

Proverbs 13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Proverbs chapter 13. A wise son hears his father's instruction, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke. From the fruit of his mouth a man eats what is good, but the desire of the treacherous is for violence. Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life, he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin. The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied. The righteous hates falsehood, but the wicked brings shame and disgrace. Righteousness guards him whose way is blameless, but sin overthrows the wicked. One pretends to be rich, yet has nothing.

Another pretends to be poor, yet has great wealth. The ransom of man's life is his wealth, but a poor man hears no threat. The light of the righteous rejoices, but the lamp of the wicked will be put out. By insolence comes nothing but strife, but with those who take advice is wisdom. Wealth gained hastily will dwindle, but whoever gathers little by little will increase it. Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life. Whoever despises the word brings destruction on himself, but he who reveres the commandment will be rewarded. The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, that one may turn away from the snares of death. Good sense wins favor, but the way of the treacherous is their ruin. Every prudent man acts with knowledge, but a fool flaunts his folly. A wicked messenger falls into trouble, but a faithful envoy brings healing. Poverty and disgrace come to him who ignores instruction, but whoever heeds reproof is honored. A desire fulfilled is sweet to the soul, but to turn away from evil is an abomination to fools. Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm. Disaster pursues sinners, but the righteous are rewarded with good. A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, but the sinner's wealth is laid up for the righteous. The fallow ground of the poor would yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice. Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him. The righteous has enough to satisfy his appetite, but the belly of the wicked suffers want.

Proverbs chapter 13 begins with another proverb concerning instruction. Translating it more directly, it says, A wise son of father's instruction. The second verset about the scoffer's failure to heed rebuke implies that the wise son hears the father's instruction. However, Michael Fox suggests that we should read this verse as stroboscopic. J.B. Williams defines this term as a juxtaposition of images which are seen quickly side by side, then they are shut off. The point would be that a wise son implies a father's instruction. If you see a wise son, you are seeing the consequence of the discipline of a wise and a good father. The second half of the verse suggests that the converse implication cannot be so readily drawn. A foolish son is not necessarily the evidence of a lack of a father's instruction, although he commonly will be. Rather, there are scornful sons who refuse to receive the discipline and rebukes of those over them. There's an inexact contrast between the fruit of a man's mouth and the appetite of the treacherous in verse 2, suggesting that the wise man produces life-sustaining conditions by his wise speech, whereas the treacherous has an appetite for violence and produces nothing that sustains himself as a result. Once again, we need to recognise the way in which the meaning of proverbs is not all on the surface. It requires closer attention and reflection.

By inexact juxtapositions, for instance, they can imply things without saying them directly. We should also always be trying to discern the way in which the proverbs are true. They don't provide their own context, and spoken in the wrong context, they might even be foolish. The hearer is required to discern contexts and ways in which a proverb might be true, discovering when it should be used and when it should not. In the book of Job, for instance, we have several examples of ways in which poorly applied truth can function as error. There are a few proverbs that make a similar point.

The mouth is like a gate to be guarded. We should have circumspection in our speech. James chapter 3 verses 5 to 10 speaks about the danger of the uncontrolled tongue or mouth.

[4 : 30] So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed, and has been tamed by mankind. But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who were made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

A similar point is made in Proverbs chapter 21 verse 23. Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble. Verse 4 contrasts the craving of the soul of the sluggard, who gets nothing in reward for his craving, and the soul of the diligent, that is not defined by craving, but is nonetheless richly supplied.

As he works hard, he finds more than enough for his needs. Verses 5 and 6 present two contrasts between the righteous and the wicked. The righteous hating falsehood, and righteousness guarding the one whose way is blameless.

We've seen the same point elsewhere in the book of Proverbs. Righteousness is something that protects people. Their integrity is something that upholds and guards them. On the other hand, the wicked, by the very sinful paths that they have chosen for themselves, invite ruin.

[6 : 00] Themes of wealth come to the foreground in verses 7 to 11. Verse 7 is a complicated one to understand. Bruce Waltke gives a number of different possibilities. It could refer to the person who considers himself rich, but isn't.

The one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God, like the rich fool of Luke chapter 12. Or it could refer to people who are blind to what they have or do not have.

Or maybe the focus is on pretense. We can think about this in the context of Proverbs chapter 12 verse 9. Better to be lowly and have a servant than to play the great man and lack bread.

Verse 8 is another complicated verse to understand. There's an inexact opposition in the antithetical parallelism of the verse. The ransom of man's life does not match. He is no threat.

The rich man has the resources to buy his way out of trouble that he has gotten himself into. The second half of the verse is not so clear. Waltke suggests that since the poor man cannot pay up, he has no motivation to listen to moral rebuke.

[6 : 59] The rich man's standing and possessions means that he has something to lose, which make him more receptive to moral correction. The rich and famous, for instance, may publicly confess their faults when they are called out, because their wealth is put in jeopardy.

Fox argues that this is not very persuasive. It is far too convoluted an explanation. William McCain argues that it means that the poor man, who lacks the supposed security of wealth, may find that people have less leverage on him.

