

We are starting to see more and more about what God thinks.

The LORD is named eight times in our passage
(more than any other chapter since chapter 3).

We have been looking mostly at what it means to live wisely and uprightly
in God's world.

Tonight we will see a little more about what it means to live wisely and uprightly
before God.

We've seen the “tree of life” image used already in Proverbs.

The picture reminds us of the tree of life in the Garden in Genesis –
and the tree of life in the heavenly City in Revelation.

A gentle tongue is a tree of life that brings healing.

1. “A Gentle Tongue Is a Tree of Life” (v1-4)

*A soft answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.*

² *The tongue of the wise commends knowledge,
but the mouths of fools pour out folly.*

³ *The eyes of the LORD are in every place,
keeping watch on the evil and the good.*

⁴ *A gentle tongue is a tree of life,
but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.*

Indeed, the word translated “gentle” is a word that refers to healing.

We've encountered it several times already in proverbs:

Proverbs 4:22 – [My words] are life to those who find them,
and healing to all their flesh.”

Proverbs 6:15 – speaking of the wicked –

“in a moment he will be broken beyond healing”

Proverbs 12:18 – “the tongue of the wise brings healing”

Proverbs 13:17 – “a faithful envoy brings healing”

Proverbs 14:30 – “a *tranquil* [or a healing] heart gives life to the flesh.”

A gentle tongue is a *healing tongue* – a tongue that brings healing to broken hearts.

Thus a healing tongue is a tree of life –
but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.

Have you ever met someone whose words brought healing?

The way that they spoke to you *gave you life.*

In the same way, the opposite is also true.
When a tongue is twisted, it breaks the spirit.
A perverse tongue uses words to tear down and destroy.

How can your tongue become a tree of life?
Think about these opening verses.

*A soft answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.*

This is one of the most commonly quoted proverbs in the whole book.
Think of Abigail – the wife of Nabal (whose name means “fool”).
Her husband had stirred up the anger of David –
and so Abigail went to speak gently to David and cool his temper.

Why is this so hard to do?
It’s hard, because in the midst of anger – we tend to get angry too!
When someone else is heated – we tend to heat up!
They may use provocative words – and we want to respond in kind!

Other times we are the instigators.
We think of what someone has done – and we get hot –
and we *want* to provoke a fight!

(We might not admit that at the time –
but if we are honest with ourselves and others, *sometimes we want to fight!*)

This is why the path of wisdom is so important!
Verse 2 points out:

² *The tongue of the wise commends knowledge,
but the mouths of fools pour out folly.*

Do you distinguish between *knowledge* and *opinion*?
What do we really *know* – as opposed to what do we *think*?
The wise will distinguish carefully –
and will commend *knowledge*.

We are getting such delightful confirmation of the book of Proverbs every day in the news!
The mouths of fools pour out folly!
Fools will spout their opinion and heap condemnation on any who disagree.
The wise will commend knowledge.

That’s why it has been so hard in recent months!

We knew so little back in March.
We only know a very little bit more now!
There are all sorts of unanswered questions.

And the wise man will commend *knowledge*.

What do you do when you don't *know*?
Well, for one, you admit that you don't know!
The wise will have the humility to admit it when we don't know.

You may have heard the phrase, "All truth is God's truth."
You could just as easily say, "all knowledge is God's knowledge."

The postmodern notion that everyone has their own "truth" simply doesn't work.
If everyone has their own truth,
then there is no such thing as a lie.
There are not multiple truths about George Floyd's death.
There is a lot of information (and a lot of *misinformation*)
circulating right now.
And I will not claim to have perfect knowledge of what happened and why.

What I know is that the black community has suffered greatly
over the last 400 years in this land.

Whatever may prove to be the case in one particular episode,
the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation
has continued to influence many police departments.

If your experience is like mine, you might wonder,
"but compared to previous generations, racism has dwindled so much!"

That may be true (I hope it is) –
but let me give you a real life example.
I had a friend who was a delivery driver for a home medical company.
His job was to deliver medical equipment to people's homes.

Every once in a while (maybe 5% or less of his deliveries)
there would be a white person who would not let him deliver the equipment
because he was black.

