

Without A Vision The People Perish

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, at Second Presbyterian Church, November 2, 1997; Scripture Lessons: Proverbs 29:18.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Where there is no vision, the people perish. I've been giving a lot of thought to that - especially as 1997 comes to an end and we prepare for a new year in less than two months. I've been thinking a lot about Second Presbyterian church and my own church and our vision for the future. If we don't have a vision - the book of Proverbs says - we'll perish. So we need to be sure that we have a vision and that the vision we have is the vision that the Lord Almighty has given us.

But first I want us to see the verse I read within its context. The verse I read comes from the Old Testament book of *Proverbs*. The opening chapter of *Proverbs* says, *The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel.* We read in 1 Kings 3 that after his father David died the Lord appeared to Solomon and said, *Ask what I should give you.* And Solomon responded by asking the Lord for wisdom. The Lord was pleased that Solomon asked for wisdom instead of money. Because the Lord was so delighted he gave Solomon, not only wisdom, but those things which he hadn't asked for: wealth, long life, and victory over his enemies.

One of the things that Solomon did to preserve wisdom was to collect proverbs. The book of *Proverbs* gives us divinely inspired sayings that tell us how important it is to know and love God in order for us to enjoy life as God intended. Nearly every proverb stands alone. The book of *Proverbs* isn't like the Gospels that tell a story. Sometimes proverbs are grouped together around a common theme, but most proverbs stand by themselves.^{like pearls strung on a necklace} That's why I read just one proverb this morning. *Where there is no vision, the people perish.* That was certainly true of Israel. When the people of God ignored the vision that God had given his people through the prophets the nation perished. The Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC and the Southern Kingdom of Judah was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The people perished because they had rejected the vision, the revelation, given to them by God through their prophets.

The King James Version of the Bible reads, *Where there is no vision, the people perish.* But modern translations give it a slightly different twist. *Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint* (NIV). They're both saying the same thing. Without the revelation that has come to us from God through the prophets the people cast off restraint, they do whatever they feel like doing, whenever they feel like doing, there's no self-discipline and so they perish. When we reject the vision of right and wrong that's revealed by prophets and apostles we end up perishing. When a nation turns it's back on God it goes down the tubes. And when congregations don't share the vision that God has revealed then the congregation perishes. *Without a vision the people perish.*

Think about that! If I'd been writing the proverb I probably would have said it differently, particularly as we begin our stewardship campaign. I probably would have said, *Where there is no money, the people perish.* That's probably what I would have said. I would have been wrong, but that's where my temptation lies. If the Lord had appeared to me, as he appeared to Solomon, and told me to ask for whatever I wanted, I probably wouldn't have asked for wisdom. I would have asked for money. I would have asked for people to pledge so much money that our 1998 budget would be fully subscribed to. I'd ask for so much money that the debt we owe ourselves from rebuilding could be repaid. I'd ask for enough money for Second Presbyterian Church that you could call your own full time minister. But, the Bible tells us, without a vision all the money in the world won't enable a church to do what God wants us to do.

Our annual stewardship drive is about to begin. Our members received a letter in the mail this week announcing our upcoming stewardship campaign. Sometimes when I look at our budget, and the amount of money we need each week, and the amount of money given I get nervous! I get real nervous! I get scared! I get depressed! Clyde gets scare! Ann Terry gets scared! Jim Sumner gets scared! Bruce Hastings, who's in charge of the property committee, gets scared! This year we're about \$20,000 behind in our projected giving. So we're having to cut back. There's a great temptation to think that our greatest need is money. The same thing is

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true in our individual households. Bills pile up. Unexpected expenses. Medical bills we didn't anticipate. College expenses. The car breaks down and we wonder where we're going to get the money to pay for it to get fixed. The dog gets sick and the veterinarian sends us a huge bill. The luxury we thought we couldn't do without so we put in on our credit card and now what we owe is coming due with interest. There's a great temptation to think that our greatest need is money. Without money we will perish.

we need money for our families.
And we do need money.⁴ We need money as a church. We need to pay the utility bills to keep the building warm enough so that people won't be uncomfortable when they come to worship God or go to Sunday school. It costs to buy material for Sunday School and the choir. We need to pay Clyde. We need to pay Jim and Ann and others who have valuable ministries. And missionaries need money. But there's a great temptation to think that *all we need is* if we had more money *to* ~~we~~ be happy and successful. *More money for families, self, church.*

If we had all the money we wanted we could really live - like the Texas millionaire, an oil-tycoon. *He was so wealthy that* Despite all his money he died. ~~And~~ he had written in his will that he wanted to be buried in a brand new Cadillac. They brought in back hoes to dig the grave big enough for the whole Cadillac. The undertaker embalmed his body and placed it in a sitting position in the drivers seat with his hands on the steering wheel. And as the Cadillac with the body of the man was being lowered into the grave someone whispered, *Man's that's really living... to be buried in a Cadillac. That's really living.* All the money in the world won't keep us from perishing.

