

It is awfully tempting in these pestilent days
to put our hope and trust in medicine – in doctors and science –
if only we can make it a few more months,
then we’ll have a vaccine! – a cure! – a treatment!!

We think that we have come so far!

And yet, when you listen to the war of words that is waged in state houses across America –
and in Washington – and around the world! –
you realize that *yes*, we have accumulated massive amounts of technology and skill.

We have wealth and we have information!

One thing we lack.

We lack wisdom.

At times I feel as if God allows me to go through particular trials at particular times
in order to illustrate my own sermons –
or at least *feel their weight* more keenly!

I have been struggling with diligence and self-discipline –
just in time to preach a series on Proverbs!!

Hopefully it will do me good!

There are two main sections in our passage (verses 1-14 and verses 15-28) –
but the end of section (verses 13-14) one also sets you up for section two –
so I have bracketed it out
(particularly because of the way it returns us to the theme of *ends*).

But both sections begin with the importance of heeding advice or reproof:
“Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge – but he who hates reproof is stupid.”
“The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.”

Stupidity is bipartisan.

Governors – presidents – judges – doctors – scientists –
even ordinary people are capable of stupidity!

I was going to say that even ordinary people are capable of *extraordinary* stupidity –
but no, stupidity is *so* ordinary that it takes real effort

to pull of extraordinary stupidity!

Why do I say this?

“He who hates reproof is stupid.”

How many of you *love* reproof!

1. Goodness Obtains Favor from the LORD (v1-12)

The first section is tied together by the theme of goodness in verses 2 and 14 –

“a good man obtains favor from the LORD” (v2)

“From the fruit of his mouth a man is satisfied with good” (v14)

a. “He Who Hates Reproof Is Stupid” – the Importance of Discipline (v1-3)

*12 Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge,
but he who hates reproof is stupid.*

*² A good man obtains favor from the LORD,
but a man of evil devices he condemns.*

*³ No one is established by wickedness,
but the root of the righteous will never be moved.*

Verse 1 says that the “one who hates reproof is stupid.”

The word translated “stupid” has the idea of “brutish” – or “beastly.”

Humans were created in the image of God –

we were designed to *know* and to understand things about God and his world.

When we err – when we make mistakes –

we demonstrate that our knowledge is not what it should be.

So we need to have a wholehearted love of *discipline*.

Otherwise we will not become *good*.

Do you want to be a good person?

I suspect that most people would say “yes.”

I once met a man who insisted that he was a good person

because he had only broken 9 out of the 10 commandments.

(I was curious – he said that he had never had any other God than God...)

He had murdered.

He had committed adultery.

He had stolen.

But hey, I’ve always worshiped the true God, so I’m a good person...

We all have this bad habit of thinking the best of ourselves and the worst of others...

But in contrast verse 3 says:

“No one is established by wickedness –
but the root of the righteous will never be moved.”

At first this may seem obviously untrue!

After all, there are *so many* who have obtained kingdoms by wickedness!

But think about the whole sentence.

What does it mean to be established?

(In Hebrew the word means “to be firm, to be grounded, to be anchored” –

To be established is more than just a “here today – gone tomorrow” sort of thing.

That’s why the *root* of the righteous will never be moved.

An unmoveable root will endure permanently.

It will keep coming back!

Chop it down – it will return!

It is like that old redwood tree that had been chopped down in front of my dad’s house.

It was a *righteous* root!

My dad kept trying to cut it back.

My brother and I spent *days* chopping and digging it up.

But it was a righteous root!

Thirty five years ago, the new homeowner said, “I’ll just let it grow” –
and now he has a 150 foot tree right next to his house!

The root of the righteous will *never* be moved!

If you are hearing echoes of the “root of the house of Jesse” – you are on the right track!

And in Jesus, we become fellow heirs of the promises to Abraham and to David.

b. “The House of the Righteous Will Stand” – Words in the Household (v4-7)

As if to highlight this, verses 4-7 focus on the *household*.

We start with the excellent wife:

⁴ *An excellent wife is the crown of her husband,
but she who brings shame is like rotteness in his bones.*

There are lots of these hints toward Proverbs 31 throughout the Proverbs.