They'd say, "leave it on the porch."
He'd say, "Ma'am, it's a bed – I'm not allowed to leave it on the porch!
Besides, how are you going to get a bed into your house?"

But the customer would refuse – and so he had to leave it on the porch –
or call a white colleague who would come and finish the delivery.

Let me ask you –
if you were the hiring manager – and you *knew* that 5% of your clients
would refuse to let a black man do his job –
would you take that into account when looking for delivery drivers?

You don't need 50% of the population to be racist in order to have a problem.
If only 5% of the population is racist – that's all it takes.

But don't worry (verse 3):

³ *The eyes of the LORD are in every place,
keeping watch on the evil and the good.*

God sees.
He watches.

And when the Bible says that God *sees* that means that he *takes note*.
He is not blind.
He is not deaf.
He is not dumb.

You may wonder, *then why doesn't he do something about it!*

Oh, but he is!
He caused *you* to see the problem!
He has eyes – and he gave you eyes!
He sent his Son to join himself to our humanity –
in order that we might be joined to his own life –
so that we might participate in bringing his life to the world!

He calls us to do justice – to love mercy – and to walk humbly with our God.

He sees and he is acting –
he sent Jesus – and by uniting us to Jesus – he has sent us to be his instruments
in bringing peace to the nations.

And this is why verse 4 says:

⁴ *A gentle tongue is a tree of life,
but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.*

John Chrysostom pointed out that “The tongue which does not sin by speaking makes use of sanity:

indeed the illness of the tongue is its sin.

The one who can check his tongue and does not sin with it is filled with the Holy Spirit.” (104)

How can our tongues bring healing?

How can our healing tongues be a tree of life in this crazy world?

Well, are your words causing discord?

Are your words doing harm to others?

Are you just trying to score points?

There is a “virtue signaling” of the left – and there is a virtue signaling of the right!

Both are about scoring points and looking good before others.

Neither are interested in bringing healing to the broken!

If your tongue would bring healing – if your tongue would be a tree of life –

then it must partake of the Tree of Life,

our Lord Jesus, who came to bring healing to the nations.

Okay – but how do we get there?

How do we *become* that sort of person?

This is the central theme of the central part of the chapter:

2. Why Is Instruction So Important? (v5-19)

a. Look at the Consequences of Accepting or Rejecting Instruction (v5-12)

⁵ *A fool despises his father's instruction,
but whoever heeds reproof is prudent.*

Verses 5-12 are organized around the theme

of the consequences of accepting or rejecting instruction.

You may have had a bad father.

Or maybe just a distant father –

a father you didn't feel like you could connect with.

What do you do with that?

Well, when verse 5 talks about “your father” –

that doesn't have to be your biological father.

Hopefully you have a good biological father –

but this is referring to your mentor – your advisor – your spiritual counselor –

the one who is leading you in paths of righteousness.

The one who is saying to you: “follow me as I follow Christ.”

If you are prudent, then you will need the reproof of such a father.
If you are a fool, then you will despise that instruction.

Do you have someone that you can go to –
someone who is a spiritual mentor – a “father” (or “mother”) –
someone you trust to direct you wisely?

But not only do you have such a person:
also, do you *do what they say*?

I’m not talking about mindlessly obeying whatever they tell you!
But when they tell you “this is the good way, walk in it” –
do you do that?
Or do you reject their counsel and follow your own bright ideas?

How’s that working out for you?

Here’s a news flash:
our modern conception of individualism ... doesn’t work!

“You gotta be you”
“Be yourself”
All those slogans that celebrate the isolated individual...
what are they for?

Selling brands that make you look just like everyone else who buys that brand!

All of the calls to “think for yourself” “just be yourself” –
are actually the voices of alternate fathers and mothers
who are calling you to accept *them* as your fathers and mothers!
They aren’t actually saying, “think for yourself” –
they are calling you to accept an alternate path of discipleship,
where you submit to *their instruction* and accept *their rebuke*.

You are going to follow someone!
Who will you follow?

⁶ *In the house of the righteous there is much treasure,
but trouble befalls the income of the wicked.*

⁷ *The lips of the wise spread knowledge;
not so the hearts of fools.*

Verses 8-9 then focus on the LORD's attitude toward all this:

⁸ *The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD,
but the prayer of the upright is acceptable to him.*

⁹ *The way of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD,
but he loves him who pursues righteousness.*

The sacrifice of the wicked is just like the way of the wicked – an abomination to the LORD.
But the prayer of the upright is acceptable to him –
because he loves the one who pursues righteousness.

