no emotion; nothing. I had been so wound up about this. It was the only thing I really wanted and I got this acceptance letter and there was just nothing. So I called this friend of mine and said, I don't think God wants me to go to Queen's University. And he replied, I don't think he does either. That moment, for me, was one of those moments when I had to commit what I was doing to the Lord, and in that instance, the plan that he established for me was different than the one that I wanted. Have you had that experience of having to lay something down and commit something to the Lord? And I thought that's certainly a time when we would use this kind of a proverb. But it occurred to me, as I was thinking about committing things to the Lord, that that circumstance of rolling something to the Lord and leaving it there and it remaining with him, was actually fairly rare for me; that, in fact, a lot of the time, it's not a matter of committing something to the Lord once, it's about committing something to the Lord again and again and again.

You may not be familiar with the legend of Sisyphus; there's no reason why you should, we preach the Bible and Graeco-Roman mythology is not part of our standard curriculum. But there's a legend, a myth in Graeco-Roman mythology of a man named Sisyphus who was

super-clever, so clever that he could dupe the gods, which tells you something about how clever their gods are if they can be duped by someone. But nonetheless, when he was finally brought to justice he was condemned to an eternity of rolling a large rock up a hill only to have it roll back down to the bottom every time he reached the summit. It's often used to describe futile effort; a Sisyphean task, as they say, comes from this legend. I thought there's something about that that sounds more like my day-to-day life and I suddenly realised that is when we have to use this proverb. We need to use the proverb Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and he will establish your plans every single day. And this is where the metaphor came to life for me; a wonderful idea to think about rolling things to God. Have you ever rolled a really large boulder or a snowball? Growing up in Canada, as kids we'd make a snowman; you'd roll the bottom of the snowman until you couldn't move it anymore and that's where the snowman was going to be. And you'd roll this thing. But the thing about rolling something, if you've ever rolled anything, is that you get a good look at it as you're rolling it. And I thought to myself, there's something really valuable about rolling something to the Lord continually and being able to see what's in the ball; to be able to look at my motivations and my intentions.

But here's the other piece that I began to think about. It seems to me that the shape of my life, broadly speaking is that my life is concave. In other words, it has a slope in towards me. Is your life the same? Does everything seem to roll back to you? And here's the problem with committing something to the Lord once; I roll it to the Lord and say, here, Lord, this is yours; I don't know what this means exactly but to the best of my ability I leave it with you. And I walk back to the centre of my life, this centre of the web of all that I do, and unbeknownst to me, the slope of my life allows that thing to slowly, or quickly, roll back down and end up at my feet. I can roll them out to God again and again, then my life is clear. And then, if I don't pay attention, they roll back down and bump against my ankles and end up tripping me up every single day. Does this sound vaguely familiar to anyone else but me? Every day I need to be committing these things to the Lord. Every day I need to be rolling these same things to the Lord and while rolling have a good look; are my intentions right? Is there pride? Is there arrogance? Is there wickedness? Is there injustice? Is there any reason why this thing that I am doing could not be established by the Lord? Is there any reason why I'm going to roll this to him and it's just going to roll right back to me because it's not pleasing or right or the time's not right, whatever it is? If I use this proverb frequently enough, possibly, the things that I've committed to the Lord will not bump into my ankles but I'll catch them on the downward slope. Long before they trip me up again, I can stop them and roll them back to the Lord. Big things, small things, roll them all back to the Lord. Commit them to the Lord. Commit to the Lord everything that I do and allow Him to establish what needs to be established, and let slip what needs to let slip, and I could just get on with trying to be as faithful, as obedient, as I can be. That's when we use this proverb - every single day.

So there's your challenge to use this proverb this week. First thing when you get up, when you're on the train, when you first sit at your desk and you look through your diary for the day, when you drop the kids off at school and you finally have that moment to draw breath and have a cup of coffee, to commit those things to the Lord. I tried it this morning, actually; I got into my office early and I went over my message and I thought well, if I'm going to tell you all to do it I might as well try it myself. I took a few moments to pray and to commit the things that I'm doing to the Lord. There's a handful of things that I'm working away at and I want to, in prayer, roll these things to the Lord. I want to look at them a little bit. I don't just want to pray for success in a particular program, project or an activity; I actually want to be thinking about what it is that I'm committing to the Lord, why I'm committing it to him and what I hope to achieve out of this. And it was a really enlightening exercise. It only took about five minutes, not an enormous part of my day, but in those few minutes I feel that the Holy Spirit revealed to me a couple of places where my intentions, my motivations, were not as pure as I would have thought they were. A couple of places where I realised that my focus and my perspective were not the sorts of perspectives, not the kind of focus, that in my mind, would lead to God establishing those things. It was a very interesting exercise and a very helpful reminder for myself and for each of us to commit everything we do to the Lord and he will establish our plans.

So there's your challenge; every day to commit everything you do to the Lord. Roll it to him, try to catch that stuff before it trips you up again, and allow him to establish your ways. Because when we live this way, according to this pattern, we will find success because this is how God has made the world. He has made the material world of rocks and trees and birds and bees and he has made the moral world of truth and justice and all the things we find here in Proverbs. And when we commit ourselves to committing our ways to the Lord, he will establish our plans. A pocket tip for better living from the book of Proverbs.

#### **About the Author**

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