

I often struggle with figuring out which proverb captures the heart of the chapter.

This week was particularly challenging:

In light of all the national and regional messes these days,

verse 14 immediately jumped out at me:

“The beginning of strife is like letting out water –  
so quit before the quarrel breaks out!”

and verse 28 is justly famous:

“Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise;  
when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.”

But as I meditated on the passage, others started rising to the top:

“Why should a fool have money in his hand to buy wisdom when he has no sense.” (v16)

Or v24

“The discerning sets his face toward wisdom,  
but the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth”

Or v11,

“An evil man seeks only rebellion, and a cruel messenger will be sent against him.”

And that’s when I realized how the passage *really* fits together.

The central question of Proverbs 17 is *Where are you going?*

Who are you becoming?

Who do you *want* to be?

Ginger has often commented that the thing that enables her to endure me is because she knows who I *want* to be.

I want to be better than I am.

Now – be careful!

Because we all *want* to be better than we are!

Our passage does not give us excuses.

Proverbs is wonderful like this!

Proverbs does not let us get away with wishful thinking!

Proverbs does not let us escape into idealized “someday I’ll become something...”

Indeed – that is the fool, whose eyes ‘are on the ends of the earth.’

Proverbs 17 asks you – are your eyes set on wisdom?

Not just who do you *want* to be – but *who are you becoming?*

Are you *walking* in the good way?

Are you *practicing* those things that you want to become?!

It's easy to see all the foolish things happening around you.

There are times when you just feel like telling everyone how wrong they are!

### 1. The Crown of the Aged: The Pattern of Righteousness (16:31-17:6)

16:31 and 17:6 form a bracket around this opening section.

*Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life.*

<sup>6</sup>*Grandchildren are the crown of the aged, and the glory of children is their fathers.*

Both speak of crowns, glory, and age (or at least gray hair).

In one sense verse 31 speaks factually.

Gray hair is a crown of glory.

When it says "it is gained in a righteous life" –

this is again describing the way things *ought* to be.

After all, foolish ways lead to death –

so fools *shouldn't* live long.

And grandchildren are the crown of the aged –

the gray hair is only part of it!

The grandchildren are the rest of it.

As we have seen throughout Proverbs,

there is more to parenting than biology.

Your father may be your biological father –

but may also include anyone who disciples you – who shows you the path to walk.

Obviously, biology plays a role in this.

If no one has any children, then there will be no one to disciple!

I had some friends in seminary who were childless – unable to have children.

They thought about adopting – but decided instead to pour themselves into young adults, particularly young people who were lacking parents (for whatever reason).

Likewise, Rolf Caylor never married – but still wound up with over 100 spiritual grandchildren, by virtue of his service as an elder here at MCPC.

*Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty,*

*and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.*

Do you *rule* your spirit?  
Are you in control of your emotions?  
Or do your emotions control you?

Remember that we are talking about a *pattern* of righteousness.  
This is a pattern that will continue to develop over time.

If you are growing in self-control,  
then you will continue to move toward that crown of glory!

*The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD. (v31-33)  
Better is a dry morsel with quiet  
than a house full of feasting<sup>[a]</sup> with strife.*

Verse 1 of chapter 17 then speaks of what sort of household you run.  
The ESV footnote points out that “feasting” is actually the word for “sacrifices” –  
namely, the peace offering.  
The imagery here is of going to the temple and worshipping the LORD –  
bringing sacrifices – partaking of the peace offerings –  
but doing so *with strife* and contention.

Would you prefer that?  
Or being too poor to go to Jerusalem –  
or if you do go, being too poor to bring a peace offering –  
and so eating a “dry morsel” (a little bit of nothing) with quiet.

There is a sense in which that little bit of nothing is actually prosperity.  
Don’t confuse *having stuff* with prosperity!  
Don’t confuse *getting your way* with power!  
Don’t confuse *feeling happy* with pleasure!

Consider verse 2:

<sup>2</sup> *A servant who deals wisely will rule over a son who acts shamefully  
and will share the inheritance as one of the brothers.*

This is every bit as shocking as it sounds.  
A servant does not inherit with sons.

What is this saying?  
Verse 3 may help us out:

<sup>3</sup> *The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold,*

*and the LORD tests hearts.*

What sort of inheritance are we talking about?

Gentiles were the servants and outsiders.

God is teaching Israel that they should not assume that because they are sons,  
therefore the inheritance must always belong to them!

The LORD tests hearts.

If you become proud and arrogant –

if you become quick to anger and jealous of your privileges –  
the LORD tests hearts.

He knows truly – and he will judge accordingly.

Verses 4-5 describe then the foolish ways that lead down the wrong path:

<sup>4</sup> *An evildoer listens to wicked lips,  
and a liar gives ear to a mischievous tongue.*

Be careful who you listen to!

