

Proverbs 20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Proverbs chapter 20. Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise. The terror of a king is like the growling of a lion, whoever provokes him to anger forfeits his life.

It is an honour for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarrelling. The slugger does not plough in the autumn, he will seek at harvest and have nothing.

The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out. Many a man proclaims his own steadfast love, but a faithful man who can find?

The righteous who walks in his integrity, blessed are his children after him. A king who sits on the throne of judgment, winnows all evil with his eyes.

Who can say, I have made my heart pure, I am clean from my sin? Unequal weights and unequal measures are both alike an abomination to the Lord.

[1 : 0 2] Even a child makes himself known by his acts, by whether his conduct is pure and upright. The hearing ear and the seeing eye, the Lord has made them both.

Love not sleep, lest you come to poverty. Open your eyes and you will have plenty of bread. Bad, bad, says the buyer, but when he goes away, then he boasts.

There is gold and abundance of costly stones, but the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel. Take a man's garment when he has put up security for a stranger, and hold it in pledge when he puts up security for foreigners.

Bread gained by deceit is sweet to a man, but afterward his mouth will be full of gravel. Plans are established by counsel, by wise guidance wage war.

Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, therefore do not associate with a simple babbler. If one curses his father or his mother, his lamp will be put out in utter darkness.

[2 : 0 6] An inheritance gained hastily in the beginning will not be blessed in the end. Do not say, I will repay evil. Wait for the Lord, and he will deliver you.

Unequal weights are an abomination to the Lord, and false scales are not good. A man's steps are from the Lord. How then can man understand his way?

It is a snare to say rashly, it is holy, and to reflect only after making vows. A wise king winnows the wicked, and drives the wheel over them.

The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord, searching all his innermost parts. Steadfast love and faithfulness preserve the king, and by steadfast love his throne is upheld.

The glory of young men is their strength, but the splendor of old men is their grey hair. Blows that wound cleanse away evil. Strokes make clean the innermost parts.

[3 : 0 3] Wine can be a great blessing. It can also be something that tests and reveals people's hearts. Wine intoxicates. It loosens people's control over their bodies and their mental faculties.

Lady Wisdom offers wine to her guests in Chapter 9. But wine is a dangerous gift. One can only receive this gift well if you are not given to it. It is a liberty that could easily take liberties with you.

Proverbs Chapter 20 begins with a warning against wine, against its power to serve as an influence over people. Wine and strong drink are personified as a marker and a brawler.

If you cannot maintain some mastery over your spirit in the presence of alcohol, the personality imputed to the alcohol itself will take you over. There are many people who have been ruined by drink, who become very different people as a result of the drink.

The description of alcohol here might invite some understanding of drink almost possessing a person. The person who gives himself to intoxicating substances will forfeit wisdom.

[4 : 04] We have warnings against drunkenness elsewhere in the Book of Proverbs. In Chapter 21, Verse 17, Whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man. He who loves wine and oil will not be rich.

In Chapter 23, Verses 20-21, Be not among drunkards, or among gluttonous eaters of meat. For the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and slumber will clothe them with rags.

And finally, Chapter 31, Verses 4-5, In Proverbs 19, Verse 12, There is a similar statement here in Verse 2, Although there might be a subtle difference in that it is the terror of the king, rather than the king's wrath, that is like the growling of a lion.

Here it is the fear of the king in potential enemies that serves as the growling of the lion. The fearsome might of the king, and the apparent danger of provoking him to anger, causes people who might otherwise rise up against the people to draw back.

Although it can be unsettling to think of this, the security and safety of a society can often rest in large measure upon the threat of violence and effective vengeance, upon all who would threaten the general peace, and all who would break the law.

[5 : 30] The ideal king is the one who can rule by means of his growl. He does not generally need to bite, or to engage in violence. The terrifying might of his growl is sufficient to drive off any enemy.

In a society prior to the advent of modern policing, where the might of the king and other rulers were at some distance from the people, the maintenance of peace depended upon the dynamics of honour culture, upon the threat of effective vengeance upon those who unsettled the peace, or who preyed upon others.

Those who were not able to project a sufficient fear of what would happen to those who threatened them and their family could easily be doomed to be the prey of those mightier than them. Modern nations can still operate to a degree within some sort of an honour culture.

There needs to be some projection of might, and a deterrent, warning and threat upon any who would think of attacking the nation. We might also think of the mob boss in a movie. If he does not project some dominance through might, he will be in great danger of being taken out by rivals.

