

Proverbs 17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 March 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Proverbs chapter 17. Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife. A servant who deals wisely will rule over a son who acts shamefully, and will share the inheritance as one of the brothers. The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and the Lord tests hearts. An evildoer listens to wicked lips, and a liar gives ear to a mischievous tongue.

Whoever mocks the poor insults his maker. He who is glad at calamity will not go unpunished. Grandchildren are the crown of the aged, and the glory of children is their father's. Fine speech is not becoming to a fool, still less is false speech to a prince. A bribe is like a magic stone in the eyes of the one who gives it. Wherever he turns, he prospers. Whoever covers an offence seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends. A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool. An evil man seeks only rebellion, and a cruel messenger will be sent against him. Let a man meet a she-bear robbed of her cubs, rather than a fool in his folly.

If anyone returns evil for good, evil will not depart from his house. The beginning of strife is like letting out water. So quit before the quarrel breaks out. He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the righteous, are both alike an abomination to the Lord. Why should a fool have money in his hand to buy wisdom when he has no sense? A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.

One who lacks sense gives a pledge, and puts up security in the presence of his neighbour.

Whoever loves transgression loves strife. He who makes his door high seeks destruction.

A man of crooked heart does not discover good, and one with a dishonest tongue falls into calamity.

He who sires a fool gets himself sorrow, and the father of a fool has no joy. A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones. The wicked accepts a bribe in secret, to pervert the ways of justice. The discerning sets his face toward wisdom, but the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth. A foolish son is a grief to his father, and bitterness to her who bore him.

[2 : 32] To impose a fine on a righteous man is not good, nor to strike the noble for their uprightness. Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.

Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise. When he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.

Proverbs chapter 17 begins with a proverb reminiscent of Proverbs chapter 15 verse 17.

Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a fattened ox and hatred with it. Here the house of feasting seems to refer to a house full of sacrifices. The peace and harmony of a household is its greatest wealth, and not even great banquets can compensate for its lack.

In this image of a strife-filled house enjoying peace offerings, we might think of the example of the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians chapter 11, when some are eating before others, some are going home drunk, and others are going home hungry. What should have been a great celebration of their oneness in Christ in the celebration of the Lord's Supper actually ends up being quite the opposite.

Even a dry morsel, if it were expressive of the peace and unity of a household, would be preferable to that. The status that a person comes to enjoy can depend far more upon their character than upon their birth. While the son of the house has great advantage over the servant, he can by his folly fall from his position, and the servant, for his part, can be raised up. Although we are rightly attentive to the disparities of birth within a society, we should also pay attention to the way in which people can rise and fall as a result of their folly or their wisdom. Verse 3 is similar to a statement that we find elsewhere in Proverbs chapter 27 verse 21. The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and a man is tested by his praise. What might appear to be fine silver is tested in the crucible, and that which appears to be pure gold is tested in the furnace. Appearances may deceive.

[4 : 31] When these substances are tested, it may transpire that they are otherwise than they first appeared. The Lord tests hearts in a similar way. The testing of the hearts in view here is probably not just the Lord's seeing of the heart. Rather, what might be in view is the Lord's testing of a heart by bringing someone into difficult situations. Situations that will reveal, by the person's response, the true character that they have. Among other things, this is a warning against presumption. We can easily focus upon how we appear to others, but the true character of our heart will be revealed as the Lord tests us. It is his inspection that we should be most concerned about. Wicked people listen to wicked lips, and liars give heed to lies. The people who are the source of wickedness and falsehood are also attracted to those things in other people's speech, and as a result they are susceptible to being caught in the same sort of trap that they lay for others. Verse 5 warns against schadenfreude towards the poor. We should not take delight in the misfortunes of the poor. The second verset suggests that it is the economic and material calamities that have struck them that will have encouraged the mockery.

The Lord's concern for the poor here is described in ways that are similar to those in chapter 14 verse 31. Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his maker, but he who is generous to the needy honours him.

Our proper posture to the person who is in distress, even our personal enemy, should be concern and care. We can see this in chapter 25 verses 21 to 22. If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you.

The glory of old age is spoken of earlier in chapter 16 verse 31. Grey hair is a crown of glory. It is gained in a righteous life. Here we are told that grandparents are crowned with their grandchildren. As grandparents are surrounded by their grandchildren, they are already seeing and enjoying the harvest of the legacy that they have stored up. There is however a reciprocal glory here. Children also glory in their parents and grandparents and those who have gone before them.

