

Wisdom for winning souls

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 June 2018

Preacher: Nick Louw

[0 : 00] Well, in 1936, Dale Carnegie wrote one of the best-selling books of all time. Can you already tell me what it was called? How to Win Friends and Influence People. Well done.

And this book provides very helpful techniques and principles to do, amongst other things, to increase your popularity with people. Everybody wants to do that.

To persuade others of your way of thinking, to bring them around to your point of view, to increase your influence in business and other spheres of life, to increase your earning power, and to make you a more entertaining conversationalist.

And it contains a lot of practical wisdom about human relationships. Things like, to get a person to listen to you more, you must use their name in conversation a lot.

Because Carnegie says, I quote, the average person is far more interested in their own name than in all the other names in the world put together. Or, like, getting someone to talk about themselves most of the time.

[1 : 02] Because someone who walks away from a conversation with you, where they've been able to talk about themselves most of the time, will come away thinking you're the most interesting person they've ever spoken to. Or, things like, to get someone to agree with your point of view.

Start by asking them questions they'll always answer yes to. So, you get them used to the idea of agreeing with you. And there's various other helpful nuggets in Carnegie's book. And people loved the book.

It sold over 30 million copies because it did what it said. It helped you to win people. It helped you to get people to like you. It helped you to become popular and successful. And who doesn't want that? But this morning, as we turn now to the greatest wisdom book ever written, the book of Proverbs in the Bible, we discover a difference between Dale Carnegie's wisdom and the Bible's wisdom.

Because here we discover a far more important goal in life than winning friends and influencing people. And that is the task of winning their souls. In Proverbs 11.30, Solomon writes, He who wins souls is wise.

[2 : 13] Not he who wins friends or influence, but he who wins souls. And this morning we're going to look at what that means. Now, you would have noticed if you've got a different Bible translation, I'm using the original NIV translation, the one that's in the pews.

This proverb is translated in various ways because the original Hebrew is tricky. And so if you have a different translation, this is the one that we're going to use, the NIV, because for our purposes we want to stick as close to the original as possible.

And that's what this translation does. But what does it mean to win souls? We need to start by understanding, of course, the proverb as a whole. This is, in fact, the second half of Proverbs 11.30.

The full proverb says this, The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise.

Now, with Proverbs, sometimes the two lines will seem to be unrelated, but that's when it forces us to think and think what the connection is between the first and the second half of the proverb.

And these two lines are related to each other in that one explains the other. In other words, winning souls is equivalent to the fruit of the righteous. That's what a righteous person will produce in their life.

[3 : 28] It will lead to the winning of souls. And ultimately what that leads to, the fruit of the righteous, leads to being a tree of life. And so we're going to look at each of those terms in a little bit more detail, but for our purposes right now, we've got to understand winning souls means it's equivalent to bringing people to life.

And not just life on earth, but eternal life, because that's what the tree of life signifies in the Bible.

Okay, so that's what the basic idea of this proverb is. Winning souls is a means of bringing people

life.

And if you are involved in that task, says Solomon, then you are wise. You are living this life well. That is the best work you can be involved in during your time on earth.

Why? Why is the work of winning souls the best work you can be involved in? Well, because it is the only work that will count for eternity. No other work you do on earth will really matter in 10,000 years' time, except the work of winning souls.

Think about it. If you're a Christian, you're not saved by your works. We were reminded of that earlier. You're saved by Jesus' righteousness. He has become righteousness from God for us.

[4 : 47] And so there's no work you can do if you're a Christian to make you more saved. And so the only work that's left for you to do on this earth that will matter is the work of helping others to be saved, bringing them to eternal life.

Everything else you busy yourself with in life, other than that, will ultimately dissolve and count for nothing in the end. And that is why he who engages himself in the work of winning souls, or she who engages herself in the work of winning souls, that one is the wise one in this world.

I wonder if you know that Michelangelo, the famous Italian sculptor and artist, once made a snowman in Florence. It's recorded for us during a particularly cold winter.

But as you'd expect, when Michelangelo makes a snowman, it's no ordinary snowman. It's not just, you know, those typical snowmen with the carrot in the nose and, you know, button eyes.

No. People who saw this snowman apparently were astounded by its beauty and its detail. People came actually from far and wide, from other towns, just to see Michelangelo's snowman.

[5 : 57] But you know what? Today, all these years later, we don't know what it looks like. We don't have any pictures of it. We'll never know what it looked like. Why? Because it melted when summer came.

