

Proverbs 15: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

- [0 : 0 0] Proverbs chapter 15. A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouths of fools pour out folly.
- The eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good. A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.
- A fool despises his father's instruction, but whoever heeds reproof is prudent. In the house of the righteous there is much treasure, but trouble befalls the income of the wicked.
- The lips of the wise spread knowledge, not so the hearts of fools. The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is acceptable to him.
- The way of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but he loves him who pursues righteousness. There is severe discipline for him who forsakes the way. Whoever hates reproof will die.
- [1 : 0 0] Sheol and Abaddon lie open before the Lord. How much more the hearts of the children of man! A scoffer does not like to be reproved. He will not go to the wise.
- A glad heart makes a cheerful face, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is crushed. The heart of him who has understanding seeks knowledge, but the mouths of fools feed on folly.
- All the days of the afflicted are evil, but the cheerful of heart has a continual feast. Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it.
- Better is a dinner of herbs where love is than a fattened ox and hatred with it. A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger quiets contention.
- The way of a sluggard is like a hedge of thorns, but the path of the upright is a level highway. A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish man despises his mother.
- [1 : 5 9] Folly is a joy to him who lacks sense, but a man of understanding walks straight ahead. Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisors they succeed.
- To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season how good it is. The path of life leads upward for the prudent, that he may turn away from Sheol beneath.
- The Lord tears down the house of the proud, but maintains the widow's boundaries. The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord, but gracious words are pure.
- Whoever is greedy for unjust gain troubles his own household, but he who hates bribes will live. The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.
- The Lord is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous. The light of the eyes rejoices the heart, and good news refreshes the bones. The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise.
- [3 : 0 2] Whoever ignores instruction despises himself, but he who listens to reproof gains intelligence. The fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom, and humility comes before honour.

The control of one's spirit and one's tongue is essential to wisdom. The quick-tempered person will tend to incite others' anger, and will also respond to other people's anger with his own anger.

Proverbs chapter 15 verse 1 presents an alternative. The person who responds to wrath with a gentle answer. If you control your own spirit, you will also be able to de-escalate emotionally fraught and volatile situations.

The person who is able to speak calmly in such situations can dramatically change their dynamics. The wise person who has such rhetorical skill and mastery will rightly make knowledge seem attractive.

When you see someone who speaks with such wisdom, you will likely desire such control of your own tongue and mastery of speech for yourself. By contrast, the fool gushes forth folly.

[4 : 06] Instead of the finely controlled tongue, the fool vomits out his foolishness. Like the wise, he makes his heart evident in the process, but not in a way that commends it to anyone.

A spur to wisdom is knowing that God sees all that we do. He sees what we do, and who we are in the secret place. He sees the unfeigned self. The wise person, mindful that they are seen by God, acts accordingly, and develops deep integrity.

The evil person characteristically acts in a way that ignores this fact, when out of the sight of others they indulge in sin, while putting on a good appearance elsewhere. The hidden secrets of hearts are, however, revealed in due time.

The gentle tongue can heal, like the tree of life. We've had a similar proverb to this in chapter 12, verse 18. There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

By contrast, the tongue of the perverse is violent. It damages and injures others. Verses 5 to 12 particularly concern formative instruction. Verse 5 expresses a truth that we've encountered in various forms elsewhere, and is a relatively straightforward antithetical parallelism.

[5 : 18] The blessings of righteousness include the profit that it brings, especially when contrasted with wickedness. The wise don't just have wisdom for themselves, but they scatter it abroad to others.

By contrast, the heart of fools is disordered. It has no knowledge to disperse. Bare religious ritual and service, apart from a right disposition of the heart towards the Lord, is worthless.

This is a point made in several forms in the Old Testament. In 1 Samuel chapter 15, verse 22. And Samuel said, Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord?

Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. The wicked person may go through the most extravagant motions, offering the greatest of sacrifices.

However, if he is not offering his heart to the Lord, the sacrifice itself is an abomination. Isaiah chapter 1 verses 11 to 15 speak about this. What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices, said the Lord?

[6 : 18] I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts?

Bring no more vain offerings. Incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath, and the calling of convocations, I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.

Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you.

Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood. True sacrifice ought to be a sort of enacted prayer, confirmed in practice in which the offerer presents himself and his works to the Lord.

This verse is not opposing prayer and sacrifice. These two things belong together. Rather, it is underlining what true prayer and sacrifice entail. Verse 9 is paired with the proverb that preceded it.

[7 : 21] If the sacrifice and prayer of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, so is the way of the wicked. Both the wicked person's vertical worship and his horizontal way are abhorrent to God.

