

Proverbs 25: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Proverbs chapter 25. These also are proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied. It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out.

As the heavens for height and the earth for depth, so the heart of kings is unsearchable. Take away the dross from the silver, and the smith has material for a vessel. Take away the wicked from the presence of the king, and his throne will be established in righteousness. Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence, or stand in the place of the great, for it is better to be told, come up here, than to be put lower in the presence of a noble. What your eyes have seen, do not hastily bring into court, for what will you do in the end when your neighbour puts you to shame?

Argue your case with your neighbour himself, and do not reveal another secret, lest he who hears you bring shame upon you, and your ill repute have no end. A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver. Like a gold ring, or an ornament of gold, is a wise reprover to a listening ear.

Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest, is a faithful messenger to those who send him. He refreshes the soul of his masters. Like clouds and wind without rain, is a man who boasts of a gift he does not give. With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone. If you have found honey, eat only enough for you, lest you have your fill of it, and vomit it. Let your foot be seldom in your neighbour's house, lest he have his fill of you, and hate you. A man who bears false witness against his neighbour is like a war club, or a sword, or a sharp arrow. Trusting in a treacherous man in time of trouble, is like a bad tooth, or a foot that slips. Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart, is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, and like vinegar on soda. 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 north wind brings forth rain, and a backbiting tongue angry looks. It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife. Like cold water to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country. Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain, is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked. It is not good to eat much honey, nor is it glorious to seek one's own glory. A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls. Proverbs chapter 25 begins a new section of the book of Proverbs.

[2 : 58] It is a compilation of a number of the Proverbs of Solomon that were brought together in the time of Hezekiah. Hezekiah was king of Judah from around 728 to 687 BC. He was co-regent with Manasseh for the latter decade or so of his reign. The Proverbs in this section, from chapter 25 to 29, are more thematic in their ordering, especially in chapters 25 and 26. There are a lot of metaphor and simile Proverbs, far more than elsewhere. The section is introduced in a way that makes reference to a previous section of Solomonic Proverbs. These also are Proverbs of Solomon. King Hezekiah's men were presumably transcribing Proverbs from various sources, editing them and collating them within a single text. This work may have been undertaken to consolidate the wisdom and the tradition of the nation. In 1 Kings chapter 4 verses 29 to 34, the wisdom of Solomon and his forming of Proverbs is described.

And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezraite, and Heman, Calchal, and Dada, the sons of Mahal. And his fame was in all the surrounding nations. He also spoke 3,000 Proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon, to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish.

And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom. Verses 2 to 7 of this section particularly focus upon the figure of the king. Verse 2 might remind us of Deuteronomy chapter 29, verse 29. The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us, and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law. The Lord's glory is seen in the concealed things, the mysteries of the creation that he has formed, the mysteries of his purposes. The glory of kings is seen in the way that they search things out within their kingdom, the ways that with their wisdom they disclose and speak to the affairs of the nation. The heart of the king himself is mysterious to the people of the land.

While the king investigates and discloses the hearts of others, he himself is inscrutable. This associates the king with the Lord in various ways. But we should recall Proverbs chapter 21, verse 1. Although the king's heart is inscrutable to the people of the land, the king's heart is like streams of water in the hand of the Lord. He can turn the king's heart wherever he wills.

The king's task is to forge a nation, and to do this he needs to be working with the right material. One of his tasks is to remove the wicked from his presence, an act compared to taking the dross away from silver. A king who surrounds himself with the wrong people will be greatly weakened. He will not have an effective reign. One of the problems at the end of King David's reign was the influence of people like Joab in his court. As long as he had the dross like Joab, he would not be able to rule effectively. And one of the initial tasks of Solomon upon coming to the throne was to purge out certain people from the old regime, and to establish a new righteous one in its place.