He has nothing to lose, so he cannot be threatened in the same way. The difference between the wealth of the righteous and the wealth of the wicked is expressed in verse 9, with the light of one and the lamp of the other.

The lamp of the wicked may seem to burn very brightly for a time, but it is short-lasting, whereas the true wealth of the righteous will endure. A common theme in the book of Proverbs is the substance and character and source of people's wealth.

We may focus simply upon the appearance, but that leaves many of the most important factors unexamined. Easy money, wealth obtained through wrongdoing, wealth that is not backed up by diligence, and other sorts of perverse wealth, are short-lasting and provide no long-term security.

[8 : 08] At other points it is the nature of the wealth that is contrasted. A rich person may have vast sums in the bank, but may have a life that is miserable and full of care, whereas a righteous person who is invested in the life of their household may enjoy great prosperity of a kind, albeit with little money to his name.

Many of the things that are most valuable are not things that appear on a bank balance. Insolence and refusal to take advice produce strife. Arrogant and unteachable fools produce violent and unsettled communities.

Waltke expresses the principle from a different perspective. Where there is strife, there is pride. By implication, one of the hallmarks of the wise who take advice is peace.

Once again, the source and the character of wealth is the subject of verse 11. Wealth that's gained as easy money will soon dwindle. The person who gets a great windfall in the lottery can easily squander it.

The foolish lottery winner can squander what they have, because they do not have the principles by which such wealth is truly gained. Meanwhile, the person who gathers little by little has the fundamental principle by which wealth is generated.

[9 : 16] Within our society, we can often focus narrowly upon the way that money is divided, or the way that power is divided, and not pay enough attention to the different ways that these things are generated in the first place.

A society that is built upon gambling and speculation may enjoy great wealth, but it will not actually be secure wealth, whereas those who gather little by little and build up in a responsible way have wealth that will be more enduring.

The theme of desire fulfilled connects verses 12 and 19 and brackets the material between them, which mostly concerns desires and what comes to pass for the foolish and the wise.

The sapping of morale is one of the results of frustrated hopes, but the experience of the realization of one's hopes revives and gives new life. Verse 13 speaks of the despising or revering of the commandment, and the consequences that these postures bring upon oneself.

The person who reveres the word of God and who honors the teaching of the wise, which is the subject of the next verse, will prosper, whereas those who despise it will come to ruin. In verse 14, the teaching of the wise is described as a fountain of life.

[10 : 22] It grants those who attend to it the fullness of life and its blessings. In verse 15, we see that good judgment wins favor with God and man. People pay attention and give honor to the wise, and more so as time goes on, and as they see that their words have not fallen to the ground.

Their words grow in weight over time and in value. The antithesis here, however, is treachery, which is likely not what we would presume to be the antithesis. When reading Proverbs, John Higgins has helpfully suggested covering up the second verset while reading the first, and then guessing what the antithesis or the synonymous or synthetic parallel would be.

Then we should look at what the actual statement is, and then reflect upon the difference between what we expected and what is actually the case. Here the surprise of the antithesis invites us to reflect upon how treachery and disloyalty may be the opposite of the good judgment that wins favor, or, alternatively, on how prudence is loyal.

The next verse shows how the shrewd man acts circumspectly, whereas the fool flaunts his folly. Whereas the wise man carefully deliberates about his action, the fool cannot help but display his character in all that he does.

The treacherous or unreliable messenger is the subject of verse 17. Ultimately, such a messenger comes to ruin. He betrays those that he is supposed to be acting for, but a faithful ambassador brings healing.

[11 : 43] The consequences of ignoring instruction are poverty and disgrace, but honor is enjoyed by those who heed. The desire fulfilled was compared to the tree of life in verse 12, and now in verse 19 it is spoken of as sweet to the soul.

But now there is a surprising parallel. To turn away from evil is an abomination to fools. The only immediate point of contrast here seems to be between sweetness and abomination, but this invites us to unpack and to consider what might be implied.

The fulfillment of desire is sweet, but such a gratification comes only to those who abhor evil. The fool cannot allow himself to turn away from his evil, so he will be doomed to experience the frustration and the sickness of deferred hope.

Verse 20 moves to the subject of companionship. Who are your companions? Those people that you keep company with will shape your character. Those who walk with the wise take on their character, likewise those who associate with fools.

You can tell a lot about people by their friends and the company that they keep. You can tell something, as you see in this verse, about their destiny. You will also have an indication of their character and their values.

[12 : 52] The book of Psalms begins with this concern to avoid evil company. Psalm 1 verse 1 1 Corinthians chapter 15 verse 33 makes a similar point.

Do not be deceived. Bad company ruins good morals. Verses 21 and 22 should be read as a pairing. The first begins with sinners and then goes on to the good, and then the next begins with good and goes on to sinners.

As such, they are a miniature chiasmic pair. They explore the contrasting fates that belong to these two groups. Disaster is like a homing missile on its way towards the sinner.

