

Proverbs 29: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Proverbs chapter 29. He who is often reproofed, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be broken beyond healing. When the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule, the people groan. He who loves wisdom makes his father glad, but a companion of prostitutes squanders his wealth. By justice a king builds up the land, but he who exacts gifts tears it down.

A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet. An evil man is ensnared in his transgression, but a righteous man sings and rejoices. A righteous man knows the rights of the poor. A wicked man does not understand such knowledge. Scoffers set a city aflame, but the wise turn away wrath. If a wise man has an argument with a fool, the fool only rages and laughs, and there is no quiet. Bloodthirsty men hate one who is blameless, and seek the life of the upright.

A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back. If a ruler listens to falsehood, all his officials will be wicked. The poor man and the oppressor meet together.

The Lord gives light to the eyes of both. If a king faithfully judges the poor, his throne will be established forever. The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother. When the wicked increase, transgression increases, but the righteous will look upon their downfall. Discipline your son, and he will give you rest. He will give delight to your heart. Where there is no prophetic vision, the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the law. By mere words a servant is not disciplined, for though he understands, he will not respond.

Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him. Whoever pampers his servant from childhood will in the end find him his heir. A man of wrath stirs up strife, and one given to anger causes much transgression. One's pride will bring him low, but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honour. The partner of a thief hates his own life. He hears the curse, but discloses nothing. The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe.

[2 : 2 8] Many seek the face of a ruler, but it is from the Lord that a man gets justice. An unjust man is an abomination to the righteous, but one whose way is straight is an abomination to the wicked.

Proverbs chapter 29 concludes the second section of Solomon's Proverbs. At a number of points in the book of Proverbs, slow and gradual habitual processes with sudden ends are described. Here it is that of resistance to rebuke. The person who has given many reproofs, and yet responds by hardening himself against them, will experience a sudden destruction. Having run through all of the warning signs that he has been given, he faces a final collision that he cannot avoid. Verse 2 is the third of four related statements in chapters 28 and 29. Chapter 28 verse 12, when the righteous triumph, there is great glory, but when the wicked rise, people hide themselves. Chapter 28 verse 28, when the wicked rise, people hide themselves, but when they perish, the righteous increase. Chapter 29 verse 2, when the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule, the people groan. And then in verse 16 of this chapter, when the wicked increase, transgression increases, but the righteous will look upon their downfall. The contrasting fortunes of the righteous and the wicked have ramifications for the whole society. Verse 3 is another proverb speaking of the consequences of wisdom or folly in a son for his parents. The wise son is a cause of gladness in his father. The dissolute son, who is the companion of prostitutes, ends up bringing dishonor to his father and squanders his father's inheritance. All that for which the father had sacrificed and labored is now going to waste, in the most dishonorable of ways.

Chapter 29 of Proverbs often moves between the household and the nation. Whereas verse 3 spoke about the household and the way that the foolish son would squander the family fortune, in chapter 4 we're talking about the building up of nations or their tearing down. The righteous king builds up his nation by the practice of justice, by observing and enacting the law, acting on behalf of the oppressed, and establishing righteousness. By contrast, the corrupt ruler, the one who is gathering bribes or excessive taxes, will end up undermining and weakening the whole nation. Verses 5 and 6 should be read together. In verse 5 we see the flatterer as one who is spreading a net for a person's feet. Whose feet?

Is it for the neighbour's feet? It seems to be that way in a number of places in the book of Proverbs. It might also be, as we read it alongside verse 6, for his own feet. He does not realise, but he will be ensnared in his own transgression. Those who are given to trickery and traps will often find themselves tangled up in them. The description of the righteous man, by contrast, is an arresting one.

He sings and rejoices. This is the song of the victorious person, of the person who has escaped the trap or been delivered from it. The principle of the wicked being caught in their own schemes is one that we encounter on several occasions in the book of Proverbs. For instance, in chapter 1 verse 19, such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain. It takes away the life of its possessors.

[5 : 42] The righteous person is not just righteous for his own sake, as a sort of private morality. He is concerned for justice within the society at large, and he gives thought to the judgments delivered concerning the poor, the duties that people have towards the poor, the ways that the poor have been offended against, and the processes of law and society by which the situation of the poor is being ameliorated and the injustices committed against them being rectified. The wicked man, by contrast, is quite unmindful of these things. The responsibility to take an active interest in the rights of the poor is especially pronounced in the case of the king, as we see in Proverbs chapter 31 verses 4 to 5. It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to take strong drink, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed, and pervert the rights of all the afflicted. The righteous man has an active social conscience, and is always mindful of what he can do to address the injustices of his own society. The wider social impact of the righteous and the wicked and their behaviour is again the subject of verse 8. The proverb there speaks of the impact of scoffers and of the wise. The scoffers cause conflict within the society and end up calling judgment upon it, whereas the wise turn away wrath. The wrath being referred to here may be the conflict within the society more generally, or it may be the lord's wrath more particularly, or it may be both. The unteachability of the fool is the subject of verse 9. The fool's resistance to correction and his unteachability is a common issue within the book of Proverbs. Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself, in Proverbs chapter 26 verse 4. Arguing with a fool can be like a fool's errand. You're not going to have any success. He will respond with mockery and laughter, and only be more confirmed in his position by the time that you are done. Murderous men have a particular enmity towards those people who are blameless and upright. The righteous man exposes by contrast the character of the wicked, and those who are most wicked will express their enmity towards the righteous by seeking their very lives.

