

Proverbs 14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Proverbs chapter 14. The wisest of women builds her house, but folly with her own hands tears it down. Whoever walks in uprightness fears the Lord, but he who is devious in his ways despises him.

By the mouth of a fool comes a rod for his back, but the lips of the wise will preserve them. Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean, but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox. A faithful witness does not lie, but a false witness breathes out lies. A scoffer seeks wisdom in vain, but knowledge is easy for a man of understanding. Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not meet words of knowledge. The wisdom of the prudent is to discern his way, but the folly of fools is deceiving. Fools mock at the guilt offering, but the upright enjoy acceptance.

The heart knows its own bitterness, and no stranger shares its joy. The house of the wicked will be destroyed, but the tent of the upright will flourish. There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. Even in laughter the heart may ache, and the end of joy may be grief. The backslider in heart will be filled with the fruit of his ways, and a good man will be filled with the fruit of his ways. The simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps. One who is wise is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool is reckless and careless. A man of quick temper acts foolishly, and a man of evil devices is hated. The simple inherit folly, but the prudent are crowned with knowledge. The evil bow down before the good, the wicked at the gates of the righteous.

The poor is disliked even by his neighbour, but the rich has many friends. Whoever despises his neighbour is a sinner, but blessed is he who is generous to the poor. Do they not go astray who devise evil?

[2 : 00] Those who devise good meet steadfast love and faithfulness. In all toil there is profit, but mere talk tends only to poverty. The crown of the wise is their wealth, but the folly of fools brings folly. A truthful witness saves lives, but one who breathes out lies is deceitful.

In the fear of the Lord one has strong confidence, and his children will have a refuge. The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, that one may turn away from the snares of death. In a multitude of people is the glory of a king, but without people a prince is ruined. Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly. A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot. Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his maker, but he who is generous to the needy honours him. The wicked is overthrown through his evil doing, but the righteous finds refuge in his death. Wisdom rests in the heart of a man of understanding, but it makes itself known even in the midst of fools. Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.

A servant who deals wisely has the king's favour, but his wrath falls on one who acts shamefully. Proverbs chapter 14 begins with a proverb that might remind us of Proverbs chapter 9 verse 1. Wisdom has built her house. She has hewn her seven pillars. We should remember that the book of Proverbs is largely written to the young son. The choice of wisdom is seen in the choice of the right woman. This is particularly seen at the very end of the book of Proverbs, in Proverbs chapter 31 verses 10 to 31. The house of the woman is her household and her standing within the community. The foolish woman is the opposite of such a wise woman. She will bring to ruin everything that is a charge. The wrong woman will be the ruin of her husband, but the right woman will be his glory.

[4 : 08] You can discern people's fear of the Lord by their integrity or their lack thereof. This is the claim that is made in verse 2. In many ways it's an application of a principle that our Lord teaches us.

By their fruit you will know them. If you see someone walking in uprightness, you know something about their character. They are someone who fear the Lord. Someone who is devious and deceptive, you know something about who they are within. They despise the Lord. The fool's careless words in verse 3 come back to haunt him, not having guarded his lips, his rash vows, his inciting words, his lies, or whatever he speaks that is false and foolish, comes back and ends up causing him trouble.

The wise man, by contrast, is greatly strengthened by his speech. He speaks wisely and prudently, and so as a result his words empower him. There is no manger to clean when there are no oxen, but nor will there be abundant crops. Verse 4 makes the point that out of unwillingness to undertake the unpleasant task of cleaning the manger, a man cuts himself off from a great source of wealth. The fool and the sluggard's desire for easy money is related to this. They don't want to undertake responsibility and unpleasant tasks, and so they're always looking for the quick fix, the quick way to get rich.

The diligent and the responsible and the wise, however, know that taking up responsibility and challenge and difficulty brings true and lasting wealth. How is a judge to discern the character of a witness? Mostly through consistency of character. Lying is like breathing to the false witness. He breathes out lies. He can't help but speak lies. Even when he does not need to speak lies, he will speak them nonetheless. It's become second nature to him. The faithful witness, by contrast, will consistently speak the truth, even when it is difficult, unpopular, or might cause him some severe disadvantage.