[6 : 22] On a somewhat analogous level, if you want to form a good society, you need to consider the membership of the core group incredibly carefully. From the king's determining the members of his regime in verses 4 and 5, the question of advancement in the court is viewed from the other perspective in verses 6 and 7. Here the aspiring young person is taught to keep his ambitions in check.

If he keeps pushing himself forward above his proper station, he will be called to go down lower, and will be humbled as a result. However, if he is modest in his approach, he may well find himself called up higher, granting him honour and a new standing. Jesus gave a parable very similar to this in Luke chapter 14 verses 7 to 11. Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honour, saying to them, When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honour, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by them.

And he who invited you both will come and say to you, Give your place to this person, and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, Friend, move up higher. Then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. The verses that follow encourage prudence and discretion in the way that quarrels and disputes are handled. We are warned about being litigious, or being precipitous in bringing forth complaints to court. Escalating matters in such a fashion, you may find yourself losing costly legal battles. Far better to address the matter privately and quietly, if at all possible.

Don't go around spreading the word of your dispute. Keep the matter private if you can. You should also beware of being used in such a manner, with others divulging their disputes to you.

If you pass on such reports, you will end up being regarded as disloyal and untrustworthy. Jesus also teaches concerning these matters in the Gospel. Matthew chapter 5 verses 25 to 26.

[8 : 29] Matthew chapter 18 verses 15 to 17.

The principles here can be applied more broadly. We should always be mindful of what we have to avoid escalation of conflict. This involves dealing with many matters privately if possible. It involves doing our best to leave the door open for reconciliation. Our concern should always be to de-escalate. We need to be careful not to act in a manner that will cause people to dig in their heels.

Verses 11 to 15 speak about the character and the power of words. One of the things that the Proverbs really accentuate is the importance of the right words at the right time.

Words ought to be delivered in season by the man of wise speech to the man of the listening ear. This is expressed in verse 11 with the image of a beautiful piece of jewellery.

[9 : 54] Golden apples set in a beautiful piece of silver. And here the piece of silver is compared to the ear that hears and the apples of gold to the words that are spoken. The need for a piece of jewellery to have the right setting is witnessed in the unfitting setting of the gold ring in the pig's snout in chapter 11 verse 22. Here however the setting is fitting for the word that is received. The ear is a common place for jewellery and in verse 12 the reproving word is described as if it were a piece of jewellery that could be set in the ear. If the ear will receive it the word will adorn it. It would be strange indeed to have snow at the time of harvest in May and June. Indeed it might even have been disastrous. What is described in verse 13 is most likely a situation where people in the heat of the day in the middle of their labors would long for the refreshing coolness of the snow. If one were to experience the refreshing coolness of the snow at that time it would be similar to a faithful messenger.

A faithful messenger extends the capacities of the one who sends him. He brings relief from fears and anxieties. Proverbs chapter 13 verse 17. A wicked messenger falls into trouble but a faithful envoy brings healing. Empty boasts and promises are the subject of verse 14. Clouds driven by the wind promise the possibility of rain and so does a man who boasts of a gift. However exciting hopes only to dash them is far worse than never arousing those hopes to begin with. If verses 11 and 12 spoke of the fittingness of wise words. Verse 15 speaks of the power of wise words. A person who speaks with patience and care, who speaks with gentleness, can be far more effective in his speech than the physical force of breaking a bone could be. Elsewhere in the book of Proverbs the power and the might of wisdom has been discussed. Wisdom isn't merely beautiful, it is strong and effective. It is possible to have too much of a good thing and supposing for the sake of argument that your company is a good thing. Your friends can have too much of it. Far better to leave well before they tire of you and to desire your return than to linger around and have them desiring your departure. Verses 18 to 20 give us some examples of men who are deeply troublesome to their neighbours. The false witness is described as like a weapon. The treacherous man is compared to a broken tooth or a foot that slips. You rely upon your feet and you rely upon your teeth and when they fail you it causes you deep discomfort and can be a source of insecurity.

