

LEADING A PURPOSE-FILLED LIFE

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Date: 01-03-2026

Scripture: Proverbs 14

Proverbs 14 reads like a gallery of compressed wisdom, truth that is stated so briefly, yet so searchingly, that each verse could detail for us an entire meditation. Just look at these:

⁵ A trustworthy witness tells the truth, but a false witness breathes out lies.

⁷ Leave the presence of a fool, for you will not find knowledge there.

¹⁰ The heart knows its own bitterness, and no stranger can fully enter its joy.

¹² There is a way that seems right to a man, yet its end is the way of death.

Again and again, the chapter contrasts wisdom and folly, restraint and impulse, compassion and cruelty.

¹⁷⁻¹⁸ The quick-tempered man acts foolishly, but the one slow to anger shows great understanding.

²³⁻²⁴ Mere talk leads to poverty, yet diligent labor brings profit.

²¹ To despise one's neighbor is sin, but to be gracious to the poor is happiness.

³¹ To oppress the needy is to insult their maker.

Each proverb is a window into the moral order of God's world. They remind us that life is not random. It is structured. Choices have consequences. Character shapes destiny. And wisdom is not abstract; it's intensely practical.

And then, tucked away among these piercing saying, comes a proverb that at first seems almost ordinary, almost agricultural in its simplicity.

⁴ Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean. But much revenue comes by the strength of the ox.

We must kind of slow down here, for in that image of a manger and an ox lies a profound truth. Or really three profound truths that talk about purpose, productivity, and the cost of fruitfulness, or the cost of being fruitful.

1. PURPOSE.

Why the manger exists! A manger is not a decorative structure, not by any stretch of imagination. It's not built to be admired for its cleanliness. It exists for one reason, and one reason only – to hold the ox. Its design is governed by its purpose. If there

are no oxen, the manger remains clean, but it also remains unused. It may look orderly, but it is functionally empty.

So it is with our own lives. We were not created merely for preservation, but for participation. Not for appearance, but for assignment, God's assignment for each one of us. So, the question is not, is my life tidy? Does it all kind of match up, sit nicely together? But the question is: Is my life fulfilling its God-given purpose? A life can be morally careful and socially respectable, yet untouched by real usefulness.

The manger may be spotless, but it is missing the very thing for which it was made. The key here is purpose invites occupation. There must be somebody who inherits that purpose, and occupation that inherits then changes things.

2. PRODUCTIVITY.

The strength of the ox. The proverb does not glorify the mess. It highlights the revenue. Much revenue comes by the strength of the ox. The ox represents strength harnessed for work. It ploughs fields, it pulls loads, it turns the soil so that harvest becomes possible.

Without the ox, there is no ploughing. Without ploughing, no sowing. Without sowing, no harvest. So, fruitfulness requires a certain amount of force applied to resistance, because our inherent nature is to resist doing anything. So there must be force that is applied to that resistance to bring about fruitfulness.

The farmer who refuses the inconvenience of an ox forfeits the increase of the field. The clean barn may look serene, but it produces nothing. Productivity in the kingdom of God works the same way.

Ministry involves people. Leadership involves tension. Calling involves effort. And if we avoid the weight, the strain, the friction, we also avoid the fruit. And the key here is strength brings increase. But that strength must be welcomed within us.

3. FRUITFULNESS.

The cost of fruitfulness is equal to the mess of responsibility. Oxen do not leave mangers clean. Where there is work, there will be wear. Where there is strength, there will be strain. Where there is life, there will be a mess.

Fruitfulness always costs something. It costs energy. It may cost comfort, and it will cost control. A parent who raises children knows this. As a pastor called to shepherd souls, I know this. A church that engages mission knows this. The moment you embrace purpose, you embrace complication.

But what's the alternative? The alternative is sterility or something that is so spotlessly clean and sterile. A clean manger may impress the eye, but it feeds nothing and ploughs nothing. Remember this. The mess is not a sign of failure. It is the evidence of usefulness. It is the evidence that one is being used and is useful.