The pairing of these two proverbs also suggests the integrity of worship in a way that should be characteristic of the righteous. When we first encounter them, discipline and reproof can be resisted and rejected.

However, those who consistently reject reproof and discipline will ultimately face unavoidable discipline and reproof as they suffer the final bitter consequences of their chosen course.

The person who hates reproof will suffer the ultimate and decisive judgment in the form of death itself. In verse 3, we were told that the eyes of the Lord are everywhere, watching the good and the wicked.

In verse 11, his sight extends to the grave of Sheol and Abaddon, the place of destruction. By implication, these are realms to which he will condemn the wicked, whose hearts are no less open and exposed to him.

[8 : 23] Hebrews chapter 4 verses 12 to 13 declares, Wisdom is out there in the world.

It's in the voice of parents, in the counsel of the wise, in the word of the law, in the company of the righteous, and in many other such places. Besides having a heart that is unreceptive to wisdom, the fool will generally develop ways to avoid being exposed to wisdom, which he greatly dislikes.

Scoffing is a defensive mechanism against wisdom. Whenever he starts to feel the uncomfortable gravity of wisdom, the fool will employ the levity of scoffing. He will also use it to ridicule the wise, rather than learn from them.

Proverbs chapter 14 verse 7 declares, Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not meet words of knowledge. One of the reasons why this holds true is because the fool is so allergic to wisdom.

Out of this allergy to wisdom, the fool will avoid the wise, and for their part, the wise know better than to tarry in the presence of fools. The heart has a powerful effect upon a person's appearance, and upon their spirit.

[9 : 44] The downcast heart will be seen in a person's countenance, and also in their depressed manner. Conversely, the glad heart will be seen in a lively manner, and in a cheerful face.

The heart colours everything else. The wise have hearts hungry for knowledge, but fools have mouths that feed on folly. The implication here may be that the fool's mouth feeds on folly in his constant speaking of foolishness, whereas the wise man seeks knowledge by inner meditation upon the truth, by ruminating upon the word of God.

Verse 15 highlights the importance of the inner condition over the outer. The person who is joyful in heart will be like someone enjoying a continual feast, irrespective of the external circumstances that he experiences.

Verses 16 and 17 which follow, underline the importance of the state of a person's heart over their outward situations. A heart that fears the Lord and loves its neighbour with little material wealth is greatly to be preferred to great wealth and fine meals without these things.

Proverbs chapter 4 verse 23 counseled, Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. These verses provide just another reason why this counsel is so important.

[11:00] Verse 1 declared, Now the same principle is pressed further. It's related to the characters behind the words.

The hot-tempered man gives harsh words, but the man who is slow to anger can give the soft answer. The one who masters his own spirit can also be the master of his words, and consequently the master of situations.

The sluggard, who wishes to avoid all exertion, feels his way to be nothing but insurmountable obstacles. By contrast, uprightness and diligence will lead to one's way seeming smooth, straight and easy.

As Michael Fox observes, there are other potential interpretations here. The sluggard's chosen path is difficult. By laziness, procrastination and avoidance of labour, the sluggard ends up condemning himself to a much more difficult path than that of the diligent.

If he has set about his work diligently and straight away, he would find it much easier than he does in the end. Another possibility is that the sluggard's way is a hedge of thorns because he, unlike the upright, has never cleared it.

[12:10] His laziness again makes things harder for him than they need to be. Verse 20 recalls earlier proverbs in the collection, in chapter 10 verse 1 especially, which opens this collection, but also in chapter 12 verse 1 and 13 verse 1.

This is followed by another proverb tracing back folly and wisdom to the desires and loves of the heart. The fool finds joy in his folly, but the wise man walks on a straight path, by implication because he loves wisdom.

Counselors are important for wise deliberation. The fool simply wants to be confirmed in his way. He will mostly listen to flatterers and shut his ears to anyone else. However, the wise man will seek a multitude of advisors.

He will be careful not merely to listen to one set of voices. He wants various wise perspectives, so that informed by these in his deliberations, he can adopt a wise path.

He won't just look for whatever expert agrees with him, but will search for wise voices of various viewpoints and test them against each other. The plans of people that have been so formed and tested are much more likely to succeed.

[13:17] Being able to give a word in season, knowingly to speak the right thing as the right person in the right place and at the right time, is a great hallmark of wisdom.

It's essential to the proper use of the proverbs themselves. The wise man appreciates that there is more to the truth than merely a statement being true in the abstract. To speak is to act.

It's to deliver a specific truth in a specific context with a specific end. A claim that is true in the abstract may easily be the wrong thing to say at a given time.