A common theme in the book of Proverbs is that one's posture of heart is determinative for whether one will receive wisdom or not. The person who is a fool or a scoffer is inured to wisdom. Even if he wanted to find wisdom, he will not be able to find it. His heart is not apt for the receiving of wisdom. [6 : 20] Verse 7 warns people to move away from the presence of fools. If you encounter fools who are settled in a particular context, you have a good indication that you are not in a place where you are likely to encounter wisdom. By their fruits you will know them. This applies to contexts as well as to persons.

If, for instance, you want to know if a church is a good church, pay attention to the people who have been there for many years. See what character it has produced in them. If you want to know if a pastor is a good pastor, pay attention to their family. Do they have a happy wife? Do they have faithful children? Do they have a calm and peaceful home? Or is it a place of conflict and discord? Dwayne Garrett suggests that verses 8 to 15 function as a concentric or chiasmic pattern, beginning with the shrewd and the fools in verse 8. Then that's paralleled with the gullible versus the intruder in verse 15. Making amends for sin in verse 9 is paralleled with being repaid for sin in verse 14. Secrets of the heart in verse 10 parallel with secrets of the heart in verse 13. And then at the heart, the destruction of the wicked versus the prosperity of the upright in verse 11, and the deceptive way to death in verse 12. The focus of this section is upon walking by faith, not by sight. There's an inexact antithesis in verse 8. The wisdom of the prudent matches with the folly of fools, but the one is associated with discerning his way and the other with deceiving.

Perhaps the suggestion is that the folly of fools is self-deceiving. Alternatively, the insight of the prudent in his way is something that brings light and insight to other people who are around them. [7 : 56] Fools don't take sin seriously, and as a result they mark at the guilt offering and the need to make reparations for trespass. However, the upright are very mindful about the dangers of sin, and as a result they enjoy acceptance. No one truly knows what another person is experiencing. The heart cannot be discerned merely from outer circumstance. You can see someone smile, but you do not know where the great sorrow may lie behind it. It is both difficult to discern and difficult to communicate the true state of people's hearts. As a result, we should beware of presuming by outer circumstance or outer appearance to judge people's inner state. The warning not to judge by outward appearance continues in verse 11. The house naturally looks much more secure than the tent, but yet a house of wickedness is much less secure than the tent of the upright. By outward appearance it may look often as if the wicked are truly flourishing and the righteous are failing, but yet with the eyes of faith we can see that this is not the case. We should appreciate the importance of living by faith within the book of Proverbs.

It is easy to fall into the trap of seeing the book of Proverbs as a book of living by a sort of sight, yet here and elsewhere we are reminded that there is more to the picture than meets the eye.

Living by faith and not by sight is also a subject of verse 12. Things may seem right to the man by his sight, but yet that way can lead to death. It is only the person who lives by faith and follows the law of God, accepting in the fear of the Lord his commandment, that we will know the true way that leads to life. We must not merely judge by the outward appearance. Verse 13 is like verse 10. We should not judge by present appearances. The laughter that the person may have may disguise an aching heart. In addition to recognising that the present appearances are not the full picture of the present reality, we should also recognise that they do not give us a full indication of the long term outcome. The person who is experiencing joy now may find that joy turned to sorrow in the end.

Both the backslider and the good man will receive the consequences of their ways. You reap what you sow. This, like principles such as by their fruit you will know them, is a common theme in the book of Proverbs. The prudent person is mindful and does not judge by surface appearances as the simple man does. The prudent person is led by the fear of the Lord and as a result gives thought to his way and does not merely judge by the outward appearance.

[10:27] Folly is recklessness. The fool does not give thought to the future. He is allergic to reflecting upon where his actions are leading him. He will squirm in discomfort whenever forced to think about future consequences. By contrast, the wise man is circumspect. He does not merely fixate upon present pleasures, trying to dismiss from his attention the way that things might be headed, to consider the harvest that the seeds of his present action might be sowing.

An example of the reckless person is the impetuous and quick-tempered person. But alongside this figure, there is also the conniving schemer. The wise person contrasts with the impetuous and hot-headed man.

