

SERMON TITLE: "Blessed Memories of the Righteous"
SERMON TEXT: Proverbs 10:1-12
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: May 28, 2017 (Memorial & Heritage Sunday) at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

On Friday afternoon, I officiated at a graveside service at Leavitt's Aultorest Cemetery. The service wasn't for anyone in our congregation. But, while I was out at that cemetery, I recalled some of our former church members whose services I've done there. In particular, I remembered that cold winter day when Bob Merritt's family gathered at Leavitt's for a time of remembrance and prayer prior to his cremation. I know some people think that funerals and memorial services are morbid. But I'm always glad to meet with families to hear their stories of their loved ones' lives. No matter whether the deceased person was rich or poor, healthy or sick, educated in schools or by hard knocks, I think it's a wondrous thing to consider how factors and influences, opportunities and deprivations, and people and places shaped the decisions an individual made and the path he or she followed.

While I was out there at the cemetery on Friday afternoon, I couldn't help but notice that a lot of other people were there too, or already had been there, putting flags and flowers on graves for Memorial Day. I know Memorial Day was originally intended to be a day for decorating the graves of *soldiers* who had died in war. But, in my experience, Memorial Day has become a great time for remembering *all* our loved ones who have passed on before us, whether they died in war or not.

No matter how our predecessors lived and why they died, all their lives have something to teach us. Sometimes those lessons are positive examples, and sometimes they're lessons of what we should avoid doing. If we're willing to pay attention and remember those lessons, then maybe we can put them into practice and someone will have reason to love and honor us when we've passed on.

This opportunity of learning from our predecessors is exactly what we find in Proverbs 10:1-12. There, in verse seven, we see that "the memory of the righteous is a blessing." Assuming that all of us

would like to be remembered positively, let's dig into this text and see how we can shape our lives to become a righteous memory that will bless others after we're gone.

1—EXERCISE WISDOM

Like most of the sayings in the Book of Proverbs, these pithy statements of wisdom in chapter 10 are somewhat random. But I think we can group them into four basic categories to help us think about how we can leave behind some blessed memories of the righteous for those who come after us.

The first category, or suggestion, in these verses is that we should exercise wisdom. If we want our children, grandchildren, and others who outlive us to be blessed by righteous memories of us, then we need to put wisdom into practice. In verse one we read, "A wise child makes a glad father, but a foolish child is a mother's grief." The exercise of wisdom has immediate benefits in our relationships while we are living, and it creates fond memories that will bless our families and neighbors after we're dead and gone.

The exercise of wisdom has its challenges, to be sure. But most of the time, practicing wisdom is fairly common sense. As verse eight tells us, "The wise of heart will heed commandments." If we want to be a blessing to those who survive beyond us, then we begin by obeying the laws of the land and the laws of our Christian faith. Yes, there are some unjust and obsolete laws that need to be updated from time to time. Yes, there are times when righteous wisdom calls for civil disobedience and protest. As Jesus taught, there are times when the spirit of the law is more important than the letter of legalism. But most of the time, it's fairly safe to trust the collective wisdom of the ages that teaches us to live by the Ten Commandments, Jesus' laws of love for God and neighbor, and for basic civility that respects people's rights.

The second half of verse eight contrasts a wise person who obeys the commandments with a babbling fool who will come to ruin. Rarely do we exercise wisdom by flapping our jaws about things that aren't true or by trying to speak with authority about things we know little about. We all have been acquainted with some folks who like to hear the sound of their own voice way too much. Exercising

wisdom requires us to observe, read, and listen more than we speak. There's a lot more to God's big world of truth than our limited experience and biased perspective. If we want to leave behind the blessing of a righteous memory, then we should speak less foolishness and exercise wisdom.

2—WORK DILIGENTLY

According to Proverbs 10, a second way we can bless our successors with righteous memories is if we work diligently. We see this in verses three through five. Those who work will have food to eat, and they will gain in riches. Those who slack off and sleep will be impoverished. This work ethic of diligence is equated with righteousness and God's blessings.