The wise are keenly alert to this, and this is one of the respects in which they have mastered their tongues. The stakes of the life of wisdom are great. The prudent person is not merely seeking benefit in this present life, but following the path of life upwards, moving away from the domain of death and the grave, towards enduring fellowship with God.

The Lord intervenes in history against the proud, bringing down oppressors that vaunt themselves over and prey upon others. Here the pair is that of the proud and the widow, one of the most vulnerable figures.

- [14 : 25] The Lord acts against the proud and for the sake of the widow. He tears down the former and he establishes the latter. Elsewhere in scripture the Lord presents himself as the guardian of the widow and the fatherless.

He fills the place where the male guardian would otherwise have been. The Lord finds the plans of the wicked abhorrent, which is one of the reasons why he acts in judgment against them. However, gracious words are pure and delightful to him.

The Lord is pleased with the lips of the wise. In verse 25, the house of the proud is torn down by the Lord. And in verse 27, the greedy bring trouble upon their household by pursuing unjust gain.

From the antithetical parallel, this unjust gain is presumably received from bribes. Such bribes would pervert justice and gain favour at the expense of others. The wicked and the righteous are the subject of verses 28 and 29.

Once more, in verse 28, we see the difference between the righteous man, who weighs his words, and the wicked, who just vomits out his evil. The Lord abhors the wicked and is far from them.

- [15 : 29] He doesn't hear them. However, he delights in the well-governed heart of the righteous, and he hears such a man's prayers. The person bringing good news enlivens others. Bruce Waltke suggests that the messenger bringing good news reveals the goodness of his news in his eyes, and when that news is received, its effect is felt throughout the whole body of the receiver.

Fox differs. He argues that it is the sight of the eyes that is intended here, referring to what one sees, not to the light in another person's eyes. Reprove gives life, and the person who heeds it and seeks it out will dwell among the wise.

He will seek out their company, but he will also become one of them in time. The book of Proverbs often unmasks the true character of the desires and the practices of fools. In Proverbs chapter 8 verse 36, for instance, wisdom declares that those who hate her love death.

They may not realise it, but that is what they truly desire. We like to presume that we know the true character of our desires. However, there are times when, after foolishly pursuing our desires, and having tasted their bitter fruit, we might say, that really wasn't what I was looking for.

Proverbs tends to put this rather differently. The bitter fruit reveals what the foolish desire was about from the beginning. The person who ignores instruction is proud. The last thing that we might think is that he despises himself.

- [16 : 55] However, if he does not despise himself, why is he running headlong and unheeding towards his own utter ruin? The one who heeds reproof, by implication, is the man who truly respects himself.

Throughout the book of Proverbs and the other wisdom literature, the fear of the Lord is especially held forth as that which is most fundamentally characteristic of wisdom. Different places foreground different facets of the fear of the Lord.

It can be seen as an honouring of the Lord's teaching. In Proverbs chapter 1 verse 7, for instance, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Psalms 112 verse 1 connects this with delighting in the Lord's commandments. Praise the Lord. Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments.

In Proverbs chapter 8 verse 13, it is hatred of evil, especially seen in pride, arrogance and perverted speech, that comes to the foreground. The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil, pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate.

- [17 : 59] Job chapter 28 verse 28 emphasises a shooing of evil in this connection. And he said to man, Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.

A sense of reverence for the Lord in his holiness is the emphasis in chapter 9 verse 10 of Proverbs. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

In our passage, it is humility that is especially emphasised. The fear of the Lord is manifest in a humble heart. Proverbs chapter 22 verse 4 draws a similar connection.

The reward for humility and fear of the Lord is riches and honour and life. The humility in question is a humility arising out of the profound consciousness of God.

Such a humble person is a person who considers himself in the light of and in the sight of God. His humility is one of honouring the Lord over all else. He is contrite in spirit.

- [18 : 57] He trembles at the Lord's word. For this reason, the Lord's commandments are his meditation and his delight, heeded over all other voices. His heart is not lifted up.

However, he fears the Lord rather than man. When we think of humility, we can often focus on it as a trait inherent in someone, rather than seeing it primarily as a responsive and relative posture to someone else.

The humble person, we might think, is simply deferential, submissive, unassertive, obliging and nice more generally. However, the humility of the person with the fear of the Lord is such that he fears the Lord over all others.

Such a person can be firm, assertive, uncompromising and bold precisely out of this humility. His heart is captured by a sense of the Lord's holiness. He dares not ignore the Lord's word.

Such a person is not proud, arrogant or exalted in his own mind, but he will humbly stand firm against, resist, oppose, offend and even hurt others, rather than dare to disobey his Lord.

- [20 : 04] A question to consider. What are some ways in which we can cultivate this sort of humility and avoid various counterfeits?