

Knowing which verses to listen to (Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23)

Reading Proverbs 22 without risking a change of heart

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Take it from me, I am a successful man: the trick to reading the Bible is to know which sayings apply to you and which ones don't.

There's a great deal to be learned, but you have to know which verses to listen to and which ones to ignore. Otherwise, all you get is guilt or a change of heart. Jesus doesn't want that.

Some of the verses in Proverbs 22 have nothing to do with me. I am not a wicked person (not like in the movies, at least), and so I don't sow injustice. And I don't even know what a "rod of anger" is, so that must not apply to me. My town doesn't have a gate, so it's not like there is anywhere for me to crush the afflicted, even if I had the mind to.

I'm not among the super, yacht-owning rich, and I am certainly not poor. I work for a living (unlike either). I have earned everything I have ever had. Both the rich and the poor should look to me—I could tell them a thing or two. I'm glad I'm not like them.

I buy smart, too, which I am sure the Lord approves of. The prevailing wages in factories overseas are a win-win—I get cheaper stuff, and they get my hard-earned dollar. If they spend it all in one place, that's on them. Is it my fault that their wages are what they are? Anyway, they'll go up over time, just like they have gone through the roof here. That's the invisible hand.

There's so much concern for the poor in the Bible, and I get that. But we live in a different world now. Back then people had no education and no opportunities. They were stuck doing whatever their fathers did—fishermen, carpenters, tent makers. If you were hungry, you had to work. Today, everyone has everything for free—schools, food, health care, unemployment benefits. Paul talks about needing to work. Why don't we listen to him more?

Now, some verses of this passage are all about me. I have indeed shared my bread with the poor. One time, I even gave an apple from my own lunch— my own lunch!—to a beggar on the street. (We all know what he would have done with money if I had given him any.) He looked able-bodied, so I don't know why I did it. But I did. So that makes me blessed.

Yes, I am blessed. When I walk into a church I've never been to, they see that I am wearing good, dignified clothes and that I have a big, shiny college ring on my finger. They know the Lord has made me Somebody because of my hard work, and I get treated with respect. Church leaders introduce themselves to me, and they ask me to sit right near them.

Yes, I have a good name, just like Proverbs tells me to have. And that's exactly what I mean: look for the verses that apply to you, and keep away from those that don't. The ones that aren't about you will only confuse you.