While I was back home in Montana recently, my mom and I sometimes reminisced about my dad. Dad wasn't wealthy. He never had any really great opportunities. But he worked hard at his jobs, he worked hard at home, he worked to help his parents and his siblings, and he was diligent in his volunteer efforts at church. One of the poignant facts about my dad's life is the gift his parents gave him for his 8th grade graduation. No, it wasn't a book, a toy, or a pet. No, it wasn't a trip or a fun experience. For his 8th grade graduation gift, they gave 14-year old Dad a pair of work boots, so he could move away from home for the summer out on a ranch where he rounded up horses, milked cows, cut hay, and bucked bales. That story from his youth is symbolic of how Dad lived his whole life. He was always busy fixing things or building or creating. I have blessed memories of my dad because he was a good provider for our family. He was a diligent worker.

Of course, not everyone has the same abilities and aptitudes. Not everyone's body and mind function as well. Some folks are disabled and have trouble working. We all grow older and weaker over time. Depression and other mental illnesses certainly can limit a person's ability to show up at a job with consistency and productivity. Maybe the most diligent work some people can do is just to manage their own daily life activities so that they aren't so much of a burden on their families. Proverbs 10 is telling us that, inasmuch as we are able to contribute, our diligent work will leave behind blessed memories.

3—WALK WITH INTEGRITY

A third way to be remembered as a righteous blessing is to walk with integrity. Verse nine indicates that “whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but whoever follows perverse ways will be found out.” If we take advantage of other people and live like a scoundrel, our memory will probably be cursed instead of blessed. But if we live honestly and speak truthfully, people will probably have nice thoughts and words about us after we die. If we’re known to be fair in our dealings with other people, then, more likely than not, they will be fair in their assessment of us after we’re gone.

A couple weeks ago, I was talking with someone about a business arrangement. He said he was trustworthy because his business was based on his reputation. What he meant is that his word was backed up by his actions. I don’t suppose that any of us are 100% reliable. But, the more we live up to our promises, the more blessed we will be in the memories of our descendants.

Integrity means more than dependability, however. It also means authenticity and wholeness. Do any of you remember the math class lesson on integers? An integer is a whole number. It isn’t a fraction. So, a person with integrity isn’t a fraction either. We can’t just have one portion of our life be honest and righteous, while another part—maybe hidden away—is doing something rotten. Integrity of life requires integration of our Christian faith throughout every aspect of our being. How we treat our family members and neighbors; how we do our business; what we do for recreation; what we support with our time, talents, and treasure; and how we engage in our society—all those things together tell the story of who we are. Hopefully, we don’t have too many contradictions. The more we are able to walk with integrity, the more likely we will leave behind some blessed memories of the righteous.

4—LOVE GENEROUSLY

Last but not least, these verses from Proverbs 10 give us the suggestion to love generously. Verse 12 says that “Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.” If we want our survivors to have blessed memories of us, then our righteousness needs a big dose of love. If we fail a bit in the exercise of wisdom,

if we sometimes don't work as diligently as we might, or if our walk doesn't quite have 100% integrity yet, we definitely should keep working on those areas. But even while we're striving for those areas of perfection, we can find some comfort, relief, and assurance in this fourth category of blessed memory. If we have love, it covers all offenses. Or, as stated in 1 Peter 4:8, "Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins."

The truth is that, when we die, none of us will be perfect. For sure, there will be something about our life that someone could criticize. But our survivors will be much less eager to find fault with us if they remember us as someone who loved generously.

Do you remember 1 Corinthians 13? In that "love chapter," the Apostle Paul wrote, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal . . . and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions . . . but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude." If we want to leave behind some blessed and righteous memories, the surest bet we have is to love generously.

CONCLUSION

On this Memorial Day weekend as you remember loved ones now gone, I hope you will take some time to consider what kind of memories you will be leaving when your death eventually happens. Will your children, grandchildren, friends, and neighbors feel blessed to have known you and had you in their life? Hopefully, all of us will leave this world a little better than when we came into it. Hopefully by exercising wisdom, working diligently, walking with integrity, and loving generously, we will have left behind some blessed memories of the righteous.