It didn't last. Now, just as well Michelangelo didn't limit himself to snow sculptures, he also was wise enough to carve statues out of stone, which have lasted to this day, like the statue behind me.

And, of course, will last much longer after you and I have passed from this life. Now, let me ask you, are you wise enough to use your life on earth, working on things that are going to last into eternity?

Are you carving into stone with your time and your resources? Or are you just making snowmen that are going to melt and count for nothing in eternity? What are you investing in, in your life?

Jesus himself said, don't store up treasures on earth. Don't put all of your efforts and energy into things that will only stay here and that will ultimately dissolve, where moth and rust destroy.

[7 : 08] He said, but store up treasures in heaven. That's what Jesus said. And this proverb, Proverbs 11.30, is here to tell you how you can do that, how you can store up treasures in heaven, and how you can do something with your life that will matter in eternity.

And don't you want to know that? Don't you want to know how you can make your life count for eternity? Well, that's what this proverb is about. And that's what it means to be involved in the work of winning souls.

If you're involved in the work of winning souls, that is how you can make your life count for eternity. But what does that work entail? Well, if that's how important it is, what does it actually mean and how can you and I get involved in it?

Well, to discover that, we need to dig deeper into this proverb and we need to look at each of the words themselves. And so firstly, I want to look at the word righteous. The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life.

And that's the first step in winning souls. Now, what that literally means, what the word righteous means, is to live in line with God's standards, with God's revealed will, which is seen, for example, in keeping his laws.

[8 : 15] We don't become righteous by keeping his laws. Rather, if we live lives that are naturally consistent with his laws, we show that we are righteous people.

You know, you don't become a safe driver by taking your driver's test, do you? No. Taking your driver's test and passing it shows, proves you to be a safe driver already.

And so it's the same with keeping God's laws. Keeping God's laws should be the natural outcome of being righteous. And so the question is, do we naturally keep God's laws?

And the answer is a big fat no. The Bible makes it quite clear that we are incapable of keeping his laws. Even if we manage for a day or two to keep God's laws, or some of them, it doesn't flow naturally out of us.

You know, a person doing their driver's test might get a few points, even if they're not a safe driver. We might be able to keep a few laws, but the fact that we don't keep God's law naturally all the time proves us to be unrighteous.

[9 : 21] And the Bible says, there is no one righteous, not even one. So we've all broken God's laws, showing ourselves to be unrighteous. We've all failed the test of God's law. And that's why we need Jesus.

That's why we make such a big point of Jesus in this church. Because he was the only righteous man, and he came and died on the cross for the sins of others, to make atonement there. In other words, atonement means that he swapped places with us. He took our unrighteousness on himself and gave us his righteousness. And to put it another way, he did the driver's test instead of us, and then he invites us to hop in and ride with him.

And so even though we failed the test, it doesn't matter because Jesus passed it. And we can ride with him. Even though we are not righteous by nature, we are made righteous by substitute. That is the gospel. That is what the Bible teaches us. And so, if you haven't yet, you must come to a point of realizing your incapacity to be righteous.

[10 : 27] That is the first step in being a Christian. That is the first step in accepting Jesus and truly trusting in what he did, is realizing something about yourself. Realizing that you are unrighteous, and you can't be righteous.

And only when you come to realize that, that's, by the way, why we confess our sins every Sunday. It's a reminder of our own failure to keep God's law. But, we've got Jesus.

We can attach ourselves to him. Because he was righteous on our behalf. And so, if you haven't done that yet, do that by turning away from your own efforts, turning away from your sins, turning away from living your own way, which is all our natural instinct, and turning to living for Jesus, getting in the car with him, letting him take command and drive your life forward.

And letting his righteousness count as your own by trusting in him. If you haven't done that yet, it is vital to do that. It is vital to realize your own unrighteousness, and come and accept as a free gift the righteousness that Jesus offers you, his righteousness, by repenting and trusting in him.

And when you do, when you do, well then, how do you know that you're actually in Christ? What's changed? When you become a Christian, when you're really a Christian, as opposed to just someone who calls themselves a Christian, but isn't really, what's the difference?

[11 : 49] How do you know that you've been made righteous through Christ? Well, this proverb tells us. Because it goes on to say that righteousness will bear fruit. Did you notice that? There is such a thing as fruit of righteousness.

If you are made righteous in Christ, then you will bear fruit. And that's the next word I want to look at. Fruit. What exactly does that mean? Well, Jesus says in Matthew 7, do people pick grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles?

Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.