Verse 4 is a striking contrast.

The excellent wife is the *crown* of her husband –
she is highly visible.

When people look at him – they see her!

On the other hand, “she who brings shame is like rottenness in his bones” –
this is the opposite of visible –
this is deep down inside.

As one commentator puts it,

“the noble wife strengthens his very being by giving him social honor
and empowering him to rule the community.

The ignoble wife invisibly saps his strength and vitality
and deconstructs him from within.” (Waltke 521)

Have you thought about how your words and deeds reflect on others?

I knew a pastor once whose wife
was the reason why he had to resign from his pastorate.

She could not control her tongue.

Things he told her in private came out in public.

And that generally does not last very long...

Sisters, are you working at being noble – strong – faithful women?

If you are married – are you seeking to honor your husband
by growing in grace and knowledge –
by growing in strength and diligence?

If you are single – are you already *practicing* these disciplines?

Because whether you marry or not – you are called to be a strong, noble woman!

(If you do marry, that will honor your husband –
and whether or not you marry, it will honor Christ!)

Verses 5-7 then continue to reflect on “speech in the household,”
with a focus on the just and the wicked:

⁵ *The thoughts of the righteous are just;
the counsels of the wicked are deceitful.*

⁶ *The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood,
but the mouth of the upright delivers them.*

⁷ *The wicked are overthrown and are no more,
but the house of the righteous will stand.*

Verse 5 starts with thoughts and plans.

Verse 6 moves to their words and actions.

Verse 7 concludes with their ends.

Given that we all have this tendency to think the best of ourselves and our own plans –
how do we know if our plans are *truly* just?

Well, do others *know* of your thoughts and plans?

Or do you keep certain parts of your plans *secret*.

If you keep parts secret – that *may* suggest that you are not sure
of the rightness of your plans

(or at least you are unwilling for others to evaluate your rightness)

This is why Proverbs encourages you to speak straightforwardly.

The mouth of the upright delivers them.

But the words of the wicked lie in wait for blood –
that's not just talking about *murder*.

The words of the wicked are *destructive*.

If your words are tearing down others –

if you are allowing harmful words to escape your lips –
then your words are lying in wait for blood.

Think of your words as *things* that go forth from your lips.

Once they have left your mouth,
your words have a life of their own!

You weren't thinking – you just said something in the heat of the moment –
and now those words are roaming around those who heard them!

Maybe they are repeated to others!

You hadn't thought about "others."

But now those others have heard your words –

and so your words are continuing to destroy and tear down –

long after you had maybe even forgotten what you said!

And so verse 7 concludes this section by pointing to the destinies of these two paths:

*"The wicked are overthrown and are no more,
but the house of the righteous will stand."*

Wickedness cannot establish a house – or a nation.

Wickedness – in the end – will fail and fall.

But the house of the righteous will stand – will endure – will *prosper*.

Verses 8-12 then talk about the importance of *good sense*.

c. “Being” and “Playing” – the Importance of “Good Sense” (v8-12)

If you look at these verses together, good sense results in plenty of bread.

A lack of sense results in a lack of bread.

⁸ *A man is commended according to his good sense,
but one of twisted mind is despised.*

⁹ *Better to be lowly and have a servant
than to play the great man and lack bread.*

¹⁰ *Whoever is righteous has regard for the life of his beast,
but the mercy of the wicked is cruel.*

¹¹ *Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread,
but he who follows worthless pursuits lacks sense.*

¹² *Whoever is wicked covets the spoil of evildoers,
but the root of the righteous bears fruit.*

Once again, we start with reputation.

In the previous section we heard that a man’s wife “determines his esteem in the community.”

This is obvious to me.

I’ve discovered that when people meet Ginger first,

they tend to have a much higher opinion of me than they do otherwise.

Which, in light of verse 8 means that I *must* have good sense – since I married her!!

Good sense is contrasted with a “twisted mind.”

We keep seeing this.

We need to speak straight – walk straight – and *think straight*.

That doesn’t mean that everything in life has easy, simply answers.

