

Proverbs 12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Proverbs chapter 12. Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid. A good man obtains favor from the Lord, but a man of evil devices he condemns. No one is established by wickedness, but the root of the righteous will never be moved. An excellent wife is the crown of her husband, but she who brings shame is like rotteness in his bones. The thoughts of the righteous are just, the counsels of the wicked are deceitful. The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood, but the mouth of the upright delivers them. The wicked are overthrown and are no more, but the house of the righteous will stand. A man is commended according to his good sense, but one of twisted mind is despised. Better to be lowly and have a servant than to play the great man and lack bread. Whoever is righteous has regard for the life of his beast, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel. Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits lacks sense. Whoever is wicked covets the spoil of evildoers, but the root of the righteous bears fruit. An evil man is ensnared by the transgression of his lips, but the righteous escapes from trouble.

From the fruit of his mouth a man is satisfied with good, and the work of a man's hand comes back to him. The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice. The vexation of a fool is known at once, but the prudent ignores an insult. Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence, but a false witness utters deceit. There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment. Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil, but those who plan peace have joy. No ill befalls the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble. Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight. A prudent man conceals knowledge, but the heart of fools proclaims folly. The hand of the diligent will rule, while the slothful will be put to force labour. Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad. One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbour, but the way of the wicked leads them astray. Whoever is slothful will not roast his game, but the diligent man will get precious wealth. In the path of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death. Proverbs chapter 12 continues the second section of the book of Proverbs, and the main collection of the Proverbs of Solomon. It opens in verses 1 to 3 with some fundamental truths about wisdom, and the action-consequence nexus. The first concerns the relationship between wisdom and the reception of discipline. The fool in his pride will not accept correction. Whereas the wise person loves discipline, he's humble enough to receive it, and he knows that the correction received from the wise will deepen his grasp upon knowledge. He isn't just willing to receive discipline, he loves it. Presumably this will lead him to pursue proper discipline. He will want correction when he goes astray. He will open himself up to being rebuked. He will invite people to speak harder words to him. He will do whatever is in his power to lower people's sense of trepidation in saying something that might offend him. He is not offended by correction. He delights in it. He regards those who give such correction to him as his true friends. He will keep them close by. He will gather honest counsellors around him, and he will be very vigilant against the flatterer. In these and many other ways, the person who loves discipline is at a great advantage over the person who will just grudgingly receive it. Verse 2 reminds us once again of the Lord's moral government over the affairs of men. Ultimately, beyond the natural consequences of people's actions, we should see the way that the Lord's hand is at work in bringing the consequences of people's sin upon their head and rewarding the righteous. Verse 3 continues to explore the consequence of wickedness. Wickedness may look to prosper. It grows up and flourishes for a period of time, but there is no root. And when the time of testing comes, it does not remain. However, the righteous are firmly grounded, and as a result, they will remain. Our actions and character reflect upon and affect other people, and theirs reflect upon

and affect us. The righteous and wise son is a glory to his parents. Likewise, the excellent wife is the crown of her husband. This point is taken up in Proverbs chapter 31, in verse 10 of that chapter. An excellent wife who can find. She is more precious than jewels. And in verse 23, her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land. The wise wife here is described as the greatest source of her husband's honour and standing. Her excellence equips her husband to exercise rule and enjoy social standing within his community. People often talk about the biblical teaching concerning the headship of the man, as if it were primarily internally focused within the life of the married couple. However, in scripture, the headship of the man is primarily directed out into the society more generally. And here we see that it is not a headship in which the man is alone. Rather, his capacity to exercise headship is profoundly dependent upon his wife.

The wife is the glory of her husband, and a wise wife can build up her husband within the community, and both of them prosper together. Rather than primarily thinking of the headship of the man being over the woman, we should think a lot more about the way that the woman is the one who crowns the headship of her husband. Without such a wise wife, a man is robbed of his greatest counsellor. He's robbed of his glory, of the one who gives him standing and honour within the community. There are few things more debilitating, as the second half of this verse makes clear, than a wife who brings shame.