Okay, so he's making a fairly simple point. If you were walking along the road and you saw a tree and you saw an apple, say, growing off the branch, what kind of tree would that be?

Someone? An apple tree. Thank you. Okay, so you get the point. You get this concept that whatever the fruit is that grows from a tree tells you something about the tree.

[12 : 52] And so if Jesus has made you righteous, if you've truly repented and believed, and so you've been changed from the heart, which is what the gospel does, then the fruit that should start growing in your life is the fruit of righteousness.

Now, sadly, because we used to be unrighteous before coming to Christ, in our natures, we've still got some rotting old fruit on the branches that we need to gradually clear away, but alongside it will be new fruit as well, new habits, new desires, new conversation, new way of talking, new way of thinking, new good works in your life.

That'll be the new fruit, even if it's growing alongside the old rotting fruit, and that new fruit in your life will prove that you have a changed nature. It'll prove that you've truly come to Jesus and you truly have his righteousness.

So the fruit is proof of righteousness. And you'll recognize it because the proverb also tells us that it is a type of fruit that goes on to benefit others.

It goes on to benefit those around you. The fruit of righteousness isn't only a fruit, according to this proverb. We're told it also becomes a tree of life.

[14 : 09] And so let's think about that phrase. Let's think about what tree of life means. Now this is not the only place in the Bible where we see that phrase. Can someone tell me where else we hear about the tree of life in the Bible?

Anyone? Genesis. Yeah, absolutely. In the Garden of Eden, there was right in the middle of the garden, the tree of life. Eden was the place where humans, the first humans, enjoyed relationship with God unhindered by sin because sin hadn't entered the world yet.

And they enjoyed God's blessings without limit. And central to all of God's blessings, central to that, was this tree of life, standing tall and proud in the middle of the garden, which is what gave the first humans eternal life.

It's what kept their life going. But you see, when sin and death entered the world, well, they were separated from that tree. We read at the end of Genesis 3 that they were separated from the tree of life.

And so they grew old. They got gray hair. Their hair started to fall out. They got wrinkles. And they died because they were separated from the tree of life. And that's also why we find the tree of life not just in the first book of the Bible, but the last book of the Bible, Revelation, when it pictures the heavenly city and the life to come.

[15 : 30] It says this. I'll read it again, what Penny read. Down the middle of the great street of the city, on each side of the river, stood the tree of life, bearing 12 crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of nations.

And so you've got this amazing kind of, these bookends of the Bible, at the beginning where humans are separated from the tree of life, and at the end where they're reunited with the tree of life, and eternal life.

And so the tree was there before death came and blessed the first humans, and it will be there again after death is conquered in the new creation to bless people from all nations.

But where is it now? In the meantime, well, it's found in God's righteous people on earth, because the fruit of the righteous is the tree of life.

In their fruit, what the tree of life was in the garden, what it will be in the new creation, the righteous are now in this wilderness on earth. God's people.

[16 : 38] We, who are in Christ, who have repented and believed, and been changed from the inside out, and are bearing fruit of righteousness, we are meant to be the source of blessing to the world today. And not just the source of blessing, but the source of life.

The source of eternal life to people who are dying. And we do that by winning souls. That is how we are the source of life.

That is how we are the tree of life in this dying world, is we win souls to life. And that's why this proverb says what it says, that the fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise.

That is how we become a source of eternal life to those around us. But remember, that tree of life can't exist without the fruit of righteousness.

The fruit are our new lives that we live in Christ, and the tree giving life to others, they're inseparable. You can't win souls without righteous living.

[17 : 39] We've got to remember that. That's where it begins. If we try to share the gospel without accompanying our words with good works, with loving our neighbor practically, well then, that's like an advert with no pictures.

You know, are you going to buy a product when the advert is just text? Probably not. Nobody's going to be interested in an advert with no pictures. Our righteous fruit, our holiness in life, is the picture of the gospel.

It illustrates the truth of the gospel that attracts people to it. But of course, the opposite is true as well. If we try to win people just with our good works and our righteous living and no words, well then they'll see the pictures but they won't know what the product is because there's no description. You need both word and work to win souls, to do this all-important work of winning souls. Okay, so now let's look deeper into just what that means, to win souls.

Firstly, let's look at the word soul. Now the Hebrew word for this is quite different to how we use it in English, much like the word heart two weeks ago.

[18 : 49] And if you've been at our evening service a little while back, we looked at each of these Hebrew words. We looked at the Hebrew word for soul, nefesh. And what this word means in the Bible is very different to the kind of Greco-Western meaning that we've inherited from the likes of Plato and Aristotle when they spoke about the soul, which is not the same way the Bible talks about the soul.