Self-control and mastery of your spirit and your temper is a notable hallmark of wisdom in the book of Proverbs. A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls. Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes her city. The folly of the fool and the wisdom of the wise can often most clearly be seen in the contrasting ways that they respond to aggravation. The wise person is able to master his spirit, and as a result to hold back from saying things that are rash and foolish, the fool by contrast possesses no such mastery, and ends up giving full vent to his opinion. By the simple act of being able to hold his tongue in such a situation, the fool would have been considered very differently. Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise.

When he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent. Chapter 17, verse 28. The corruption of a kingdom can go from the top down. A ruler who has listened to lies will end up forming a corrupt regime around him.

We can think about this in the case of David. As he sinned and lied concerning Uriah and Bathsheba, the corruption of his kingdom went all the way down. His officials started to be characterized by corruption, lies, and unfaithfulness. Verse 13 should remind us of chapter 22, verse 2.

The rich and the poor meet together. The Lord is the maker of them all. However, here it is referring to a meeting between a negative character, the oppressor, and the poor man. Here the Lord is described not as the maker, but as the giver of life. It is the Lord who has given the light to the eyes of both the poor and the oppressor. Implied here is a sense of the seriousness of what the oppressor is doing. He is presuming upon the continued grace of the Lord, who has given him life and is sustaining him in it. Verse 14 also relates to the proper treatment of the poor, and once more speaks particularly to the role of the king. The king who judges the poor with equity is a king who will find his own throne established forever. The Lord is the patron of the poor. The one who gives to the poor lends to the Lord. The one who enacts justice towards the poor is the one who will receive the blessing of the Lord, as he is doing the Lord's own work. The power of a foolish son to bring misery to his parents in their older age is frequently mentioned in the book of Proverbs. Such a son wanting his inheritance right away might turf his parents out of their property. In his folly he can squander their wealth and bring dishonor upon the family by consorting with prostitutes and others. However, a father who faithfully disciplines his son will find that when he is in his older age, his son will give him honor and rest. The father who fails to discipline may find quite the opposite. A lack of exertion in training his son in his earlier years leads to considerable misery down the line and damage that cannot easily be rectified. Prevention in such a case is so much better than cure. Man should live by the word of the Lord and where there is no prophetic vision, a people lack direction. However, those who devote themselves to meditating upon the law can find clarity in dark times. Verses 19 and 21 speak to masters in their treatment of their servants. The servant within the house could be subjected to corporal punishment.

[11 : 07] Unlike the hired worker, he would not just be dismissed from his position and mere words of rebuke would be a very limited deterrent or corrective. The servant might understand the words of rebuke, but he would be unlikely to heed them. The person who just pampered his servants would find that he lost their respect and in the end overran his house. These verses might shock modern sensibilities.

It is important that we read them alongside other biblical teaching concerning masters and servants, which encourage a healthy relationship between the master and the servant, to the extent that servants should often want to remain in the house. A man and those people that surround him can both become the victims of his vices. In verses 22 and 23 we have two examples of this. The whole community of those surrounding the man of wrath labour under the burden of his strife. He is a cause of conflict and sin that can infect an entire community. In verse 23 it is the pride of a person that can bring him low. The very pride at the heart of a person's self-assertion is the greatest threat to their well-being. By contrast, the person who is lowly in spirit, a characteristic that comes with the fear of the Lord, is one who will ultimately obtain honour. The person who enters into dealings with a thief will find it difficult to escape being caught up in the thief's own crimes. The background to this verse can be seen in places like Leviticus chapter 5 verse 1. If anyone sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify, and though he is a witness, whether he has seen or come to know the matter, yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity. And then in Zechariah chapter 5 verses 3 to 4.

Then he said to me, This is the curse that goes out over the face of the whole land, for everyone who steals shall be cleaned out according to what is on one side, and everyone who swears falsely shall be cleaned out according to what is on the other side.

I will send it out, declares the Lord of hosts, and it shall enter the house of the thief, and the house of him who swears falsely by my name, and it shall remain in his house, and consume it, both timber and stones. The person who has dealings with the thief, perhaps buying stolen goods, will be reluctant to disclose what he knows. He has become a beneficiary of the crime, and as a result he ends up covering it up, and bringing the curse upon that crime upon himself. Verses 25 and 26 speak about the place to which we should look for deliverance.

Those with the fear of man are often looking primarily to rulers. They fear rulers, and they look to rulers for deliverance. The person who fears the Lord and trusts in the Lord, however, is in a very different position. Although it is not inappropriate to seek justice from rulers, indeed it is a positive thing to do, verse 26 reminds us that justice ultimately comes from the Lord. He is the one that we should look to primarily. Even when human rulers fail to deliver justice, we can still find justice from the Lord. The final verse of the chapter concerns the enmity that exists between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman, between the unjust and the righteous.

[14 : 09] This enmity exists on both sides, and understanding the existence of, the character of, and the purpose of this enmity is a crucial dimension of the task of wisdom. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which the enmity between the righteous and the wicked plays out in society and history?