Jesus said that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Donald Trump was interviewed on Friday night on some TV. program. The interview quoted that verse to him. Trump responded, *I believe in heaven. I want to go there. But I know that a man with my wealth faces a lot of temptation. I don't think I'm going to make.* ^{it} *I hope so, but I don't know.* John DuPont had more money than any of us will ever have and now he's sitting in jail. Money isn't enough. We can have all the money in the world but if we don't have Christ and if we don't have a vision of his kingdom, we're perishing.

A church can have all the money in the world and still perish. There's a church out in Pittsburgh - a huge Presbyterian Church - they call it Mellon's fire escape. It was built largely by donations given by the banking tycoon, Andrew Mellon. The church has an endowment of about 60 million dollars. They receive enough money from the interest on the endowment to maintain the building and pay for all the staff. I took a tour of the church about twenty years ago. The tour guide said, *We have so much income from our investments we don't need members.* And I thought, *Where's his vision?* Money isn't enough. It's not enough for us as families. It's not enough for a church. But I took another tour of the church a couple years ago and they've caught the vision. They're using their money to reach out into the community and minister to the physical, social, emotional, and spiritual lives of the people in their community. They're getting poorer, but they have new life because they have a vision of the kingdom of God.^{And they realize now how much they need members to carry on the ministry.} Any church that merely tries to survive will die. But a church that risks dying, that's willing to die, that puts its life and resources on the line in order to fulfill the vision God has given will live.^{Give us the choice between a church that has a vision of Christ's Kingdom in Oxford + are active + enthusiastic or church members who merely have money.}

A poor, struggling church can work miracles that a rich church can't. A minister in a wealthy church gave a sermon on the words of Peter in the book of *Acts* to a crippled man who had asked him for some money. Peter said to him, *Gold and silver have I none. But such as I have I give to you. Get up and walk.* And the crippled man got up and walked. He didn't get the money he asked for but he was healed. Peter had no money but he could work miracles. He had a vision of the Kingdom of God. He didn't let the lack of money interfere with his keeping his eye on that vision and working for it.^{of that wealthy church} A parishioner heard that sermon and proudly commented afterwards to the preacher, *We certainly can no longer say, Gold and silver have we none.* And the preacher said, *That's right. And neither can we say any longer, Get up and walk.* But if we have a vision of where Christ wants us to go and what Christ wants us to do we will not perish and we will work miracles - with or without money.

But what is the vision? There are false visions. Some people drink too much and they see visions. They see pink elephants. Some people have hallucinations. Some people visit fortune tellers who look into a crystal ball for a vision. That's not the kind of vision that the book of

Proverbs is talking about. It's talking about the vision of the prophets. It's talking about the revelation of God's will that God gave to the prophets. The vision of the kingdom of God. As Jesus said, *The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and to the poor the gospel is preached.* A church with vision preaches the gospel because we believe that everybody needs Jesus Christ, we need to worship God through him, we need to obey him, we need to trust him, we need to do his will- apart from him we're cut off from the life of God and we perish. A church with vision ministers to the whole person as Jesus did. A church with vision seeks new members, not in order to have more people to contribute to the budget, but because God has called each one of us to serve him in his kingdom - to carry on the ministry of Jesus.

Dr. Martin Luther King gave new life to that ancient vision when he said, *I have a dream... I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope.* He was simply translating the ancient vision of the prophets and the apostles into the twentieth century.

And I have a dream for our churches. I have a vision for Second Presbyterian Church and I have a dream for Oxford Presbyterian Church. I see churches ^{which} ~~who~~ seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness above everything else. I see churches whose chief concern is for ministering ^{to all people} the manifold gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. If we ask God for wisdom - he'll give it - if we keep on asking - if that's what we really want. And we'll be used by God to accomplish his purposes in Oxford.