So, the proverb would gently ask of us: Do we want to just have the appearance of order or the reality of increase? Because the strength of the ox only will bring revenue, but it will not leave the manger clean and untouched. We know this about a proverb. It's never merely about what it mentions. It's a kind of a pity-saying with a profound reach, a short-compressed statement that carries a principle that's beyond its immediate setting.

So also with Proverbs 14:4, it's not really about barns and oxen. It's about life. The manger and the ox are illustrations. The principle transcends agriculture. The principle is this: Everything has a purpose, and purpose fulfilled will rarely remain pristine. Somebody once said that a ship may be safe in harbor, but that's not why it was made.

It's the same principle that's being applied here. The reason for existence must show, and that principle presses in on us personally. So, we must ask questions of ourselves. Why am I here? Why this century of all centuries? Why this nation? Why this city? Why this church? Why in this season of life am I here? Am I living? Do I have this span of life? Because we are not accidental occupants of history. We are not. We are placed, we are positioned, and we are assigned by the almighty God Himself.

But discovering purpose is only the beginning. Purpose requires volition. Once discerned, it demands the will. The will must kick in to the purpose so that action then is associated with the idea of fulfillment. I will fulfill the reason for which I have been made. But the danger is that we like a clean manger. We prefer lives that are neatly arranged, comfortably managed, free from complication. We want order without any exertion, stability without any strain, appearance without sacrifice. And yet, the proverb quietly reminds us, a clean manger may look admirable, but in terms of productivity, it's useless.

So, purpose, when embraced, invites inconvenience. It may bring friction and fatigue and misunderstanding, even disorder. Ministry is messy. Relationships are messy. Leadership is messy. Obedience is messy. But the mess is not a contradiction of purpose. It is evidence that there is a purpose. And the end result? The end result is fruit.

The strength of the ox brings revenue. The life that embraces its calling bears visible consequence. The reason for existence then becomes tangible. So our *raison d'être* is not hidden in comfort. It is revealed in fruitfulness. It is revealed in how fruitful our lives are.

The question for us is not 'How can I keep my manger clean?' The question is, 'Am I fulfilling the purpose for which God made me?' For when purpose is embraced, though it may bring inconvenience, it will ultimately bring increase. Paul concludes 1 Corinthians 15:58 by saying, "always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

So, what is God saying to you? How is the Spirit nudging you this morning? What is coming to your mind? I think there are three natural responses that may come, if we were to be honest.

1. I've never really thought about my purpose.
2. I know my purpose, but I'm not ready to walk in that purpose.

3. I'm in my purpose, but I see no fruit.

Let's just unpack them.

1. **I'VE NEVER REALLY THOUGHT ABOUT MY PURPOSE.** That's an honest response. Many people live responsibly, but not intentionally. Life becomes routine rather than a calling. If someone says, "I've never asked why I'm here," then the first step is not activity. It's alignment with purpose.

So, let me give you some practical steps to discover purpose.

- You have to begin with surrender, not strategy. Not trying to think: What should I do? What can I do? Just surrender. Purpose is not discovered only with personality tests or other kinds of tests, but with yieldedness to God.

Romans 12 says, "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice. Then you will discern the will of God." We give ourselves to God, and then He reveals His purpose for us. Clarity follows consecration. So when we put ourselves completely in God's hands, something begins to shift inside of us. Our ambitions settle down, our fears loosen their grip, and the inner noise starts to quiet.

So, as we surrender first, we often discover that His will wasn't hidden at all. It becomes clearer because our hearts are finally linked and aligned with His.

- Return to the revealed will of God. Before asking what is my specific calling, ask: Am I obeying what is already clear? Before you ask yourself what is the calling on my life, just ask: What is God's clear word for us? What is His clear will that I don't have to think about? What is His revealed word? If you look at Micah 6:8 "Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly." That's His revealed word.

