

Proverbs 11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Proverbs chapter 11. A false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is his delight. When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom. The integrity of the upright guides them, but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them. Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death. The righteousness of the blameless keeps his way straight, but the wicked falls by his own wickedness. The righteousness of the upright delivers them, but the treacherous are taken captive by their lust. When the wicked dies, his hope will perish, and the expectation of wealth perishes too. The righteous is delivered from trouble, and the wicked walks into it instead. With his mouth the godless man would destroy his neighbor, but by knowledge the righteous are delivered. When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices, and when the wicked perish, there are shouts of gladness. By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is overthrown. Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent. Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered. Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counsellors there is safety. Whoever puts up security for a stranger will surely suffer harm, but he who hates striking hands in pledge is secure.

A gracious woman gets honour, and violent men get riches. A man who is kind benefits himself, but a cruel man hurts himself. The wicked earns deceptive wages, but the one who sows righteousness gets a sure reward. Whoever is steadfast in righteousness will live, but he who pursues evil will die. Those of crooked heart are an abomination to the Lord, but those of blameless ways are his delight. Be assured, an evil person will not go unpunished, but the offspring of the righteous will be delivered. Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion. The desire of the righteous ends only in good, the expectation of the wicked in wrath. One gives freely, yet grows all the richer. Another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want. Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered. The people curse him who holds back grain, but a blessing is on the head of him who sells it. Whoever diligently seeks good seeks favour, but evil comes to him who searches for it. Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will flourish like a green leaf. Whoever troubles his own household will inherit the wind, and the fool will be servant to the wise of heart. The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and whoever captures souls is wise. If the righteous is repaid on earth, how much more the wicked and the sinner.

Proverbs chapter 11 continues the collection of the Proverbs of Solomon. A balance would be scales used for measuring weights. These could be tampered with in various ways to produce a false impression in favour of the owner. The weights were used on the balance against the items being sold. Unjust merchants could use weights that were lighter than they ought to be to tilt sales in their favour, and weights that were heavier to advantage them in their purchases. They might keep both in their bags, bringing out the larger or the smaller weight, depending upon whether they were selling or buying. Proverbs is here repeating principles that are presented elsewhere in the Torah. Leviticus chapter 19 verses 35 to 36, for instance.

You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length, or weight, or quantity. You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. And again in Deuteronomy chapter 25 verses 13 to 16.

You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, a large and a small. You shall not have in your house two kinds of measures, a large and a small. A full and fair weight you shall have, a full and fair measure you shall have, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God has given you. For all who do such things, all who act dishonestly, are an abomination to the Lord your God. In Deuteronomy, the prohibition of the unjust weight appears among material mostly devoted to the tenth commandment, against coveting. One might also class this under the eighth, against stealing, or the ninth, against false witness. Proverbs underlines the claim of Deuteronomy chapter 25 verse 16, that righteous practice in such matters should find motivation in desire for the law's favour. The Lord upholds the moral order, and in many matters that cannot effectively be policed, a just society depends upon a population that fears the Lord and desires his favour.

[5 : 06] A consistent use of just weights will raise people's trust of trustworthy individuals, but it will also raise the general trust levels in society as a whole. By contrast, a society where people routinely defraud others will be greatly limited by its low level of social trust.

An exaggerated opinion of oneself, and presumption in one's action, invites the corrective blows of bitter experience. The proud man is unwilling to receive the correction offered by the wise rebuke, nor is he attentive to the teaching of the understanding more generally. Consequently, he must learn the hard way, by eating the bitter fruit of his folly. The downfall of the proud can come about by many different means. By contrast, the humble, humility being a virtue closely associated with the fear of the Lord, are not exalted in their own eyes. They will treat others around them accordingly.

They will put them before themselves, and win favour with many as a result. Humility also produces teachability. They will receive the law of the Lord, and also learn wisdom. Verses 3-8 contrast the ways of the righteous and the wicked. The way of the Lord is the way of integrity, and the upright commit themselves to this way, even when they can't understand why it is leading them on the path that it is. Here we see the importance of trusting in the moral government and providence of the Lord, and obeying his commandments accordingly, even when it doesn't seem to be beneficial.

