

Proverbs 10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Proverbs chapter 10. The Proverbs of Solomon. A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother. Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit, but righteousness delivers from death. The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked. A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. He who gathers in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame. Blessings are on the head of the righteous, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence. The memory of the righteous is a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot. The wise of heart will receive commandments, but a babbling fool will come to ruin. Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but he who makes his ways crooked will be found out. Whoever winks the eye causes trouble, and a babbling fool will come to ruin. The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.

Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses. On the lips of him who has understanding, wisdom is found, but a rod is for the back of him who lacks sense. The wise lay up knowledge, but the mouth of a fool brings ruin near. A rich man's wealth is his strong city. The poverty of the poor is their ruin. The wage of the righteous leads to life, the gain of the wicked to sin. Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life, but he who rejects reproof leads others astray. The one who conceals hatred has lying lips, and whoever utters slander is a fool. When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent. The tongue of the righteous is choice silver, the heart of the wicked is of little worth. The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of sense. The blessing of the Lord makes rich, and he adds no sorrow with it. Doing wrong is like a joke to a fool, but wisdom is pleasure to a man of understanding. What the wicked dreads will come upon him, but the desire of the righteous will be granted. When the tempest passes, the wicked is no more, but the righteous is established forever. Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him. The fear of the Lord prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short. The hope of the righteous brings joy, but the expectation of the wicked will perish. The way of the Lord is a stronghold to the blameless, but destruction to evildoers. The righteous will never be removed, but the wicked will not dwell in the land. The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom, but the perverse tongue will be cut off. The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable, but the mouth of the wicked what is perverse. In Proverbs chapter 10, a new body of material in the book begins. The prologue that frames the main body of the book is now over, and we enter the Proverbs of Solomon proper. Proverbs are brief statements of truth. They can be observations, exhortations, or other sorts of declarations, and they must be used properly in the right time and circumstance. Proverbs chapter 15 verse 23 says,

To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is. There are conditions for the truth of a proverb that must be understood. The same words spoken in different contexts can be wise or foolish. The words in the right time really matter. We have an example of this in Proverbs chapter 26 verses 4 and 5, where there are two statements that seem exactly opposite that are placed directly next to each other. They invite us to consider the time and the context in which they are true. Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes. In the mouths of the wise, proverbs are powerful, but in the mouths of fools they are destructive and foolish. Improperly used, proverbs can be useless or damaging. Proverbs chapter 26 verse 7 says, Like a lame man's legs which hang useless is a proverb in the mouth of fools. And in Proverbs chapter 26 verse 9, Like a thorn that goes up into the hand of a drunkard is a proverb in the mouth of fools. The proverbs of this book are poetic and usually have a terser form in Hebrew than they do in translation. They often are formed using parallelism. There are two statements held next to each other that are paralleled in some way. The literary form of the proverb is not superfluous. It's part of the means by which the proverb makes its meaning and invites the reader to reflect. Most of the material of the book of Proverbs from chapter 10 to chapter 31 is using this parallelism as a form of the proverb. There are a few varieties of parallelism. We can see examples of antithetical parallelism. For instance, Proverbs chapter 15 verse 5.

A fool despises his father's instruction, but whoever heeds reproof is prudent. The proverb is like two poles of a magnet. You have the negative statement and then you have the positive statement, or you have a positive statement and then a negative statement. The relationship between these two statements can often be surprising. The parallel form invites us to reflect upon the parallel statements alongside of each other to see what elements map onto each other and what is implied by the similarities and contrasts.

These also aid memorization and they're often clearly composed for the ear and have a memorable quality in the Hebrew. The sound of such proverbs can often accentuate their meaning. The oppositions can be strengthened or the parallels reinforced by the poetry and the sound of key opposed or compared terms.

[6 : 26] A further example of parallelism can be seen in better than proverbs. Some examples of this can be found in verses 16 and 17 of chapter 15. Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it.

Better is a dinner of herbs where love is than a fattened ox and hatred with it. There are forms of parallelism using like, chapter 25 verse 26, like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked. There are a number parallelisms, for instance in Proverbs chapter 30 verses 18 to 19.