So it is with someone whose friendship is only hypocritical. A good friend will be attentive to his friend's spirit. Yet a supposed friend who sings songs to a friend who is struggling with a heavy heart merely exacerbates his distress. This is like placing vinegar on soda which causes it to aggressively fizz up. Proverbs has on several occasions warned us against envy, vengeance and schadenfreude. Verses 21 and 22 provide us with further teaching in this vein. This teaching is also taken up in Romans chapter 12. Rather than being vindictive and seeking to avenge yourself upon your enemy, when you see your enemy in distress, take pity upon them and seek to ameliorate their situation.

Various suggested interpretations have been put forward for the burning coals of verse 22. While some have suggested that they refer to the punishment that the Lord will bring upon that person, it seems more likely that the burning pangs of shame may be in view here. Such gracious action towards your enemy may provoke him to remorse and later repentance. There are certain people who unerringly produce discord within community. The gossip or the slanderer is a great example of this.

By their simple activity of whispering in people's ears, they have a community-wide effect, sowing anger all around them. Verse 24 is a repetition of chapter 21 verse 9. It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife. Like the gossip can produce conflict throughout their community, so the quarrelsome wife can make her entire household miserable. As the wife holds one of the greatest powers for producing harmony and unity, so she is in the most powerful position to produce disharmony and conflict. Like verse 13 compared the faithful messenger to the cold of snow in the harvest, so verse 25 compares good news from a far country to cold water received by a thirsty soul.

[14 : 25] From the pure cool water of verse 25, however, we move to verse 26 with a muddied spring or polluted fountain. A faithful righteous man who guards the boundaries, who stands up to error and wickedness and does not give in or compromise, can be a source of encouragement and security to all around him.

But if such a man gives way or compromises, everyone is greatly weakened and disheartened. The righteous man is like the spring or fountain from which other people can drink. He provides life to those around him, and he does so by maintaining purity.

If he fails to maintain such purity, if he fails to stand up to and oppose the wicked, he ends up being worthless to everyone. Indeed, he may even become a threat.

There are various translations suggested for verse 27. Bruce Waltke renders it as, to eat honey excessively is not good, nor is it honourable to search out weighty matters.

This would presumably bring us back to verse 2 at the opening of the section. Michael Fox renders it as, eating honey too much is not good, and being sparing in speech is honourable.

[15 : 30] William McCain points out that whatever we interpret it as, we need to follow the logic of the illustration. Eating honey is a good thing, in itself. The danger is doing it to excess.

So whatever is referred to in the second half of the verse must be a good thing that should not be taken to excess. He suggests that it is to be sparing with eulogising words. Proverbs chapter 16 verse 32 reads, Verse 28 expresses this truth in a negative form.

A man who lacks rule of his spirit, who cannot control himself, is like a city without walls. While a city with walls can continue its life even when it's surrounded by an enemy, the city without walls will be easily overrun and overwhelmed by any enemy.

Wisdom, in large measure, is found in learning how to respond rather than react. The walls are those boundaries that differentiate yourself from others. They're the boundaries that allow you to deliberate rather than merely reacting.

They're the boundaries that allow you to maintain your inner composure when everyone else is losing his head. They're also the boundaries that enable you to avoid taking on the character of other people too easily.

[16 : 44] A walled city can retain its own character even against those things that are around it. The city without walls has no way of marking itself out from those things that surround it.

The proverb here compares the city with walls to a person with self-control. Without self-control, you will be controlled by your impulses, by your environment and the forces that are at work within it, by the movements of the masses around you, by whatever passions are in the air.

The self-controlled man has an inner core of agency. He can act in a way that is self-determined, not just determined by other factors. Another way of looking at this, perhaps, is to see that the self-controlled man is a man who truly possesses a heart, a realm within, distinguished from the realm outside, within which he can meditate, deliberate, weigh things, consider words, and a fountain from which his actions can spring.

A question to consider. Verse 11 compares an ear that listens well to a setting of silver. What are some of the ways in which we can make our ears a fitting setting for wise words?