He is cool and level-headed. However, there is a cool-headed form of evil, of the schemer, but he is also doomed on account of his wickedness. The simple receive a destructive inheritance, but the prudent gain the honour of knowledge. The evil and wicked persons will ultimately come under the dominion of the righteous. If you cannot exercise good rule over yourself, you will ultimately come under the rule of others. The dangers of both poverty and riches with respect to friendship are described in verse 20. The poor person is cut off from friendship. No one wants to be the poor person's friend because the poor person will be dependent upon them. But the rich has many friends. All these people are gathered around them, wanting what they can give. Those friends are fair-weather friends, and they would rapidly abandon them, were they to lose their wealth. This is not a justification for an attitude of indifference to the poor, as verse 21 makes plain. The righteous person shows concern for their needy neighbour. Verse 22 contrasts the devising of evil to the devising of good. The former think that they are crafty, but they end up going astray, losing their way. However, the righteous should devote shrewdness to the task of doing good, and they will receive steadfast love and faithfulness as a result. There are certain people who are all talk and no labour, but the person who really prospers will be the person who engages in true labour. This relates to the planning of verse 22.

The wise are rewarded. They enjoy wealth, honour, social status and authority. However, the folly of fools has its own natural consequence, which is folly itself. What else would we expect it to bring?

The effects of truthful and dishonest witnesses are described in verse 25. Truthful witnesses courageously deliver lives from death, whereas false witnesses will deceitfully condemn the innocent to death. The action of the false witness was previously described in relationship to his character.

[13:08] Now it is described in relationship to his consequences. The fear of the Lord is at the centre of verses 26 and 27. The fear of the Lord grants confidence and enduring security. It is the sustaining source of life and delivers one from the traps that lead to death. We can see a parallel between verse 27 and verse 14 of chapter 13. The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, that one may turn away from the snares of death. This parallels the fear of the Lord with the teaching of the wise. The king is the highest example of the leader. A great leader finds his glory in the people around him, in the character that he has formed and encouraged in them. In their loyalty and in their love, the prince's glory can be easily lost if he loses his people. By extension, the glory of a man is a happy and holy household with a loving wife and faithful children.

To enjoy this glory, he needs to recognise the value of those around him for his own honour and to treat them accordingly. Slowness to anger is contrasted with hastiness of temper in the verse that

follows. The understanding person is not reactive, but patient, self-controlled and the master of his own spirit. The fool, by contrast, can easily be incited to rash action. And the next verse presses this point further. The well-governed heart is at peace, it's calm, it's content. However, the fool's heart is unsettled by envy, by passion, resentment, and all these forms of bitterness, and it eats away at him from within. The Lord is concerned for the poor, he's the protector and the patron of the poor, and the way that people treat the poor expresses either honour or dishonour towards him. The poor person is utterly dependent on the goodness and the generosity of others, much as we are utterly dependent upon the Lord. The way that we treat those who are dependent upon us should reflect the way that God has treated us. And if we treat them with cruelty, we are making a statement about God by implication. We might think here of the parable of the unforgiving servant. He is forgiven an incredible debt, but then he goes on to treat the man who has a debt to him with incredible cruelty. The wicked man comes to ruin through his own sin, but the righteous will be assured of a good end. Verse 32 suggests that Proverbs sees its principles resting in part upon post-mortem blessings and judgments, not just upon blessings in this life. Wisdom rests, it is settled peacefully, in the heart of the understanding man, but it still makes itself known in the midst of fools. We might think of wisdom calling out to the simple earlier in the book, or the way that the wise person is revealed by contrast with fools that might surround him. Ideally, we want to move towards the position where wisdom is at rest within us, not merely trying to make itself heard above the hubbub of folly. The true source of a people's greatness or decline is moral, not military, not political, not economic or scientific. If a people want to prosper, they must give themselves to righteousness and wisdom. The great illustration of this, of course, is the story of Israel in the books of the kings. The ideal in such a society is the elevation of righteous officials and the judgment of shameful, treacherous, wicked and unfaithful ones. Here we might consider what happens when the opposite occurs. King David, when he gives himself to sin in the story of Uriah and Bathsheba, ends up elevating treacherous and unreliable servants. He elevates Joab and other servants who do not obey his commandments exactly, who do not deliver his messages faithfully. If we want our people to prosper, whether that's our nation, whether it's our church or our family, there must be righteousness in the hidden place and that righteousness must spread out in the way that we treat and appoint and reward and encourage others around us. A question to consider, how might we, in our current situations, move towards something of the glory of the king as it is described in verse 28?