

12@12
Ancient Wisdom and Modern Success
November 5, 2015

- “Two wrongs don’t make a right.”
- “The squeaky wheel gets the grease.”
- “When the going gets tough, the tough gets going.”
- “There’s no such thing as a free lunch.”
- “The early bird catches the worm.”
- “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”
- “Don’t bite the hand that feeds you.”

Any of those sound familiar? If you grew up in the United States, these are words you have probably heard repeatedly since you were a young child. And likely you have repeated them to others. I didn’t take the time to look into the background of all of these phrases but I am guessing that each phrase has been around for quite some time. The phrase, “There is no such thing as a free lunch,” for example, has been found in print as early as 1938, but is based on the practice of saloons in the 1800’s providing free food to patrons that was so salty they were compelled to buy the beer.¹

Now, I find it quite interesting that while our knowledge base increases exponentially each year we still find wisdom and truth in phrases from a different era. And so much so that phrases like these sometimes guide some very consequential decisions in our very modern lives. Think of the phrase “The early bird catches the worm” and suppose in college you found yourself attracted to a certain gal. Her name is Joyce. You are a bit the timid type, and your friends know that. One says, “Hey Joe, she’s not going to last long. Remember, the early bird gets the worm.” And so buoyed by that phrase you ask her on a date, and the rest is history, little Joe’s and Joyce’s now fill the house! Old time wisdom has guided you right into changing diapers and coaching little league games. This, of course, is a silly example, but if you consider the times when the sayings of a parent, or a coach, or a teacher go through your head at important times (that they probably learned from someone before them) , you will probably recognize that old time phrases still play quite a role in modern life.

So considering the value well-worn wisdom still has for us, I would like to go about things a little different than my normal approach at 12@12. On most occasions I begin with contemporary research or professional trends and along the way give you some helpful perspectives for business and life. And then I usually finish by giving you a tie into some ancient wisdom, most often ancient biblical wisdom. Today, however, I’d like to do the reverse. Rather than end with the ancient biblical wisdom, I’d like to begin with this wisdom, and see if there might be something helpful for us as we stand well into the 21st century.

So here is the first bit of wisdom. Let’s see what we can make of it.

“For lack of guidance a nation falls,
but many advisers make victory sure.”²

Well, this is not too difficult to decipher, is it? It is telling us that if we make decisions without consulting others, we are likely in the long view to end up in a not so good place. Have you ever noticed that the best decisions aren’t always made by the smartest person in the room? Why is this so? It’s probably so because even the smartest person has blind spots and if she does not seek the counsel of others, she may well get herself in trouble.

This last month I read the book *The Boys in the Boat*, a marvelous account of the Olympic gold medal rowing team of 1936. Al Ulbrickson was a heralded coach, but he had trouble winning the biggest prizes. In 1936 he found himself with the most gifted team he had ever assembled. If he couldn’t win with this team, he told his wife, then he should get out of coaching. As the year unfolded, the team was struggling tremendously to find its swing, a crew term meaning all the parts are working together in perfect harmony. Ulbrickson was at a loss. It was then that he turned to George Pocock, the finest racing boat maker of his time. Pocock was a quiet one, but extraordinarily observant of all things crew. Pocock’s advice ended up making all the difference. The team found its swing and raced into the history books.

Ulbrickson, as the head coach of the Olympics team, had sense enough to know that if victory was what he was after then the advice of others is something he must seek, because “For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure.”

Now, let's take a look at a second ancient proverb. It reads:

“When a king's face brightens, it means life;
his favor is like a rain cloud in spring.”³

The meaning of this proverb is a little less apparent, but with a little thought I think we can decipher it. There are perhaps two ideas to take from it. The first is simply that it is good to make those in charge happy. That's certainly a truth that we can relate with. Things certainly seem better around the workplace when the boss is happy. Yet, there is another way to view this proverb, if we take the position of the king. This ancient wisdom tells us that the king's emotions set the tone for the whole kingdom; when his face brightens it brings life to those under his rule. As a leader, I find this very enlightening.