[6 : 12] She compromises her husband's standing in the community. She has rottenness in his bones, greatly weakening him, and causing him significant pain. Verses 5-7 consist of contrasts between the righteous and the wicked. It moves from their thoughts and counsels, to their words and mouth, to their station and house. From deceitful counsels we get to lying in wait for blood, to persons that are overthrown. And on the other side, we have just thoughts, leading to the protection of upright mouths, to a house that will stand and endure in the time of testing. In verse 8, we see that people's social standing depends upon their known character, whether they are foolish or wise. The theme of social standing continues in the next verse, where those who are inordinately concerned with social appearances are seen to be foolish.

It is far better to prosper within one's means than to put on a great display of wealth that one does not actually possess. There are forms of behaviour that can reveal the character of a person. How a man treats those who are providing him with service, or those who are under his authority, can be very revealing. Perhaps also how a man treats children, who cannot offer him any great honour in return for his attention. Here Solomon focuses upon the way that a man treats his beast.

The law of the Sabbath commands Israelites to give rest to their ox and donkey. Elsewhere, they are commanded to show compassion for an animal in distress. The righteousness of a person, then, is revealed in the small mercies that they show to the people and animals around them. By contrast, the wicked lacks mercy. Even what the wicked might imagine to be merciful turns out to be cruel. As an example, we might think of the way that, in some supposedly morally advanced societies, children with Down syndrome will be aborted rather than being allowed to be born. It is presumed to be a kindness to rob such a person of their life, and to deny that their existence has the dignity to justify it.

Some people are always in search of a get-rich-quick programme, some way to find a shortcut to the gaining of wealth. However, the person who diligently works their land, and does not try and take the shortcut, will find that they have plenty of bread, while the person who is always looking around for such schemes, will come to nothing. The interpretation of verse 12 is a difficult one. The word rendered spoiled could also be rendered as net, or snare, or maybe stronghold. Bruce Waltke argues for the final rendering, suggesting that the meaning is that the wicked desires the fortification that is enjoyed by evildoers. They want this external defence. However, the righteous has firm roots, and that will be their defence. There is an intrinsic defence in righteousness that the wicked does not have in their wickedness.

[8 : 54] Something of the intrinsic reward, defence, and security of righteousness is seen in verses 13 and 14. The evil man's lips are his worst enemies. The evil man can tell lies and get caught out by them.

The evil man can incite violence with his lips, and it can boomerang back to him. The rash or impetuous words of an evil man can also catch him out. However, the righteous man escapes from trouble, and while the words of the evil man typically turn upon him in the time of trouble, the words of the righteous man are his greatest defence. Indeed, from his righteous speech, the righteous man is blessed.

It is like a tree that bears fruit, and then he gets to eat that fruit. What a man sows, he will later reap. The work of a man's hand comes back to him. The second half of the chapter begins with another proverb concerning formation that might remind us of the proverb with which the whole chapter began.

Once again, it concerns the contrast between the wise man and the fool's attitude towards advice and counsel. The fool is inured against teaching. He cannot receive it. He is right in his own eyes, so he will seek out the flatterer. He won't hear contrary advice. He will instinctively gravitate towards people who confirm him in his existing way. Verses 16 to 23 are concerned with sins of speech. They are stitched together by the alternation between negative followed by positive verses, and positive followed by negative verses. One of the hallmarks of a fool is his inability to control his spirit. He gives immediate vent to his temper, and cannot master it. You will always know when a fool is angry. By contrast, the wise and prudent man is the master of his spirit. He is able to ignore an insult. He is not bound up in a reactive relationship with other people. By responding peacefully to provocation, he is able to de-escalate situations. He gives people the opportunity to climb down. How many times in an argument do people utter rash words that they wish they could take back, but because the person with whom they are speaking cannot master their spirit and ignore an insult, they are pressed to double down on words that they would gladly retract. The person who can ignore an insult in this manner is the master of the situation. He is not determined by the anger of others, or by the heat and tension of situations. The connection between character and action is one that is often underlined in the book of Proverbs. Here we see that the person who speaks the truth gives honest evidence, and a false witness utters deceit. If you perceive people's actions, you will have a sense of their character, and likewise if you have a sense of their character, you will have a sense of their characteristic actions. In situations of uncertainty and in clarity, this gives us a principle by which we can judge how much to rely upon the words of people.