Think back to Cain and Abel.

Abel's sacrifice was accepted – but Cain's was not.
Why?

Because Cain did not do well.
(Genesis 4:7 – “if you do well, will you not be accepted?”)
(or as Hebrews 11:4 says, “By faith Abel offered to God
a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain,
through which he was commended as righteous,
God commending him by accepting his gifts.”)

If Cain had believed God – and by faith, he did what God said –
then Cain would have been accepted as well!

But instead, Cain grew angry (the hot tempered man) and since he hated reproof,
he killed his brother – thereby bringing God's judgment against himself.

¹⁰ *There is severe discipline for him who forsakes the way;
whoever hates reproof will die.*

It's worth noting that the wicked Cain lived a lot longer than the righteous Abel!
But – as Hebrews 11 points out – though Abel died,
by faith he still speaks.

Verse 11 point us to the solution to all this:

¹¹ *Sheol and Abaddon lie open before the LORD;
how much more the hearts of the children of man!*

The LORD is the one who governs life and death –
Sheol is the grave – the realm of the dead –
Abaddon is the place of destruction.
The terms can be used interchangeably.
The point is that you can never escape the eyes of the LORD.

He sees the living and the dead.
He knows your heart – you cannot hide from him!

When you realize that your heart is open to God,
then you can be free before him!

You can stop hiding! (It won't work anyway!)

But v12

*¹² A scoffer does not like to be reproved;
he will not go to the wise.*

No one tells me what to do!!

So, verses 5-12 have shown us the importance of instruction –
the importance of listening to the wise – listening to spiritual counselors
who will guide you in the right way.

But then what?

After all, as we've heard, things don't always go well for the righteous!

Verses 13-19 then show us that:

b. Circumstances Do Not Triumph Over Character (v13-19)

We start with a simple observation:

*¹³ A glad heart makes a cheerful face,
but by sorrow of heart the spirit is crushed.*

Like with many proverbs, there is no ethical evaluation here.

It's not saying that people should always be happy.

It's just observing that your face will tend to reflect your heart!

You can try to put a happy face on a sad heart –
but it's going to look fake!

Verse 14 moves a step further:

*¹⁴ The heart of him who has understanding seeks knowledge,
but the mouths of fools feed on folly.*

We started with the morally neutral “glad heart” –

but now we are reminded of how the wise man – the man of understanding –

seeks knowledge.
While the mouths of fools feed on folly.

Foolishness is their bread.

They can spend all day on social media chasing folly
(whether the folly of the right or the folly of the left –
Folly is an equal-opportunity employer.
She doesn't care whether you are a conservative or a liberal –
so long as you feed on her food.)

In contrast, however:

*¹⁵ All the days of the afflicted are evil,
but the cheerful of heart has a continual feast.*

Proverbs is calling you to cultivate a cheerful heart.
The mouth of fools feeds on foolishness.
But the cheerful of heart has a continual feast.

What does “cheerful” mean?

Well, in verse 15, cheerful translates the word *tov* (good).
In verse 13, a joyful heart makes a “good face.”

A “good” heart – a “good” face – is one that is pleasant, wholesome, winsome.

And when someone is content –
when someone is living the life that God calls them to live –
there is a radiance, a joy, a beauty – a *goodness* –
that can only be called “cheerful.”

And that cheerful countenance exists regardless of circumstance:

*¹⁶ Better is a little with the fear of the LORD
than great treasure and trouble with it.*

*¹⁷ Better is a dinner of herbs where love is
than a fattened ox and hatred with it.*

Later in Proverbs we will hear many of these comparatives.

We've heard much already that says that the righteous will prosper
and the wicked will perish.

But there are many of these reminders that things are not always as they should be.

But in this in between time, there are some key principles:
such as – “better is a little with the fear of the LORD

than great treasure and trouble with it”

John Chrysostom put it this way:

“love has a different view of what is set forth,
and to its eyes ordinary things appear rich and scraps seem generous” (106).