Faithfulness in the known often reveals the unknown. So we walk faithfully in the things that God has already told us, and then what He hasn't told us will become clear. What we haven't seen about ourselves becomes clear.

- Examine your burden or the thing that weighs heavily upon you. What troubles you? What excites you? Think of Nehemiah. His response when he heard that the walls of Jerusalem were down and the gates were burnt and that the people were living in disgrace was: "When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven." Thousands of people knew that the walls of Jerusalem were down. nobody did anything about it. it broke Nehemiah's heart.

Sometimes, when you look at your calling, it's something that may be evident to many people, and yet, in you it feels different. It feels like this is my reason for being here. This really touches me.

- Identify your gifts.
Ephesians 4:7 says, “To everyone is given a spiritual gift.” What is that gift? What do others consistently affirm about you? Whether you teach well or you encourage or you’re a good administrator or you have mercy, what is it?
- Seek Godly counsel.
Proverbs 20:18 says, “Plans succeed with counsel.” The multitude of counselors. Often others see your calling more clearly than you do.

I always say that God’s calling is confirmed within and without. Within – in your spirit. You know deep inside, this is what I should be doing. And I felt this. I remember my struggle when God was calling me to get into preaching and pastoral ministry. I knew it in my heart, but I couldn’t move forward on it. I was unhappy. I wasn’t sure this was where God was calling me. I always felt that was an entirely different call on my life. I was happy with music. Then people would come and tell me: We love the music you do, but you should be getting into preaching and pastoral ministry. And I was like a deer caught in the headlights. How did they read my heart? how do they know what I’m struggling with? But that’s how God often confirms. He confirms from within and from without what He wants you to do.

2. I KNOW MY PURPOSE, BUT I’M NOT READY TO MOVE FORWARD.

This is far more common. Purpose looks larger than capacity. Always, doesn’t it? Moses said, “Who am I?” Jeremiah said, “I’m only a youth.” The disciples said, “We have five loaves and two fish, Jesus. There are about 5,000 people here.” Every calling feels like it’s beyond us. But that is precisely the point. God’s assignments are designed to stretch dependence. Our sufficiency must come from God.

So what would it take to move you? Not more resources, not more confidence, not perfect timing. It takes trust.

Hebrews 11 – the hall of faith. It doesn’t say ‘by confidence they did something’ or ‘by full preparation they did something,’ or ‘by complete understanding. They say ‘by faith, Noah built before he saw rain.’

Can you imagine building a boat before anybody knew what rain was? Rain hadn’t yet fallen on the face of the earth. Water seeped from underneath to water the vegetation. There was no sign of rain. And yet, Noah built that ark by faith, saying that one day it would rain and they would need the ark.

By faith, Abraham went, not knowing where he was going. He was found in Ur. I had a professor who said when they told Abraham to go, he said, “Uh, uh, uh. Where do I go?” that’s all he knew. But he went. He packed his belongings and went.

By faith, Moses chose not to live in the palace, but to go and be with his kind, his kindred.

By faith, none of them were described as ready. They were described only as trusting. Faith is often the willingness to step forward before you feel adequate, certain, or fully equipped. But God does not wait for readiness. He responds to faith.

The clean manger feels safer, but safety is not the same as obedience. And here's a gentle warning. Stagnation, disguised as stability, will slowly drain joy. Joy will slowly seep away.

The unused gift will become heavy. I always say when you get to heaven and you see a spiritual gift, what a shame if it is still gift-wrapped. How terrible, because there's no use for it in heaven. It's too late. And yet, all of us have been given a spiritual gift to be used here while we are here on earth. The buried talent only brings fear. And sometimes, the first movement starts with a small act, one conversation with somebody, one application, or one step of obedience.

God usually doesn't show the whole plan at once. He shows us what we need for the next step. As we walk in the light we have, He gives more light for the step that follows.