Many commentators hold that there is some sort of structure in this part of the book, but there is little agreement about what that structure might be. K. M. Heim, for instance, sees clusters. There are indeed points in these proverbs where there are key themes that are being expounded upon in successive proverbs and reading the proverbs alongside each other can serve to illuminate. At other points there are verbal features that clearly connect different proverbs together. For instance in the opening section of chapter 16 where there is the repetition of the name of the Lord in about nine successive verses. There are different poetic levels of signification that Bruce Waltke notes when we're looking through the proverbs. There are sounds, there are syllables, there are words, there are phrases, there are half verses or versets, there are verses or lines, there are strophes and proverb pairs. There are stanzas or subunits, there are poems or units, there are sections and then there are collections. Meaning and order can operate on each one of these different levels. Sometimes a proverb's meaning is conveyed in part by the sound of key words. At other points it's two related versets that really give the meaning. At other junctures it's a succession of proverbs alongside each other that help to unpack a particular topic. We should be attending to each one of these levels of meaning as we're going through the book. The use of poetry in the book of proverbs is important. The meaning of scripture and the wisdom of scripture is conveyed in large measure through literary artistry. This is a matter of beauty and delight but also of subtlety and insight.

Such literary artistry rewards the attentive and those who know how to notice things with wisdom. Knowledge is conveyed not just through informational prose and this should shape our attitude and approach to the bible more generally. The elevation of language is not just decorative. Literary artistry captures dimensions of reality itself. It evokes and invites contemplation. It projects the world in ways that touch the deepest roots of the imagination. Craig Bartholomew and Ryan O'Dowd speak of Old Testament wisdom as action forming poetry. They write, The delight of literary play amid the urgency of a worldview aflame with a sense of God is entirely congruent. This is not just poetry for poetry's sake. It evokes a world charged with the glory of God and summons us to live in this world. Understanding the parallelisms and the use of poetry more generally in the book in light of this invites us to reflect upon the world in specific ways. Parallelisms can reinforce, they can compare, they can contradict, they can contrast. The teaching of this book is wrapped in powerful and witty metaphors, in pithy proverbs, in provocative parallelisms, in lively analogies and in things like the grand personification of the characters of wisdom and folly. While the proverbs are written and gathered in a collection, we are invited to reflect upon them, to speak about them, to deploy them at the appropriate times. In this way they will serve to deliver their wisdom to us. The superscription that opens this section covers the proverbs from chapter 10 verse 1 to chapter 22 verse 16. The second half of verse 1 is an introductory proverb to this section. It speaks about the formation and training of the son. Waltke notices patterns in the ordering of the pairing. Father is in the first verset, mother in the second, and this is more general where that pairing occurs. The ordering of the antithesis likewise. Wise in the first verset, foolish in the second. And again, that is more typical of the ordering. This introduces the material that follows in a way that foregrounds the place that the teaching of wisdom plays in the relation between the son and his parents. This accumulates motivations for faithfulness. The foolish son rejects the legacy of wisdom that the parents want to pass on. He brings grief to his parents. The concern to honour one's parents and to bring them delight should be a further encouragement to wisdom. Verses 2 to 5 form a chiasm with verse 1. It ends as the second half of verse 1 begins, with the theme of bringing shame or pleasure to parents. As we look through these verses, we'll also see, in the way that they order their antithetical parallelisms, that there are pairs of positive or negative statements that connect successive verses together. So for instance, verse 3 begins with a positive statement, then has a negative, and then verse 4 starts with a negative statement, and then has a positive. These verses cluster around the themes of wealth and poverty, and the corresponding themes of diligence and laziness.

The source of wealth matters. Wicked wealth is cursed. It will not ultimately prosper the person who gains it. We might here think about Jesus' teaching about storing up treasure in heaven, or the parable of the rich fool. Verse 3 develops verse 2.