The cheerful heart – the good heart – sees things differently from the malcontent.

The malcontent always wants more – always wants different.

Think of Israel in the wilderness.

They had manna – but they wanted meat.

Think of Saul.

He was king – but he envied David.

You may only have a little –

but when you have the fear of the LORD – even a little with the fear of the LORD
is better than great wealth with trouble.

Good character provides for contentment in the midst of difficult times.

But bad character guarantees that difficult times will never go away:

¹⁸ *A hot-tempered man stirs up strife,*

but he who is slow to anger quiets contention.

¹⁹ *The way of a sluggard is like a hedge of thorns,*

but the path of the upright is a level highway.

There is a consistency in the path of the upright.

A level highway – which remains straight and clear.

Gregory the Great put it well when he said,

“The heart of the wise is always consistent,
because, while it remains at peace in its upright convictions,
it constantly urges itself to good deeds.

But the heart of the fool is inconsistent,
because, in exhibiting itself as variable and changeable,
it never remains what it was.” (105)

3. Consequences of Righteousness and Wickedness (v20-29)

Our final section (v20-29) then deal with the consequences of righteousness and wickedness.

We start with joy in education (verses 20-23):

a. Joy in Education (v20-23)

²⁰ *A wise son makes a glad father,*

but a foolish man despises his mother.

²¹ *Folly is a joy to him who lacks sense,
but a man of understanding walks straight ahead.*

²² *Without counsel plans fail,
but with many advisers they succeed.*

²³ *To make an apt answer is a joy to a man,
and a word in season, how good it is!*

Notice the various things that cause gladness and joy in these four verses:

A wise son makes a glad father...

Folly is a joy to him who lacks sense...

And to make an apt answer is a joy to a man...

All three words are related to each other in Hebrew –
so the connection is very clear.

And the final phrase – “a word in season, how good it is” –
uses the word ‘tov’ – the word translated “cheerful” in the previous section.

In other words, the result of education is a joy to all concerned.

And when I say “education” – I don’t mean “going to school.”

Sure, schooling is part of your education –

but far more important to education is the process of learning *wisdom*.

This is *moral catechesis* – which does not require books.

Moral catechesis has to do with what sort of person you are becoming.

Are you becoming a wise person –

are you becoming the sort of person

that *others* look to for “a word in season.”

Of course, folly is a joy to him who lacks sense.

The one who lacks sense finds joy in folly.

The one who lacks sense pursues crooked paths because they seem more interesting.

Oh, let’s see what’s down here?!

That all sounds find when listening to Robert Frost’s

“Two Roads diverged in a wood...”

But it sounds very different when Gandalf is sitting in the Mines of Moria

trying to figure out which path to take –

knowing that they need to find their way out soon!

That’s why verse 22 is so widely quoted:

“Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed.”

When you have a multitude of counselors, you start to see the path of life more clearly:

b. The Path of life Versus Sheol (v24)

²⁴ *The path of life leads upward for the prudent,
that he may turn away from Sheol beneath.*

The path of life leads upward –
away from Sheol – away from the grave –
away from the land of death.

Verses 25-29 then show us how the LORD deals with all of us:

c. The LORD Tears Down the House of the Proud...but Hears the Prayer of the Righteous (v25-29)

²⁵ *The LORD tears down the house of the proud
but maintains the widow's boundaries.*
²⁶ *The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the LORD,
but gracious words are pure.*
²⁷ *Whoever is greedy for unjust gain troubles his own household,
but he who hates bribes will live.*
²⁸ *The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer,
but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.*
²⁹ *The LORD is far from the wicked,
but he hears the prayer of the righteous.*

The LORD tears down the house of the proud – but he hears the prayer of the righteous.
That's why he maintains the widow's boundaries.
He hears the cry of the widow when she is being mistreated.
He hears the cry of one who endures racial profiling.
He tears down the house of those who think that they can use the plight of others
to promote their own power.

How do you respond to all this?

Well, the heart of the righteous *ponders how to answer* –
but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.

Do you want to learn to give a good word in season?
Then ponder more and talk less!

Meditate on God's word – and listen carefully to those around you.

In so doing, your tongue can become a tree of life – a source of healing –
as your words are more and more conformed to the Word who became flesh.