In such an honour culture, there can be a great temptation for the powerful man to see every small slight as an excuse for violence. If he can blow up at the smallest offence, everyone will be extremely deferent to him and fearfully submit to him.

[6 : 43] One might also think of the quick-tempered father or husband who terrorises his household and dominates them by the fear that he creates. Verse 3 presents the flip side of such an honour culture.

While it is a very good thing for the king to project a warning to adversaries, it is not good to seek a fight at every opportunity. The good man will not needlessly terrorise others through fear.

There is a truer honour found in those who can control their temper, and having controlled their temper, can forgive. The sluggard, once more in verse 4, is described as a character who does not act at the appropriate time, and in his folly, having failed to act at the appropriate time, seeks in vain for the harvest that others are enjoying, on account of their faithful and timely sowing.

One might perhaps think of this in terms of the different seasons of life. The man who, rather than sowing his wild oats in his earlier years, gave himself to diligence and faithfulness, will enjoy a bountiful harvest while the sluggard comes back empty.

Verse 5 is a difficult one to understand. Bruce Waltke suggests it refers to the wicked and the conniving person, whose plans and schemes are hidden, but can be wheedled out of him by the wise man.

[7 : 52] William McCain suggests that it refers to the inner depths of people's thoughts. This requires a work of eliciting and drawing forth, a sort of Socratic process of asking the right questions, bringing that which is inchoate into conscious articulation.

The wise man can draw out from the heart and place into words those things that are hidden otherwise. Michael Fox suggests that the point is not that it is difficult to obtain, that these things are secret or profound, but rather that the water of the heart is abundant.

The wise man is the person who draws wisdom out of himself and others by diligently attending to counsel, and by taking counsel in his own heart. At various points in Proverbs, we have seen the fickleness of many proclaimed friends.

Verse 6 describes the hypocrisy of many who proclaim loudly their faithfulness, but when the time comes, are nowhere to be found. Much as the young man faces the challenge of finding a wise and a good wife, he faces the challenge of identifying faithful friends.

Blessing passes down through generations. The righteous, faithful and wise man sets up his children to succeed, whereas the children of the fool, even if they turn out to be wise themselves, will face a significant struggle in overcoming the legacy of their parents.

[9 : 06] Verse 8 returns to the theme of verse 2, the power of the king over the people of the land. Here it's described as the judgment that he brings dividing people into wheat and chaff.

The king winnows, affecting this separation by means of his eyes of judgment. Verse 9 makes plain the fact that no one is without sin. The more closely we examine our own hearts, the more apparent it becomes that they are stained with iniquity and rebellion.

Warnings against unequal balances are found at various points in Scripture. Deuteronomy chapter 25, verses 13 to 16. Verse 10 expresses this principle succinctly.

Our Lord teaches that by their fruit you will know them, and even a child is able to reveal his character if you attend to his actions. We can often focus upon people's character being revealed through the things that they say about themselves, but every person can say good things about themselves.

What truly reveals character is action. If you want to consider your own character, if you want to consider someone else's character, pay close attention to actions and to their fruit. Attentiveness and perception are a gift of the Lord.

[10 : 35] People can see and hear without truly perceiving. The true opening of eyes is a gift of the Lord. And opposed to this is the love of sleep. The slugger does not want to exert himself.

In his failure to exert himself, to use his senses and his faculties to their full extent, he ends up coming into poverty. The person, however, who opens his eyes by avoiding too much sleep, but also by training and exercising his eyes in attentiveness and in judgment, will find that he prospers.

The proverbs in verses 14 to 17 mostly concern economic affairs. The first, the hypocrisy of the buyer, who will lie concerning the value of an item, but then boast afterwards.

The second, the true value to be found in the lips of a wise man. The third, the danger of entering into a position of being security for another. And then the fourth, the futility and foolishness of ill-gotten wealth.

The description of the bread gained by deceit here should remind us of the woman folly's invitation in chapter 9 verse 17. Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.

[11 : 39] Proverbs chapter 15 verse 22 declared, Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisors they succeed. Verses 18 and 19 are both speaking in their way to the question of counsel.

The king is responsible to make the most momentous plans. He's not the universal expert. Rather, he must be gifted in the testing of different voices of wisdom, weighing them up, perceiving their strengths and their weaknesses, placing them in conversation with other positions, and through all of this, to arrive at wise, prudent action, having deliberated carefully.