[12 : 15] The Lord's righteous providence is at work within the world. It upholds and enforces the moral order of his world, and ensures that the righteous are blessed, while the wicked are frustrated.

We might think here also of the fourth beatitude in Matthew chapter 5 verse 6. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. It's not immediately obvious what such a proverb means. It spurs us to reflection. We might think, there are a lot of righteous people who do seem to be poor, who do not seem to prosper, and a lot of wicked people who really do seem to gain wealth. Much as the psalmist reflects upon these matters in Psalm 37, we might be provoked to think about the way in which this statement might be true. It is true, obviously, in an ultimate sense. Those who lay up treasures in heaven will ultimately be blessed, but those who just build up wealth on earth will find that it comes to nothing, and it does not profit them at the end. However, it is likely true in a less than ultimate sense as well.

Even within this present age, we can see many ways in which the Lord satisfies the hunger of his people, while frustrating the wicked, even in their gain. Proverbs shouldn't be absolutized in many cases.

The righteous can definitely be poor, but laziness still causes poverty in a way that righteousness does not. Verses 4 and 5 take on this theme, and returning to the character of the shame-bringing son, they speak of the way that the person who does not answer with diligence to the urgency of the present situation will bring dishonor and loss to those who are closest to him.

Speech and words are in the center of the frame in verses 6 to 14. In verse 6, we see that blessings come upon the head of the righteous. Those in community with them declare benedictions concerning them.

[14 : 01] The righteous prosper and advance the community, so the community seeks their good and wishes them well. By contrast, the wicked bring violence back upon themselves. The way that the mouth of the wicked conceals violence might be a reference to the violence within them that they spread throughout the community around them.

Alternatively, it might be a reference to the violence that comes back over them, and overwhelms them. Their mouths are silenced as they are overwhelmed by the violence that they have caused in the community.

Verse 7 continues the theme. Even after their death, the righteous will be remembered as people use them as a blessing, recalling their character and their deeds. They treasure the memory of the righteous and bless and encourage people in terms of it.

By contrast, the names and the memories of the wicked will be forgotten. They will rot with their bodies. A common contrast between the wise and the foolish is the contrast between the babbling lips and the wise heart.

The wise heart is the inner core of the person that has been formed by the truth. The wise speak from the heart, from a settled interior that has been formed by the word of God. By contrast, the babbling fool is someone who is defined by non-stop speech, which has no relationship with the depth of heart.

[15 : 15] The words of a fool spring so quickly to his lips because they have never been weighed in his heart. In verse 10, the babbling fool is connected with the figure of the troublemaker. In Proverbs, wisdom is obtained through the proper reception of words.

We listen to instructors. We accept reproof. We resist flattery. The world is not understood merely through experience, but as it is metabolized into sound words.

Our posture towards this is absolutely crucial within the understanding of Proverbs. Once again, in verse 11, we're told about the mouth of the wicked that conceals violence. The mouth of the righteous leads to blessings coming upon his head, but is also here compared to a fountain of life.

The speech of the righteous refreshes and sustains those who are around them in community. This is seen, for instance, in not spreading gossip. Hatred stirs up strife through the angry and inciting words of the wicked, or perhaps through the gossip and rumors that they spread around.

By contrast, the person who is loving covers over things, does not needlessly put his neighbor to shame. Verse 13 juxtaposes the wise lips of the person who has understanding and the back of the fool who lacks sense.

[16 : 28] In the parallel, perhaps we see something of the contrast between the agency that the wise person enjoys. His lips give understanding and wisdom and are able as a result to rule, whereas the fool has to be driven along by others.

Having no sense within him, he has to be beaten by another party to make him do anything worthwhile. In verse 15, both the rich man and the poor man are described in a way that suggests that they are in a precarious position.

The poor man is vulnerable on account of his poverty, quite naturally. But the rich man, however, has a different sort of vulnerability. Understanding verse 15 will be easier when we see the parallel in Proverbs chapter 18 verse 11.

A rich man's wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall in his imagination. The second part of that gives us the clue. In verse 15, his strong city describes how the wealth is perceived by the rich man.