While it may seem banal or tautological, it is an important principle to grasp. The liar, for instance, will lie even when he doesn't have to. It is characteristic to him. When you have no way of immediately ascertaining the truth of a person's statement, you can nonetheless judge by their characteristic actions whether they are to be relied upon. The person who speaks the truth is discerned in a similar manner. If someone tells the truth even when they don't have to, or even to their own harm, we have good reason to rely upon them when things are otherwise uncertain. In verse 19, we see that the truthful lips endure, whereas lying tongues are soon silenced. Perhaps we could see this as being silenced in judgment, or maybe they are silenced by being confounded or condemned. While this is primarily a promise of blessing to the righteous and judgment upon the wicked, it also serves to illustrate the principle of time, the way that time reveals the character of people. The words of fools and liars rapidly depreciate in value, whereas the words of the wise will greatly appreciate in people's estimation over time. By the same principle, we should be wary of giving too much weight to novel words, and should pay far more attention to words whose wisdom has been tested by time. When people are always chasing the latest fad, they will be very susceptible to being led astray by lying tongues.

[13:01] When reading the Proverbs, it is important to pay attention to their form and what it reveals about their meaning. For instance, the antithetical parallelism of verse 20 suggests a contrast between the deceit that is in the heart of the wicked and the joy known by those who plan peace. The implication is that the deceit with which the wicked are preoccupied is something that brings no joy at all.

It is a miserable obsession that brings them only bitterness. The righteous are protected against evil. Whatever happens to them, the Lord ultimately shepherds them towards their good. All things work together for good to those who love God to the called according to his purpose. No such protection is enjoyed by the wicked. They are filled with trouble. They make trouble, and trouble will come back upon their own heads. Once again in verse 22, we are reminded of the moral government of the Lord. Lying lips are an abomination to him, but those who act faithfully are his delight.

Seeking the praise of the Lord and trusting in his moral government, it is not foolish to pursue an honest path. Verse 23 forms a bracket with verse 16. Verse 16 begins with a fool who cannot help but reveal his internal state, and then describes the prudent who is able to cover it up. Verse 23 reverses that order. The heart of fools proclaims folly. The fool cannot constrain his lips. He gives full utterance to his character. If you spend any time with a fool, he will want to tell you about his

folly. He cannot help but broadcast it. Not appreciating just how shameful his folly is, he cannot easily help but reveal its presence to those around him. If you really want to discover if someone is a fool, just listen to them. Give them time to speak. They will soon declare themselves. Verses 24 to 27 are bracketed by statements about the diligent and the slothful. Just as the words of the truthful appreciate in value, so the hand of the diligent will make him rich over time, while the slothful will come to nothing and be reduced to forced labour. In verse 27 we see that the slothful man will not even begin the task of pursuing gain perhaps, or will not bring it to its proper completion.

[15 : 09] He will waste the resources that he has to hand. The power of words is an important theme in the book of Proverbs. In verse 18 we see the power of rash words to cause damage, and the power of wise words to bring healing. The careless sword thrusts of rash words are easily applied, but words of healing reveal wisdom. In verse 25 we see something similar. The power of a good word fitly spoken in season to revive the troubled or anxious spirit. Righteousness and wickedness are contagious. They provide patterns for others to emulate. In verse 26 we see this. The person who's righteous is not just righteous for himself, he serves as a pattern and exemplar for others. When people see the righteous, they are spurred to righteousness. Verse 28 sums things up in describing the path of righteousness. It is a path of pure life, whereas we see earlier in the book of Proverbs. It is a path of rising light.

A question to consider. Proverbs chapter 12 is concerned at many points with the way that people's words and actions, even ones that might seem otherwise insignificant, reveal their characters. If we want to discern people's character, what are some of the key things in the immediate situation, in the medium term, and in the long term, that will help us to discern what type of persons they are?