But we've inherited that understanding that it's some kind of incorporeal, spiritual part of you distinct from your body. That, you know, when you die, your soul leaves your body and your soul goes off to eternity.

But that's actually not true. That's not what the Bible teaches. In the Bible, a person's soul is the entirety of their being. It includes the body, but it's so much more than the body.

So that word that the Bible uses for soul is trying to describe the whole person, not just their flesh, because we know we are more than the elements that make us up.

You know, we, in fact, scientists once listed the, all the components of a corpse, a dead body, all the chemicals, they boiled them all down and they took the value of all the different chemicals.

[20 : 10] And apparently, you're only worth something like 54 rand, just your chemicals alone. But you know you're far more worth than that, because you're more than just a body, right? You're a soul.

You're an entire body and spirit and mind and heart all in one, and that is the nefesh, that is the soul. And that entire soul will stand before God in the judgment and either go to heaven, body and everything, or go to hell, body and everything.

And so, to win a soul is not merely to win a person's spiritual side. To win a soul is not merely to win part of a person. It's to capture their entire being, their entire life.

So, Jesus, for example, likened the work of winning souls to fishing. He called it fishing for men. Now, for those of you who fish, when you catch a fish, you're aiming to completely change its life, aren't you?

Right? You're aiming to remove it completely from one environment into another environment where it doesn't want to go. Well, that's similar to winning souls except that in fishing for people we don't want to kill them.

[21 : 24] In fact, we want to do the opposite. Instead of taking them out of an environment of life and into an environment of death like the poor fish, we're actually taking them from death and into life.

because the default environment for sinful people, the Bible says, is death. They are under judgment and they're heading for death like a freight train and there's no stopping it.

And we need to start seeing people that way in our daily lives as souls under judgment, souls who need rescue, not just bodies, not just personalities, but entire beings who are heading for death and judgment.

And when we start to see people as souls each and every day, then we actually do something about that. You know, if you saw someone drowning in a pond about to die, you wouldn't just walk casually on, would you?

You would do something. Well, when we start every day seeing every person we come across as a soul on their way to judgment needing to be rescued from death, we will make an effort to win them for life.

[22 : 36] And the way we do that is through telling them the gospel, the only thing that can rescue them. But the way we bring the gospel to someone, the intention we have, the urgency we have in bringing the gospel to someone must be with the aim of completely changing them from one life to the other.

When we share the gospel with someone, it should aim at nothing less than that. You know, if you saw someone drowning in a pond, you wouldn't stand on the bank going, you really should try to keep your head above water. It'll be much better if you do that.

Good luck. No, you would dive in and you would go and you would pull them out. And so winning souls is not getting people to do something extra in their life. It's not giving them some good spiritual advice.

Winning souls is not about getting people to add a bit of church into their life while the rest of their life stays much the same. No, true soul winning is aiming for them to be born again, to undergo a complete change of life, to take them from one environment to completely other environment and

we should settle for nothing less.

Just getting someone to come to church from time to time is not winning a soul. It's important because part of winning a soul is to get them to hear God's word, but it's not, that's not all it is.

[23 : 55] And so you need to keep working on people until their soul is captured for Jesus. If you're a Christian, that's the work we're engaged in and it's serious work.

It's a matter of eternal life and eternal death. There's no more important work in this life that we can do and we need to keep working on people until their soul is captured, which is what our final word, win, actually means, to win a soul.

The word translated win here is used to describe armies winning a town or winning a city, winning a battle. And so it's a winning which comes at great cost and effort.

It's not winning the lottery, which comes at no effort. It's winning a town after a bloody battle. And that's the word here describing to win a soul.

Because we need to fight hard in this task. We need to fight hard against the enemies who currently have occupation of the souls of people and they're not going to give up without a fight.

[25 : 02] When you come along and just, you know, present the gospel of Jesus to someone, it's not like Satan and his minions who are currently in charge of people's souls are going to go, okay, well, let's go, you've won.

No, they're going to fight you. They're going to try to stop you. They're going to put every obstacle in your path and in that person's path. To being won. And that's why we've got to fight. We've got to put effort in.

To win a soul is to fight for it. To have a battle plan. To organize our forces. To make advances and when our advances fail, not to run away but to regroup and advance again from a different angle until the soul is won.

True winning of souls takes effort and time and much praying on our knees, pleading with the Lord, contending for the souls that he has put in our lives for us to win over weeks and months and maybe years without giving up.