He is doomed. It's only a matter of time. In verse 22, the emphasis moves to the question of inheritance or no inheritance. The good that the righteous person establishes can endure.

We may think about the way that the Lord promises blessings to thousands of generations to those who love him. On the other hand, there are principles that countervail this within the wisdom literature. We might think about the book of Ecclesiastes, which speaks about the futility of the person who lays up wealth and builds a legacy, only for it to be carelessly squandered by a fool that comes after him.

[14:06] Proverbs push against each other and are often qualified by each other. One of the marks of the wise is knowing the extent to which and the context within which a statement is true. Injustice is a powerful force that can frustrate the poor.

In verse 23, wicked oppressors are one complication of the deed consequence nexus of Proverbs. The ground or the poor themselves are swept away by injustice, and so the diligence of the poor may be denied its just reward.

The English proverb, spare the rod, spoil the child, is expressed more sharply in verse 24. The one who spares the rod hates his son. The mercy of the wicked is cruel, as we see in chapter 12, verse 10.

Wicked parents may think that they are being kind to their children in not disciplining them.

However, theirs is an act of great cruelty. Jordan Peterson has written about these dynamics in his book, Twelve Rules for Life.

He writes, He continues later, But more often than not, modern parents are simply paralysed by the fear that they will no longer be liked or even loved by their children if they chastise them for any reason.

[16:09] They want their children's friendship above all and are willing to sacrifice respect to get it. This is not good. A child will have many friends, but only two parents, if that. And parents are more, not less, than friends.

Friends have very limited authority to correct. Every parent, therefore, needs to learn to tolerate the momentary anger or even hatred directed towards them by their children after necessary corrective action has been taken, as the capacity of children to perceive or care about long-term consequences is very limited.

Parents are the arbiters of society. They teach children how to behave so that other people will be able to interact meaningfully and productively with them. It is an act of responsibility to discipline a child.

It is not anger at misbehaviour. It is not revenge for a misdeed. It is instead a careful combination of mercy and long-term judgement. Proper discipline requires effort.

Indeed, it is virtually synonymous with effort. It is difficult to pay careful attention to children. It is difficult to figure out what is wrong and what is right and why. It is difficult to formulate just and compassionate strategies of discipline and to negotiate the application with others deeply involved in a child's care.

[17:23] Because of this combination of responsibility and difficulty, any suggestion that all constraints placed on children are damaging can be perversely welcome. The primary form of discipline in the book of Proverbs is not punishment.

It is loving instruction, guidance, and giving an example. Those who depend narrowly upon punishment are misguided, but so are those who think it kindness not to discipline. Hebrews chapter 12 verses 5 to 11 describes the discipline of the Lord.

And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves and chastises every son whom he receives.

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.

[18 : 35] For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. The rod stands for discipline more generally, not spanking more narrowly.

There are many forms of discipline that fall under this theme here, nor should this be focused just upon the young child. The rod here may be related to the punishment that would be inflicted upon the severest actions of the older child.

The rod then would represent the furthest extent that punishment can take, as in the case of the man's blood being shed, who has shed man's blood in Genesis chapter 9. The consequences of poor parental discipline are seen everywhere within our society.

Many of the social dysfunctions that we experience are either the consequence of a lack of discipline of our children, or the bitter harvest of seeds of poor discipline that was applied earlier on. Proud, entitled, selfish people who believe that the world should revolve around them, and that no one should cross their will, have generally been made that way by a certain sort of upbringing.

[19 : 38] This gets at another sense of the meaning of this verse. Whoever spares the rod hates his son. He comes to loathe the son that his upbringing has produced, whereas the son who has been raised faithfully by his father enjoys a good relationship with that father, because the son that has experienced discipline becomes a likable person.

One of the tests of good discipline is whether it produces this lasting love between parent and child. Many children have experienced cruelty and violence from their parents, which masquerades as discipline, but is really anger and vengefulness.

The parent wants to break or suppress the child's will. They terrorise their child because they believe that their will should have dominance. Many modern forms of parenting are a reaction against cruel forms of parenting that prevailed in the past.

However, parents who coddle and spoil their kids, and parents who psychologically manipulate and condition their kids just to make them compliant with them, are also expressing a sort of hatred towards them, rather than actually instructing them.

The loving father will be diligent to discipline his son. He will not allow a sort of false empathy for his son to prevent him from exercising such discipline. True discipline is a result of compassion and love.

[20 : 52] Even though it hurts the child, it does the opposite of harming them. The child may not like it, but it will be for their long-term good. This is a test of true love in the book of Proverbs. As Proverbs chapter 27 verse 6 puts it, Faithful are the wounds of a friend, profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

This principle very strongly applies to parenting. The chapter ends by returning to the theme of desire and appetite, something that it has discussed at various points. The righteous finds that his appetites and his desires are met, whereas the wicked are frustrated.

A question to consider. In verse 15 we read, Good sense wins favor, but the way of the treacherous is their ruin. Why is treachery the antithesis of good sense?