Mike Krzyzewski, the great Duke basketball coach, wrote in his book *Leading from the Heart*, “A leader has to show the face his team needs to see.”⁴ At first that line might seem a call to inauthenticity. Shouldn't the coach just be real with his own emotions whatever they may be? I think the answer to that question is no. For leaders to lead with whatever emotions they might feel on a given day is ultimately self-centered leadership. Leadership that cares for others, considers first what emotions others might need to see. This might include remorse at the loss of a trusted employee, anger at fraudulent behavior, or a big smile that makes everyone glad they worked for a company that just landed the big deal or completed the project under budget and in time. Emotions used at the right time and in the right way can preserve life for a team. A good king knows this and acts accordingly, says the ancient proverb.

Now on to a third proverb. It reads like this:

“If a ruler listens to lies,
all his officials become wicked.”⁵

If you only had the first line of this proverb—“if a ruler listens to lies”—you might expect the second line to be, he will become wicked. But that is not what it says. It says that if he listens to lies then all his officials will

become wicked. That is surely an interesting twist. But it does not take long to see the truth in it.

The greatest corporate scandal, if not in U.S. history certainly in Houston history, is that involving Enron. At the top of its power structure were Ken Lay, Jeff Skilling, and Andrew Fastow. They chose along the way to follow paths of deceit. But as is almost always the case, it did not stop with them. There were many others who got involved. Even the vaunted, “independent” firm of Arthur Anderson found itself on the wrong side of right and wrong, as it aided and abetted in massive corporate deceit. Now, I am not sure from what source this cascade of evil started, but when something happens to the extent of the Enron collapse, it is almost always because the culture for wrongdoing has been set from the top.

This leads me to perhaps the greater truth of this proverb. Yes, bad people can spawn bad people, but perhaps more broadly, we see in this proverb the power of the leader to create culture. We could rewrite the proverbs in dozens of different ways and retain its meaning. We could write: “If a ruler honors his subjects, his officials will treat them well.” “If a boss makes excuses for his shortcomings, his managers will pass off their mistakes as well.” “If a coach discovers ways to bend the rules, his players will do so on the field.” “If a father reminds his daughter that she is beautiful, she will find that she need not put down her looks.” You see, a leader creates culture. His or her moves are being watched even if subconsciously, and those watching will be shaped by it, either in the direction of deceit and evil or honesty and honor. If you have any doubt, just test it for yourself.

Let me end with one more bit of ancient wisdom. It is in a slightly different form. It is in the words of a mother to a son. She writes:

“O my son, O son of my womb,
O son of my vows,
do not spend your strength on women,
your vigor on those who ruin kings.
It is not for kings, O Lemuel—
not for kings to drink wine,
not for rulers to crave beer.”⁶

For those who like a cold brewsky when you arrive home or a glass of wine, this proverb might take you back a bit. But I think you can sense this proverb is not about refraining from all consumption nor from pursuing a relationship with another in a healthy way. The problem says King Lemuel's mother is if her son takes his eye off ruling and begins to chase and crave fast-fleeting pleasures. This she says ruins kings.

With success comes certain privileges. We are afforded certain luxuries. This should be a good thing. What a great thing to have resources to do certain things we couldn't do otherwise. But way too often along the road of success, a thought goes through our heads. It says something like, "I've worked hard, I am the boss, I deserve to . . . I deserve to have another drink. I deserve to chase another woman. I deserve to be happy." But it seems to me that each time we succumb to those words the door to failure and defeat creeps open a little wider. And though we may have the resources and the power to get what we want in the moment, we put ourselves in line to be among those of whom it is said, "They were doing so well, until they lost focus."

There is much to be enjoyed in this world, deep pleasures to be experienced. The modern privileges afforded by success are beyond anything the ancients could have imagined. Who would have ever thought one could get on anything like a plane today, arrive in Tahiti tomorrow, eat steak from the best Argentinian cattle, and drink wine from the finest vineyards of France, all while watching ESPN on a smartphone? And yet while the landscape has changed as it always will, the ancient words of wisdom, like we have seen today, still have their force. They are like laws of nature. You can work with them or against them, but you cannot change them.

¹["There ain't no such thing as a free lunch,"](#) Wikipedia (accessed October 27, 2015).

² Proverbs 11:14

³ Proverbs 16:15

⁴ Mike Krzyzewski and Donald T. Phillips, *Leading with the Heart: Coach K's Successful Strategies for Basketball, Business, and Life* (Warner Business Books, 2000), 157.

⁵ Proverbs 29:12

⁶ Proverbs 31:2-4