[6 : 41] Elsewhere in this chapter there are statements of the shame that foolish children can bring to their parents. In verse 21, He who sighs a fool gets himself sorrow, and the father of a fool has no joy.

And in verse 25, A foolish son is a grief to his father, and bitterness to her who bore him. Righteous children, however, are a glory to their parents, and vice versa. The righteous son will honour his father and mother, and will treat the teaching that they have given him as akin to a wonderful ornament.

It's his glory. Earlier in the book, we saw the connection between the way of wisdom and the fifth commandment, honouring father and mother. That same principle, expressed in a more elaborate form here, shows the mutual glory that is characteristic of the way of wisdom, where the generations glorify each other, and a whole family built up in mutual honour and consequent strength, is naturally elevated in such a manner.

Bruce Waltke observes that most of the proverbs from verse 7 to verse 28 are synthetic or synonymous parallelisms concerning fools. We see in verse 7 the mismatch of traits, fine speech and fools, and false speech and princes.

If the first, the fine speech in the mouth of the fool is unfitting, the false speech in the mouth of the prince is so much more so. Princes, by implication, should be characterised by noble and true speech.

[8 : 01] Bribery is a form of exploitation and perversion of justice. By requiring bribes, justice could be withheld from the poor. Justice would also become partial to the rich and the corrupt, who are able to buy off judges.

Verse 8 is difficult to understand, but it may be referring to the way that the person who gives bribes perceives them. He sees it as like a magic stone that gives him special powers. Wherever he turns it, he will get his way.

Perhaps in its reference to the fact that it is in the eyes of the person who gives the bribe, that it is a magic stone, we are given to understand that this is ultimately foolish, and that the reality is not actually as the bribe giver fancies it to be.

Perhaps because one day he will face a justice, from which no bribe will allow him to escape. The danger of gossiping and tail-bearing is described in verse 9. Earlier, in chapter 10 verse 12, We were encouraged to practice discretion with respect to other people's faults.

Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offences. By spreading the word of what someone has done wrong, gossip makes reconciliation near impossible. While the verse that follows makes clear that this covering up is not just an ignoring of what has been done wrong, it does encourage us to deal with such wrongs in a posture of gentleness and forgiveness.

[9 : 18] We want, if at all possible, to heal the wound and the breach between two people. And as a result, we draw no more attention to the wrong than needs to be drawn to it to rectify the harm and the division that it has caused.

We should be forgiving and tractable, looking for the possibilities of reconciliation and healing, doing all in our power to avoid exacerbating the wound that has been caused. The gossip and the tail-bearer, by contrast, love to spread the word of such wrongs and to make the divisions stronger by their actions.

The righteous man seeks to de-escalate situations, and one of the best ways to do this is to deliver a rebuke in private. Such a rebuke will allow for a person to repent and for a relationship to be restored without requiring costly public loss of face.

There is a wisdom in the way that we give a rebuke. There is also a wisdom in the way that we receive it. The man of understanding, who is characterised by the wisdom that receives reproof and correction, is deeply sensitive to rebuke.

He always prizes correction, knowing that it is the way in which he can grow in wisdom. The fool, in his pride, however, resists correction and rebuke, and even a hundred blows upon his body would be less effective than a few well-chosen words in the ears of the wise.

[10 : 32] The insensitivity of the fool to correction is one of the reasons why he does face these severe consequences. As he has resisted correction, he ends up inviting far more painful punishment and consequences.

Verse 11 describes the fate that awaits the rebellious evil man. The Lord, presumably, will send a cruel messenger against him. He will face his comeuppance. A fool is a dangerous person to be around, described in verse 12 as like a she-bear robbed of its cubs.

The she-bear robbed of her cubs is deadly and implacable. While the fool described here may not be as willfully violent as a she-bear robbed of her cubs, he is no less dangerous, and people should give him a very wide berth.

Those around such persons are always in danger of becoming collateral damage of their folly. Beyond the way that our characters are affected by the company that we keep, we can also suffer some of the consequences that come upon those with whom we are in association.

This is an added reason to steer well clear of the fool. Perhaps an example of this could be seen in the verse that follows. Those who give evil in exchange for good will find that evil clings to their house.