It means that our minds, hearts, words, and steps

are ordered on the straight path.

Verses 9-11 then describe the economics of this straight path of good sense.

Verse 9 says that it is better to be lowly and have a servant (the idea is “only one”)

than to play the great man and lack bread.

The great man has many servants!

But you would be foolish to “play the great man” –

the image here is that of someone who is pretending to be what he is not.

If you pretend to be what you are not –

you will come to ruin.

Thinking rightly about yourself is a central part of what it means to think *straight*.

That’s why it’s important to talk about your plans with those you trust

(to hear back from others if they see what you are seeing).

Verse 10 then turns to how you treat your animals.

“Whoever is righteous has regard for the life of his beast,
but the mercy of the wicked is cruel.”

Your beasts work for you.

In the ancient world, they didn't really have *pets*.
If a man was cruel to his animals, he *really* lacks sense –
because those beasts are his livelihood!

In the Ten Commandments, we are told to give our animals *rest* on the Sabbath day –
“on it you shall do no labor – you, nor your son, nor your daughter,
nor your manservant, nor your maidservant, *nor your ox, nor your ass*”

Your beasts of burdens shall be given rest on the Seventh Day –
because God is a God who cares for all his creatures.
They are included in *our* rest.

So the righteous will have regard for the life (for the well-being) of his beast.

The principle here is that of the lesser to the greater.

If someone treats his animal cruelly,
who will trust him with anything more important?
Think of Deuteronomy 25:4 – “you shall not muzzle an ox while he is treading the grain”
Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:9-10 that this was written for our sakes –
not for oxen!
(That doesn't mean that it's okay to mistreat your ox!
It means that you need to understand the *principle* here!)

“Even the mercy of the wicked is cruel.”
You've all seen it in the movies –
the “mercy” of the villain is always designed to cause greater pain.

2. The Ends of Good and Evil (v13-14)

Verses 13-14 assure us that this situation will not last for long.

¹³ *An evil man is ensnared by the transgression of his lips,^[a]
but the righteous escapes from trouble.*

Verse 14 is a synthetic proverb (not common in these chapters) –
which synthesizes all that is said in the first half of the chapter.

*¹⁴ From the fruit of his mouth a man is satisfied with good,
and the work of a man's hand comes back to him.*

Diligence and faithfulness will bear good fruit.

And this then sets us up for the second half of the chapter:

3. Faithfulness Delights the LORD (v15-28)

a. Do You Listen to Advice? (v15)

*¹⁵ The way of a fool is right in his own eyes,
but a wise man listens to advice.*

Verses 15 and 28 open and close this section with an inclusio about the way.

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes (v15)

In the path of righteousness is life (v28).

At the same time, verse 15 also connects us back to verse 1 –

“a wise man listens to advice”

(just like whoever loves discipline loves knowledge).

b. The Use and Abuse of the Mouth (v16-23)

These verses form a chiasm.

Notice the words fool, conceals [or ignores], and prudent in verse 16?

Well they are used in reverse order in verse 23: prudent, conceals, fool.

Likewise (in Hebrew) there are parallel words in verses 17 and 22,

and the central four verses (18-21) moves in a familiar trajectory,

from the words and lips (18-19) through the heart (v20) to the end (v21).

In the first half (verses 16-19) you see an alternating parallelism

between thoughtless reactions and thoughtful ones.

*¹⁶ The vexation of a fool is known at once,
but the prudent ignores an insult.*

We are living in a time when fools reveal their vexation very easily.

That has probably always been true –

only now there is a larger audience on social media...

But the prudent ignores an insult.

What is the point of revealing your irritation?
It simply reveals your lack of self-control!

If you want to know how to respond – keep reading!
In the court room (verse 17), give honest evidence.

*¹⁷ Whoever speaks^[b] the truth gives honest evidence,
but a false witness utters deceit.*

When you are called upon to bear witness
you must speak truthfully regarding what you have seen.
Don't play with the truth.
Don't bend it to what you think others want to hear!

And further, do not be rash in your words (verse 18)
but use your tongue to bring healing to others.

*¹⁸ There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts,
but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*

Words can hurt.
Words can kill.