There are so many mischievous tongues out there!

The wise will be careful not to pay attention only  
to those voices that confirm their own opinion!

<sup>5</sup> *Whoever mocks the poor insults his Maker;  
he who is glad at calamity will not go unpunished.*

There is a place for mockery – even God will mock the proud!

But do *not* mock the poor!

The poor have no defender – so it is easy to pile on and make their plight worse!

But the LORD tests hearts.

He will not let the guilty go unpunished!

If the way of wisdom is the pattern of your life –  
then verse 6 is the result:

<sup>6</sup> *Grandchildren are the crown of the aged,  
and the glory of children is their fathers.*

## **2. Warnings Against Folly (17:7-28)**

### **a. Speech and Money: the Ways of Folly (v7-9)**

Verses 7-9 need to be understood together:

<sup>7</sup> *Fine speech is not becoming to a fool;  
still less is false speech to a prince.*

<sup>8</sup> *A bribe is like a magic<sup>[b]</sup> stone in the eyes of the one who gives it;  
wherever he turns he prospers.*

<sup>9</sup> *Whoever covers an offense seeks love,  
but he who repeats a matter separates close friends.*

Fine speech – excellent speech – is effective.

It will persuade people!

And that is why fine speech is not becoming to a fool.

Because you really don't want fools to persuade people!

Likewise a bribe is like a magic stone in the eyes of the one who gives it.

Bribery works.

And that is why bribery is such a bad idea!

Because you really don't want judges "persuaded" by money.

By the way, the Bible always condemns *receiving* a bribe.

(Notice below in verse 23:

<sup>23</sup> *The wicked accepts a bribe in secret<sup>[c]</sup>  
to pervert the ways of justice.)*

Under no circumstances should you ever accept a bribe.

But the Bible does not always condemn *paying* a bribe.

You should avoid it whenever possible – because bribery is just plain bad for justice!

But I think of missionaries who have had their belongings confiscated –  
even passports confiscated – on condition of a bribe being paid.

If there is any way to avoid paying a bribe – then *don't pay the bribe!* –  
after all, paying only perpetuates an evil, broken system!

But if you did all in your power to avoid it,

then you are not guilty before God – the one requiring the bribe is the guilty one!

In the same way, repeating a matter – gossiping about others (v9) –  
will separate close friends.

But whoever covers an offense seeks love.

Paul will take this up into the 'love' chapter in 1 Cor. 13.

Love covers offenses – love does not repeat them.

Love does not stir up trouble!

And this sets up verses 10-15:

**b. Pay Attention to Where the Story Ends: Get Out Before It's Too Late! (v10-15)**

At the heart of verses 10-15 is the importance of where the story ends.

Folly heads the wrong direction.

So if you notice that you are on the wrong path –

get out!

Turn around!

Repent!

At presbytery yesterday someone pointed out that the moderator (me!)  
had lost track of what the motion on the floor was!

If the moderator loses his way, the whole body will head down the wrong path.

So I had to repent and get back on the right path!

Verse 10 says:

*<sup>10</sup> A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding  
than a hundred blows into a fool.*

Verses 11-14 then describe the path of folly:

*<sup>11</sup> An evil man seeks only rebellion,  
and a cruel messenger will be sent against him.*

*<sup>12</sup> Let a man meet a she-bear robbed of her cubs  
rather than a fool in his folly.*

*<sup>13</sup> If anyone returns evil for good,  
evil will not depart from his house.*

*<sup>14</sup> The beginning of strife is like letting out water,  
so quit before the quarrel breaks out.*

Pay attention to the path that you are on!

Choose your battles well.

Think!

Do you want to start down that path?

What will happen next?

If you start – the quarrel will follow!

If you return evil for good,

evil will not depart from your house!

And verse 15 closes the section with a warning:

*<sup>15</sup> He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous*

*are both alike an abomination to the LORD.*

Oh crud!

Up until this point it was sounding like the answer was: “be passive!”

“Don’t get involved!”

“Just keep quiet and let the world burn to the ground around you!”

But if your silence results in the acquittal of the wicked –  
or if your silence results in the condemnation of the righteous –  
then you are an abomination to the LORD.

You know me well enough to know that my tendency is toward being passive!  
I would prefer not to get caught in the middle of the fight!

And since I try to listen to all sides carefully,  
I find myself very frequently in a position to be attacked from all sides!  
But that is because I do not want to justify the wicked!  
Nor do I want to condemn the righteous!

And if I only have partial information –  
then I am *not* in a good position to pass judgment!

What do I do?

How do I handle this?

I don’t want to be an abomination to the LORD!

But our LORD is very kind.

And he gives us ways to distinguish how to walk – and how to judge.