[11 : 39] Anyone associated with such a house will consequently suffer. The beginning of a conflict is like a breach in a dam, a small initial trickle of water that will soon lead to a great opening and a torrent coming forth.

Those who recognise the warning signs will get away as soon as possible. Once that dam starts to burst, things will be said that can't be taken back. Actions may be taken that may provoke vengeance.

Far better to leave the situation before tempers overflow. The task of the person delivering justice is to condemn the wicked and to justify the righteous.

A failure to condemn the wicked and a failure to justify the righteous are both an abomination to the Lord. Neither can be excused. The failure of omission is not to be considered minor in comparison to the sin of commission in relation to justice.

Verse 16 imagines a situation where a fool comes to buy wisdom. First of all, wisdom cannot be bought so simply. Wisdom has to be learned. And a fool who seeks to buy wisdom is like a man with no mouth buying food.

[12 : 42] Without sense, the fool has no ability to receive the food of wisdom. Verse 17 speaks about other companions that we have in our lives. The friend who is with us constantly and the family member who is most likely to be by our side when something goes badly wrong.

Friends can forsake people in the time of poverty and need. Brothers are more likely to be found at that point. However, there are exceptions. Chapter 18 verse 24 speaks of this.

A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. Chapter 6 verses 1 to 5 gave an extended warning against putting up security for a neighbour.

In verse 18, another such warning is found. Verse 19 speaks of the way that love of transgression goes hand in hand with the love of strife. Michael Fox suggests that the door that is made high is a reference to the one who makes his opening high, which is a reference to the mouth that speaks haughty and proud words.

If this is the case, it will go very neatly with the verse that follows. Verses 21 and 25 express the bitterness and the sorrow of the foolish son. This should remind us of the proverb with which the larger collection begins.

[13:51] A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother. In chapter 10 verse 1. This principle is an added spur to the good father to raise up his son in the way of wisdom.

If he does not, he will end up hating his son and finding his son a cause of shame and sorrow, when faithful children and grandchildren could be his crown. The joy that's absent from the father of the fool is picked up in verse 22, as we see that the joyful heart is good medicine.

Such a joyful heart will give healing to every aspect of someone's life. Irrespective of outer circumstance, the joyful heart can bring balm. We've earlier read similar principles to this.

In chapter 15 verse 13. A glad heart makes a cheerful face, but by sorrow of heart, the spirit is crushed. The discerning sets his face towards wisdom. He's focused on this as his object and his goal.

The eyes of the fool flip to the ends of the earth. He wants the blessings that wisdom gives, but he looks in all the wrong places. We might think here of the words of Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 11 to 14.

[14:55] For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven that you should say, Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?

Neither is it beyond the sea that you should say, Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it? But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.

The fool looks to the farthest reaches of the world, in part because he refuses to accept that wisdom is what the Lord has declared it to be, that it's so near at hand and clear as to what it entails.

He wants something foreign and strange and esoteric, but in reality wisdom is something that will humble him in his pride, calling for the fear of the Lord above everything else. Job chapter 28 is an extended poetic expression of this fact in verses 20 to 28 of that chapter.

From where, then, does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding? It is hidden from the eyes of all living and concealed from the birds of the air. Abaddon and death say, We have heard a rumor of it with our ears.

[16:01] God understands the way to it, and he knows its place. For he looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens. When he gave to the wind its weight and apportioned the waters by measure, when he made a decree for the rain and a way for the lightning of the thunder, then he saw it and declared it.

He established it and searched it out. And he said to man, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding. Verses 23 and 26 describe forms of perverse justice, the wicked that accepts the bribe in secret, and then the person who imposes a fine upon the righteous man or strikes the upright noble.

Where such things take place, justice boils down to tyranny and mere power, rather than being founded upon truth. The final two verses express once more the principle of self-control at the heart of knowledge and mastery of lips as indicative of its presence.

The person who is wise knows that much of the time wisdom is to be found in his holding his tongue, in not speaking into a situation that he could make volatile, in not speaking in situations where he lacks the necessary understanding, in holding his tongue in response to a slight, or in not pridefully advancing his voice over others.

The importance of this ability to hold one's tongue is seen in the fact that even a fool can be seen to be intelligent if they practice this. How much more so the person who is genuinely wise?

[17:26] A question to consider. Verses 16 and 24 describe the foolish ways in which fools can seek after wisdom itself.