We often think about the righteous holding their own integrity, but here we see that the integrity of the righteous, as it is a commitment to the way of the Lord and his moral government, is something that preserves and guides them. By contrast, the treacherous are brought to ruin by the very dynamics of the paths that they have committed themselves to. A similar truth is expressed in verse 4. Verse 4 is closely related to chapter 10 verse 2. Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit, but righteousness delivers from death. Implicitly then, the riches at the beginning here are the unrighteous mammon that people can build up and trust in. However, despite the fact that riches seem promising, what will truly deliver someone is righteousness. When trials and days of testing come, it will be integrity that guards people. All of this requires a certain walking by faith. In the immediacy of a situation, it can often seem pragmatic to compromise, to take the way of wickedness instead of the way of righteousness, to adopt just a little crookedness, to emulate successful sinners around you.

However, these verses make plain that those who adopt such paths will come to ruin. The wicked person trusts in their own providence, their own ability to govern their world, and yet the righteous recognises that they are not in control, and in situations where it would seem that they are definitely on the losing side, they still trust in the Lord, and in the end, they are rewarded for that trust. The wicked's wealth will come to nothing, but the righteous will be delivered by the Lord. In the end, their integrity will also advantage them over the way of the wicked. The wicked will be caught in their own schemes. The mouth of the godless man is a source of violence. We might think of Paul's description of the mouth of the wicked in Romans chapter 3 verses 13 to 14. Their throat is an open grave. They use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. This verse is similar to the one that precedes it in verse 8. The godless man is a troublemaker from which the righteous need to be delivered. However, the righteous will be delivered through wisdom, and the troublemakers will be caught up in their own trouble. Verse 9 functions as a transition between verses 3 to 8, which speak about the contrasting destinies of the righteous and the wicked, and the way in which their characteristic behaviours set them on the paths towards their divergent destinies, and the verses that follow in verses 10 to 15, which concern the fate of the community that is influenced by the righteous and the wicked in different ways. Here the concern for the community is seen in the city, the neighbour, and the people more generally. Cities are built up when they have righteous people in their midst.

[9 : 12] We might think here about the way that righteous people protect the city from judgment, as in the case of Sodom. If there were 10 righteous people, the whole city would have been saved on their account.

The righteous are also concerned to do good to their neighbours, to build up the city around them. Not only will they protect the city against the Lord's judgment, they will establish industry within the city. They will build up the walls of the city to defend it against its enemies. They will enact justice within the city and punish the evildoer. They will show kindness to the poor and the destitute.

In all of these ways, they build up everyone else around them. By contrast, the wicked are a great threat to the well-being of the city. Their trouble-making speech, their lies, their slander, their rumours, their backbiting, and their incitement to violence, all threaten the life and the peace of the city. They spread discord and hatred. Consequently, when they perish, the city rejoices. It has been delivered from a threat. Verses 12 to 13 describe a particularly dangerous form of speech, bearing false witness against one's neighbour in the spreading of slander and the revealing of secrets. Those who do this are foolish and untrustworthy, but those with prudence and understanding can hold their tongues. They recognise the great damage that careless words can do. A word rashly spoken cannot easily be taken back. Similar rashness and judgment can be seen in verse 15, in the person who puts up security for a stranger, putting himself in a position of considerable jeopardy. A recurring theme in the book of Proverbs is finding guidance and counsel, and where one should look to discover it. If you are simple, not yet having wisdom, how do you know where to look for actual wisdom? Here the situation of a people without wise counsellors and a people with an abundance of wise advisors are compared and contrasted. The discovery of wisdom requires guidance. However, when there are many guides saying different things, you need to know how to discern between them. And one of the ways you do this is by having a multitude of counsellors who all give their different perspectives and can be weighed against each other. A person with an abundance of counsellors can take the strengths of various different positions and synthesise them into their own. Weaknesses of one person's position can be revealed by the stress testing of another.