Indeed, verses 16-20 help us to distinguish the fool from the friend:

**c. The Fool and the Friend: Understand the Difference (v16-20)**

<sup>16</sup> *Why should a fool have money in his hand to buy wisdom  
when he has no sense?*

The pun “he has no cents”! is entirely in English –  
but it fits the play on words.

How can someone with no sense buy wisdom?

In contrast:

<sup>17</sup> *A friend loves at all times,  
and a brother is born for adversity.*

When trouble comes – that is when you find out who your friends are –

that is where you find out where your true family is!  
I think we have forgotten what the word “friend” really means.

A friend is not just a “buddy.”  
A friend is not just someone you “like to hang out with.”

A friend is someone who has your back –  
someone who has your interest at heart.  
A friend *loves at all times*.

The more I reflect on what friendship requires,  
the more I see how *my friendship* has fallen short.  
I need to be a better friend in *this sense* –  
in the sense of *being there* for my friends.

Now – there are limits.  
Loving at all times does not mean being stupid!

See v18:

<sup>18</sup> *One who lacks sense gives a pledge  
and puts up security in the presence of his neighbor.*

Don’t cosign on a loan (unless you are prepared to pay the loan yourself!).  
Yes – by all means, be a *friend* –  
*be there* for your friend who is in trouble!  
But if you put your own household at risk –  
then you are not wise –  
because the only way that you can *continue to be a friend*  
is if you don’t ruin yourself!

<sup>19</sup> *Whoever loves transgression loves strife;  
he who makes his door high seeks destruction.*

Verse 19 bring back the theme of exalting yourself –  
“to make your door high” means to exalt your own gate –  
It’s speaking of the pride and arrogance of those who “love transgression.”

They love strife.

And (v20):

<sup>20</sup> *A man of crooked heart does not discover good,  
and one with a dishonest tongue falls into calamity.*



When your heart is crooked – so also is your tongue.  
Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.

Therefore, set your face – and your heart – toward wisdom:

**d. Speech, Money, and Heirs: Set Your Face Toward Wisdom (v21-28)**

In the final section of chapter 17, we see how speech, money, and children are all related.

<sup>21</sup> *He who sires a fool gets himself sorrow,  
and the father of a fool has no joy.*

Consider Solomon.  
Solomon was a wise man –  
but his son, Rehoboam, was a fool.

There is no guarantee that a wise father will have a wise son.

But think!

This is good news!  
It is *good news* – because it *also means* that a foolish father may have a wise son!  
You are not trapped by your father!

Ezekiel 18 speaks of how a righteous father may have a wicked son,  
and wicked father may have a righteous son.  
And – for that matter – a wicked man may become righteous.  
And a righteous man may become wicked.

No one is trapped by their parents –  
and for that matter, no one is trapped by their past!

Verse 20 had told us that a crooked heart does not discover good –  
now we hear in verse 22 that:

<sup>22</sup> *A joyful heart is good medicine,  
but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.*

The Reader's Digest column, "Laughter, the Best Medicine" – is based on this proverb.  
It's not saying that you have to be happy all the time.  
It's making a factual statement – that a joyful heart is good for you.  
So *practice* it.

You are a victim of misery – (we all are!) –  
but you are not a *helpless* victim of misery.

- <sup>23</sup> *The wicked accepts a bribe in secret<sup>[c]</sup>  
to pervert the ways of justice.*
- <sup>24</sup> *The discerning sets his face toward wisdom,  
but the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth.*
- <sup>25</sup> *A foolish son is a grief to his father  
and bitterness to her who bore him.*
- <sup>26</sup> *To impose a fine on a righteous man is not good,  
nor to strike the noble for their uprightness.*
- <sup>27</sup> *Whoever restrains his words has knowledge,  
and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.*
- <sup>28</sup> *Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise;  
when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.*

The last verses of our passage continue to work through these themes.

I will highlight verse 24:

- <sup>24</sup> *The discerning sets his face toward wisdom,  
but the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth.*

The fool is always looking for something else – something new –  
something unexplored –

the discerning sets his face toward wisdom.

From the standpoint of the fool, wisdom is boring.  
Wisdom is predictable.  
Wisdom always says the same thing...

The fool wants something exciting and new!

Ecclesiastes will explore this theme further.

Because as it turns out – folly is neither exciting nor new!  
Folly turns out to be the same old story of rebellion and misery.  
Just because you changed the setting of Romeo and Juliet  
and placed it on the West Side of New York,  
doesn't make West Side Story a different story!

The discerning sets his face toward Wisdom –  
because Wisdom *is* the source of life and light.

And we will close with verse 28:

- <sup>28</sup> *Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise;*

*when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.*

Better to be thought a fool, and remain silent,  
than to open one's mouth and remove all doubt...

Proverbs 17 asks you – are your eyes set on wisdom?  
Not just who you *want* to be – but *who are you becoming?*  
Are you *walking* in the good way?  
Are you *practicing* those things that you want to become?!