When you have spoken hurtful words, *you need to repent!*
After all, when you have harmed someone else with your words –
there is only one way to return to the path of wisdom!
Use your words to bring healing.
And that means *repent* of how you harmed others with your words!
Undoubtedly someone else has harmed you with their words.
But that does not give you the right to harm others!

Because look at where your words are going (verse 19)

*¹⁹ Truthful lips endure forever,
but a lying tongue is but for a moment.*

We keep coming back to the eschatology of Wisdom.
These are not just temporary truths.
They are truths that endure forever –
because our Lord Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life
(three key terms in Proverbs!)
All of Wisdom comes together on his lips!

And thus *his* lips endure forever!

Verses 20-23 then take us back out of the chiasm through the same (but reversed) route.

²⁰ *Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil,
but those who plan peace have joy.*

²¹ *No ill befalls the righteous,
but the wicked are filled with trouble.*

²² *Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD,
but those who act faithfully are his delight.*

²³ *A prudent man conceals knowledge,
but the heart of fools proclaims folly.*

We are living in stressful times.

Stressful times reveal the folly in men's hearts.

Under pressure, what is in your heart will come out!

This is why it is important to *plan peace* – to set *shalom* as your goal.

Plan peace.

Act faithfully – be true to your word – and true to your God!

For those who act faithfully are his delight!

And *conceal knowledge*!

What?!

Conceal knowledge?

I like Waltke's comment here:

“The shrewd *is one who conceals knowledge*

because he is not driven neurotically by pride to parade his knowledge
or by rage to wreak harm.

He has the self-control to wait for the right situation

and the prudence to know when to speak up.” (W 539)

I have been guilty of parading my knowledge quite often –

so I can particularly appreciate the importance of this proverb.

Flaunting knowledge – showing off how much you know – is *not* the path of wisdom.

In other words, the *key* to the right use of the tongue is *self-control*.

And that is also true of the right use of *work*.

c. Diligence in Word and Deed (v24-27)

Verse 24 may sound familiar by now:

(We heard something similar in chapter 10, verse 4).

²⁴ *The hand of the diligent will rule,
while the slothful will be put to forced labor.*

If you are lazy, then someone will come along and make you work!

Verse 25 is particularly apropos in our crazy day.

²⁵ *Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down,
but a good word makes him glad.*

I have to say that you are getting really good at this!
So many of you have encouraged me with a “good word” here and there!
And truly, you have made me glad through your encouragement!

Keep it up!
And keep looking for others to encourage!

I heard of someone who had the idea of writing one encouraging note or email
to a family in their congregation each day.
They made it a part of their morning devotional practice.

Perhaps in these times of social distancing, we should encourage the old art of penpals!

But make sure that your words are going in good directions!
You may not think of yourself as a counselor.
But you *are* a counselor!

Think about verse 26:

²⁶ *One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor,^[c]
but the way of the wicked leads them astray.*

You are a counselor.
Your words give guidance to others.
The question is *what direction* are you guiding them?

This takes on a particularly important aspect in the midst of a pandemic!
Your posts and comments on social media are guiding others –
directing them towards a certain course of action.

Which way are you leading?
The righteous will guide his neighbor in the good way –
but the way of the wicked leads them astray...

Verse 27 wraps up this octave with another reflection on diligence.

²⁷ *Whoever is slothful will not roast his game,
but the diligent man will get precious wealth.*^[d]

d. Where Are You Going? (v28)

And all of this ends with life – or death.

We've been hearing lots of antitheses – opposites.

Verse 14 ended the first half with a synthetic parallel.

Verse 28 concludes the whole poem with another synthetic parallel –
except here the synthetic parallel is a contrasting one!

²⁸ *In the path of righteousness is life,
and in its pathway there is no death.*

We're back to the Way – the Truth – and the Life.

There is no death in the pathway of righteousness!

Even the grave cannot separate you from the God who loves you!

Long before the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,
Solomon understood this.

Long before Paul had penned Romans 8,
the wise had perceived that *nothing* can separate us from the love of God.

The path of righteousness

refers to the whole context, conduct, and consequences of your lifestyle.