That's what it means to be a soldier of Christ. Because the task of winning souls is a battle. It is costly. It takes struggle and it takes resources.

[26 : 08] But the reward is unquantifiable. To be able, think about this, to be able to stand one day in eternity and know that you had a part to play in winning souls that are there with you.

There is no greater thing and you will experience no greater joy than to win a soul. And my prayer for you, my prayer for all believers at St. Mark's is that you are able to know and experience that joy.

To, to, that each of you will become winners of souls. That is my prayer for you. That is what I will be praying for you. that you will become a soul winner. That you will be engaged in that task every day.

That you will grow a deep desire to win the souls of your friends and your neighbors and your colleagues and your family. I'm not saying that I want everyone to be an evangelist. You know, evangelism is just part of winning souls.

And there are many other ways to be involved in that work of winning souls. Using the gifts and the opportunities that God has given you. And so ask yourself, how are you going to be involved in that work of winning souls in the coming week, in the coming month, in the coming year, and for the rest of your life?

[27 : 25] Are you aiming to win souls in your everyday life? Is that what gets you up in the morning? Is that what you're aiming for? Is that what you're thinking about? Is that what you're praying for? Are you praying for your friends and neighbors?

Whenever you think of them, are you looking for opportunities to speak to them about Jesus in conversation when God opens the door? And are you prepared for what you'll say when those opportunities come? Do you know what you're going to say about Jesus when God gives you that opportunity?

Because you'll find if you just prepare yourself, God will open those doors. Are you bringing people to church to hear God's word to win their souls? Are you praying and thinking of who you can invite to church?

Are you reading good books that explain the gospel that you can pass on to others? Are you doing that deliberately so that you can win souls? Do you have a strategy in your life for winning souls?

Are you looking out for visitors who come to church to get to know them and go home and pray for them, find out their name so that you can pray for them and win their soul if it is not yet won for Jesus?

[28 : 30] You know, there's many ways to get involved in this work, but you've got to want to do it. You've got to realize that it is the best and most important work that you can be involved in. And being part of a church is being involved in that work.

But in the jobs you do at church, are you doing those things not because you're on the roster, but are you doing those things because you want to be involved in the work of winning souls?

You want to contribute to that. Do you serve tea to win souls? Do you work on the sound desk to win souls? Is that your motive for what you're doing here? Because that will definitely change the way you do it.

And parents, parents, are you contending to win the souls of your children? Not just getting them to come to church, but are you aiming to win their whole life for Jesus by pleading for them in prayer, by reading scripture with them at home, by using every opportunity at church to have them sit under God's word because that is your responsibility, parents.

God has entrusted their souls to your care. What are you doing to win those souls for him? Or are you just letting them go their own way and letting the world win their souls instead?

[29 : 43] And so whoever you are, what are you doing to win souls? Do you even care about winning souls? Do you even want to win souls? Well, if not, then take these sobering words of Charles Spurgeon to heart.

Do you have no wish for others to be saved? Well, then you are not saved yourself. You can be sure of that. And if that's the case, then your own soul needs to be won first by Jesus.

Let him in. Let him do that. Let him conquer your rebellion and your wayward heart, which you know is unrighteous. Trust in him.

Repent. And if you've done that, if he has come and if he has taken over residence in your soul and you want to be involved in the great work of winning souls but you just don't know how, well then pray.

Pray for opportunities. And God will be glad to give them to you. If that is the work that you've signed up for, God will then give you work to do.

[30 : 48] If you present yourself, give yourself to him as a winner of souls and if that is your desire and you pray for him to use you in that and you live your life every day with the intention of winning souls.

Will you do that this week and beyond? Will you aim to bear fruit and speak words that will have eternal consequences in the lives of those around you this week?

Because the truly wise person is not the one who works to win friends and influence people for this life but the one who works to win souls for the life to come.

Let's pray. Father, we do thank you for this call to be winners of souls. We thank you that you've explained to us this morning that it is the wisest use of our time on earth and I do pray for every person here, Lord.

I pray for those whose souls have been won to Christ that you would now use them to bear fruit and win souls for you. And I pray for those here whose souls have not yet been won for Christ.

[31 : 55] They know that you are not Lord of their hearts yet. Lord, would you draw them to put their faith in you? Would you draw them to realize that they are under judgment until they confess faith in Christ and truly believe and repent and help them to come to that point, Lord?

And would you make us a church of soul winners for your glory and for the glory of Jesus Christ? Amen. Dylan Yes.

Anytime to ever and that you may have