Verse 16 is a complicated one to interpret. It might be something closer to a synonymous parallelism. Michael Fox argues that the word translated violent, in many translations, would better be translated as diligent. That word is also given a more positive sense in the Septuagint, where the translation refers to virtuous men. Alternatively, it might contrast the gracious woman who gets honour and the violent men who get riches, but nothing more than riches. And as we will see in places like verse 13, even that gain will prove to be deceptive and short-lived. The wicked often seems to get his rewards very quickly and easily, whereas the righteous may have to sow for quite some period of time before they reap their harvest. Nevertheless, the reward of the righteous is sure, but the riches of the wicked can soon vanish. Assurance of the certainty of the contrasting fates of the righteous and the wicked, of the fool and the wise, are also given to us in verses 19 and 21. And while the wicked man might think that he is advantaging himself when he is cruel to others, and that the man who is kind and generous is being a fool, in the end the kindness of the kind man rebounds to himself, whereas the cruelty of the cruel man hurts himself. Verse 16 spoke of the gracious woman, and in verse 22 we have a contrasting woman, a woman who has beauty but no discretion.

The most common way to read this proverb is to think of the woman as like the pig who wears her beauty like a gold ring. Her attractive appearance is completely out of keeping with her inner character, Fox suggests an alternative reading, one directed far more immediately to the young man who is choosing a wife. He observes how the elements line up within the simile. The ring is like the woman.

[13 : 11] The fact that the ring is gold connects with her beauty. The lack of discretion corresponds with placing this ring in the snout of a pig. So what then is the pig? The pig, Fox argues, is the man who chooses such a woman for his wife. In such a situation, the beauty of the ring is degraded, and the pig only looks more ridiculous. As Proverbs 31 verse 30 says, charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.

Such a woman is the wife that the wise man will seek. Verses 23 to 27 continue to contrast the fates of the righteous and the wicked, but here focus mostly upon their generosity and charity.

Verse 23 is parallel to chapter 10 verse 28. The hope of the righteous brings joy, but the expectation of the wicked will perish. Here, however, the goodness of the desire of the righteous is accented. The righteous man, by giving away, ends up gaining more for himself.

In giving freely, he becomes richer. By blessing, he is enriched. By watering others, he himself is watered. By selling freely rather than hoarding, he himself is prospered. The wise and righteous man will not be niggardly in his dealings. He will be generous and charitable and not withholding. Like a farmer scattering his grain abroad, he will joyfully give, and when the time comes, he will receive a bountiful harvest from the Lord. As in verse 4, in verse 28, we see that riches are not something ultimately to trust in. They will fail those who rely upon them.

The righteous person is compared, by contrast, to a green leaf, and then in verse 30, his fruit is compared to a tree of life. We might here recall the description of the righteous person in Psalm 1, who meditates upon the law of God and is like a tree planted by streams of water. A similar verse to verse 30 that helps us to interpret it is found in Proverbs chapter 13 verse 14. The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life that one may turn away from the snares of death. The second half of verse 30, whoever captures souls is wise, obviously has a positive meaning, although if we saw the words captures souls in isolation, we'd presume that it had a negative meaning. Reading it in light of Proverbs 13 verse 14, we can see that the one who captures souls is one who's delivering souls, redeeming them from a point of peril. Once again, the righteous person is someone who spreads life and goodness around them. Other people benefit from having righteous people in their communities.

[15 : 44] Fools, by contrast, are troublemakers that bring conflict to their communities, and can also bring ruin to their households and their dependents. Their property will end up in the hands of the wise, and they will become servants to the wise. The final verse of the chapter is an a fortiori argument from the way that the righteous will be repaid on the earth, which might either refer to the way that judgment begins with the house of God, that the righteous are the first to receive punishment for their sins, or a reference to the way that God rewards the righteous with blessing. Whichever of those two meanings is in view here, the punishment of the wicked and the sinner is far more urgent.

If the righteous will be rewarded, how much more will they? A question to consider, what are some of the dynamics by which someone who gives freely will grow richer than the person who is withholding?