3. I AM IN MY PURPOSE, BUT I DON'T SEE FRUIT.

This may be the most painful place to be, because you're obeying, you're serving, you're faithful. But the revenue has not appeared. And discouragement may whisper back: get back to Egypt. At least in Egypt you had three square meals. At least in Egypt you knew what you had to do every day. Sure, you were a slave, but life just went on neat and tidy. What do we say to someone like that? well, very gently, let me say this if that's who you are in this congregation:-

- i. Remember that fruit has seasons. Psalm 1:3 reminds us of that. not every season is harvest season. Ploughing, seeding, rain are all different seasons in producing fruit. And you could be in one of those other seasons even though you're fulfilling your purpose.
- ii. Faithfulness precedes visibility. Galatians 6:9 says, Do not grow weary in doing good, for in due season we will reap if we do not give up. Due season, beloved, is God's department.
- iii. Some fruit are really invisible. Take character formation, for one. you may tirelessly work at it, but you never see that character formed in somebody, because they move away. Or it creates depth of dependence. Or increased endurance.

Paul puts this kind of theologically, but it brings out the point. He says, though outwardly we may be wasting away, inwardly we are being renewed day by day. Then he explains why. He says, for this light momentary affliction, that is this fruitlessness that you think is present in your life, this affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

For as we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen. For he says, the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen, which God only sees, are eternal. The things that you think nobody is seeing, God sees. And that is kept eternally. In other words, what looks unimpressive on the outside, which may be like quiet endurance or deepened trust or steady obedience, may actually be producing something eternal on the inside. And the visible fruit may seem small, but the unseen work God is doing in us carries eternal weight.

- iv. Christ Himself labored for years with little visible response. Isaiah prophesied about it. He said, who has believed our report, he said of the Messiah. True. they tried to stone Him, they tried to throw Him off a cliff, and they finally managed to put Him on the cross. And we know that that was Jesus' intention. But it seemed like there was no fruit there in His earthly life. but there was eternal fruit that was being created.

So, to the discouraged servant, I would say, don't measure obedience by applause. Don't measure calling by comfort. Don't measure purpose by immediate productivity. The strength of the ox still matters, even when the field looks barren.

So, here we are. let's distill this down.

- Some of you need to discover your purpose today in this congregation. You're saying: I've never done that. Maybe today, this is the moment.
- Some of you need to step into it saying: Yeah, I know what God's calling me to do, but I've always held it at arm's length. I don't think I'm adequate.
- Some of you need to just persevere and not give up.

Different seasons, but all one call. And the proverb will not allow us to remain neutral today. The manger exists for a reason, beloved, and so do you. Each one of us here. We exist for a reason, a different reason, a script that is already in heaven prepared for you, that has your life. So if you've never truly asked why God placed you here, then begin right there. bring yourself to Him. Lay your life before Him and ask, "Lord, for what was I made? Why have you placed me here in this age, in this century, in this city, in this church, in this community? Why me? Why now?"

And I know that God is never reluctant to answer those kinds of questions. If you know what obedience requires, but you've been hesitating, then take the plunge. Step into the water. You remember the priests stepped into the water. Only then the waters parted. And sometimes you wonder – those were priests who were filled with faith. You had to have faith to put your foot into the river. Just takes one step for God to act.

And if you're already laboring and feeling weary because the fruit seems so small, don't measure your visible calling by visible fruits or results. The Lord of the harvest sees what others cannot. Your labor is never in vain. In the end, it will not matter how neat our lives looked. It will matter whether we bore fruit.

So, the question is simple. Will you protect comfort or pursue calling and purpose. Will you preserve appearance or will you embrace your reason for living? God has placed you here on assignment. Let your life fulfill that assignment. And may it be said of us: not that our mangers were clean, but that there was increase, there was fruit in our lives. Jesus said, "By this My Father is glorified that you bear much fruit and so prove to be My disciples." May our lives bear fruit.

Amen.