To rule well, he must seek out many counsellors, and know where they may assist him. However, we face the danger of including the wrong people in our council. The person who goes around revealing secrets and slandering others is not a person into whose council you should enter, nor should you allow them into yours.

The fifth commandment states, Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God has given you.

Verses 20 and 21 concern judgments upon those who fail to honour their father and mother. Exodus chapter 21 verse 17 says that whoever curses his father or mother shall be put to death.

[12 : 54] Whether judgment comes by such human punishment, or by other means, the person who curses his father and mother, who despises his parents, will find that his light is put out.

The lamp here probably refers to his own posterity. If you fail to honour your father and mother, how do you expect your children to honour you? A related point is in verse 21, presumably referring to the person who wants to gain the inheritance very quickly, who wants to snatch it from his parents, without actually receiving it appropriately at the proper time and over time.

This might be related to the proverb of chapter 19 verse 26, He who does violence to his father and chases away his mother is a son who brings shame and reproach. When you see the wicked prospering and the righteous suffering, it can be difficult to have confidence in the Lord's moral governance, particularly if you feel that you have been wronged.

In such situations, you might want to take matters into your own hands. The warning of verse 22 comes with a charge to be confident in the Lord in such situations. Here we should consider the teaching of places like Romans chapter 12 verses 19 to 21.

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord. To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him.

[14 : 12] If he is thirsty, give him something to drink, for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. The providence and the moral governance of the Lord is also a subject of verse 24.

A man's heart may have its plans, but the Lord ultimately directs his steps. When we look back at our lives, how much have we actually planned? So many of the critical events of our lives, the events that have determined the course that our lives have taken thereafter, are things that we could never have foreseen, nor have controlled.

Ultimately, these things come from the Lord. He is sovereign over all of our steps, and so we should commit our ways to him, knowing that we cannot truly understand our way. He is the one to whom we must look for guidance and protection.

Our inability to understand or to control our way should also lead to circumspection and caution when we make commitments concerning the future. Here the warning is against making rash vows.

We can see a similar warning in Deuteronomy chapter 23, verses 21 to 23. If you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin.

[15 : 23] But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin. You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth.

The testing of people by the king and by the Lord is the subject of the verses that follow. Earlier in the chapter, in verse 8, we read, A king who sits on the throne of judgment winnows all evil with his eyes.

This process of winnowing the wicked, of separating them from the wheat of the righteous like chaff, might remind us of Psalm 1, where the wicked are compared to chaff that the wind blows away. Here there is also a wheel involved, which is almost certainly not an instrument of torture in the context, but an instrument to assist the winnowing, which we see also in Isaiah chapter 28, verse 27.

If the wise king divides the righteous from the wicked, the Lord's searching is far more intimate and intensive. Some have seen verse 27 as referring to the man's own spirit searching out his inner self, that the Lord searches him out by such self-examination.

Michael Fox challenges this reading, pointing out that it is not the soul that is doing this, but the breath. The breath is the lamp of the Lord, and the Lord is the one that's searching out. Every place that the breath, the animating principle of life goes within a human being, the Lord is searching out by the light of that spirit.

[16 : 41] The point is that every single aspect of our lives come under the Lord's sight. Nothing that we do is hidden from him. The righteous Davidic king is the son of the Lord. He expresses the Lord's character to his people, and this is seen particularly in steadfast love and faithfulness.

The king is kind and loyal to his people, and his commitment to them is the means by which his own throne is established. A king who oppresses and shows no covenant faithfulness to his people will have a very uncertain rule.

As modern persons, we tend to think of society as formed of lots of individuals who have various differences, but those differences do not make a difference. In scripture, however, a lot of emphasis is placed upon the differences between different groups of people, between the young and the old, between men and women, between rulers and their subjects, and with many other people in various stations of life.

A good society is one in which every member rises to their full stature and expresses their gifts and their strengths to the service of all. Verse 29 expresses something of this principle.

The glory of young men is their strength. The strength of a society more generally is primarily seen in their young men. A good society honours the strength of young men and employs it for the benefit of all, ensuring that young men do not use their strength in a cruel or oppressive fashion, nor that young men in their strength are just seen as disposable.

[18 : 04] Old men should also be honoured for their part. They should be honoured for their wisdom. They should not merely be regarded as relics of some past to be swept away. Rather, their particular insight should be attended to.