He thinks that it gives him security, whereas as we've seen in some of the surrounding Proverbs, ill-gotten or foolish wealth is no such source of security at all. The great evidence of wisdom, in many parts of scripture, is mastery of the tongue, and the words of a person reveal the state of their heart, and whether they are wise or foolish.

[17 : 43] The slanderer and the prattler are the subject of verses 18 and 19. The slanderer conceals his hatred while backbiting and spreading rumours. The prattler, meanwhile, is unable to restrain his lips.

By contrast, the prudent person knows when it is time to speak, and when it is time to be silent. He knows the right words to give in season. The preciousness of the words of the righteous is the subject of verses 20 and 21.

Here again, there is a contrast between the mouth and the heart, although this time it's the mouth of the righteous being contrasted with the heart of the wicked. The heart of the wicked is of little value.

It's not being formed. It is not a site of meditation. The heart of the wicked is more like a garbage tip, whereas the righteous guards and tends his heart like a garden. With such a well-guarded and formed heart, the words of the righteous are precious.

In chapter 25, verses 11 and 12, such words are described. 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 reprove to a listening ear.

[18 : 50] Unsurprisingly, the words of such wise people will be treasured by others who are on the path of wisdom. In verse 11, Fools, by contrast, die for lack of sense.

They can't even eat the food that is before them. They can't accept the words of wisdom. As a result, they suffer the doom associated with their folly. From verse 22, we have a contrast between the fate of the righteous and the wise and the foolish and the wicked.

This contrast is drawn both in the immediate situation and in the longer-term future. The ultimate source of true riches is the blessing of the Lord. As a blessing, it is pure and unmixed.

Both the fool and the wise are in search of pleasure. However, the fool takes pleasure in a sinful levity. He takes nothing seriously, least of all his sin. By contrast, the wise person recognises the joy and the delight and the exuberance of true wisdom.

There is a deep delight to be found in the search for knowledge, to be enjoyed in skilful and effective labour in the world, and in walking in the way and enjoying the fruits of the path of righteousness.

[20 : 10] The wicked experiences a dread. He recognises that his actions are associated with consequences. He hopes, and maybe fancies to himself, that he will escape these consequences.

But deep within, he suffers this dread. He knows that he is due justice. He is always afraid that it will catch up with him. Verse 24 assures us that one day it will. By contrast, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who seek the kingdom of God, those whose desire is set upon those things that are good and wise, they will also receive what they are anticipating, not the apprehension of those that are fearing judgment upon their sins, but the godly longings of the righteous heart.

It may look as if the wicked are prospering, but the true reality will be revealed when the foundations are tested, in the time of trial. At that point, the wicked will be wiped away.

The righteous, however, will stand and be established forever. This looks towards not just the immediate temporal horizon of continuing history, but the great end of things when destinies are finally settled.

This theme continues in verses 27 and 28. In verse 29, we are told that the way of the Lord is a stronghold to the blameless, but destruction to evildoers.

[21 : 25] The way of the Lord is his moral government of the world, the way that he establishes righteousness. The righteous walk in the way of the Lord. They are walking in line with, with the grain of, this moral governance.

By contrast, this same moral government is something that crushes and destroys the evildoers. The contrasting fate of the righteous and the wicked is also the subject of verse 30, which might remind us of Psalm 37 verses 9 to 13.

For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land. In just a little while the wicked shall be no more. Though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there.

But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace. The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him. But the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming.

The same establishment of the righteous within the land is also related to the establishment of their speech. As the mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom, what is within their hearts, they will be established.

[22 : 28] Meanwhile, the perverse tongue will be cut off from the land, just as the wicked are cut off. Their speech, their lies, will be silenced. The speech of the righteous and the speech of the wicked reveal what they have a deep acquaintance with in their heart.

The lips of the righteous reveal their knowledge of what is acceptable, and the mouth of the wicked the perversity that they harbour within. A question to consider.

What are some of the ways in which the mouth of the righteous could be considered a fountain of life?