

Proverbs 16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 17 March 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Proverbs chapter 16. The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord. All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirit.

Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established. The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble. Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the Lord. Be assured, he will not go unpunished. By steadfast love and faithfulness, iniquity is atoned for, and by the fear of the Lord one turns away from evil.

When a man's ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him. Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice. The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps. An oracle is on the lips of a king. His mouth does not sin in judgment. A just balance and scales are the Lord's. All the weights in the bag are his work.

It is an abomination to kings to do evil, for the throne is established by righteousness. Righteous lips are the delight of a king, and he loves him who speaks what is right.

A king's wrath is a messenger of death, and a wise man will appease it. In the light of a king's face there is life, and his favour is like the clouds that bring the spring rain. How much better to get wisdom than gold? To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver. The highway of the upright turns aside from evil. Whoever guards his way preserves his life. Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. It is better to be of a lowly spirit with the poor, than to divide the spoil with the proud. Whoever gives thought to the word will discover good, and blessed is he who trusts in the Lord. The wise of heart is called discerning, and sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness. Good sense is a fountain of life to him who has it, but the instruction of fools is folly.

[2 : 1 1] The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious, and adds persuasiveness to his lips. Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul, and health to the body. There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. A worker's appetite works for him, his mouth urges him on.

A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire. A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends. A man of violence entices his neighbour, and leads him in a way that is not good. Whoever winks his eyes plans dishonest things. He who purses his lips brings evil to pass. Grey hair is a crown of glory, if it is gained in a righteous life. Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes the city. The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord. The first nine verses of chapter 16 of Proverbs form a unit. All but verse 8 have the name of the Lord within them. These verses are bookended by Proverbs concerning the Lord's control over the plans of men, and the Proverbs that follow them in verses 10 to 15 mostly concern the king. Verses 1 to 4 are particularly focused upon the superintendence and providence of the Lord. People may deliberate about the words that they are going to say in their heart, but when the time comes to speak, it is the Lord who is sovereign over what is said. In Luke chapter 12 verses 11 to 12, Jesus promises his disciples that he will give them the words to say when they are in a situation of trial. And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say. While it focuses upon speech, this verse makes a more general point about the way that the Lord oversees and superintends all action. We may have the most elaborate plans, but ultimately it is the Lord who decides what happens.

1 John chapter 3 verse 20 declares that God is greater than our heart and he knows everything. Verse 2 speaks of the person who thinks in his presumption that all of his ways are right.

The Lord, however, weighs both the paths that such a person takes and the spirit that governs him. He knows the true reality of a person's heart and even though we may delude ourselves, we cannot delude God. God perceives and he judges the true intentions of our heart.

Out of these first two verses arises the third. If the Lord is the one who ultimately disposes all our ways and our words, and if the Lord is the one who truly knows the hearts of men and weighs them, then we should commit our work and our plans to the Lord, praying that he will establish what we do. God's sovereignty is expressed even further in verse 4.

[5 : 12] The Lord is the one who has made all things, not just in the sense of creation, but also in the sense of fashioning things towards their purpose in history. He has even made the wicked for the day of trouble.

The Apostle Paul speaks of this sovereign providence of God in Romans chapter 9 verses 17 to 24. For the scripture says to Pharaoh, For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.

So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. You will say to me then, Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will? But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?

Will what is moulded say to its moulder, Why have you made me like this? Has the potter no right over the clay to make out of the same lump one vessel for honourable use, and another for dishonourable use?

What if God, desiring to show his wrath, and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only, but also from the Gentiles?

[6 : 25] Knowing the sovereignty of our Creator, we should not have our hearts lifted up. Whatever plans and intentions we might have in our hearts, God is greater than our hearts.

Man proposes, but God disposes. Knowing this, we should humbly commit our ways to him. However, the person who lifts themselves up in arrogance will be punished. Verse 6 speaks of iniquity being atoned for by steadfast love and faithfulness.

There is debate about whether this is God's steadfast love and faithfulness, or whether it is the human beings. Is the point here that a sacrifice needs to be confirmed by faithful practice, or is the point ultimately that the Lord is the one who atones, and that he does so on account of his steadfast love and faithfulness?

That would certainly seem to be the more theologically attractive reading. Bruce Waltke doubts whether it is the actual reading, however. Given the use of this language elsewhere, he thinks it must refer to the human being's steadfast love and faithfulness.

We have another occurrence of such language in Proverbs chapter 3 verse 3. Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you. Bind them around your neck. Write them on the tablet of your heart.

[7 : 33] Michael Fox suggests that we might hear the language of Exodus chapter 34 verses 6 to 7 here. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers and the children, and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.

The second verset of the Proverbs speaks about the fear of the Lord as the means by which we turn away from evil. If the first half is about the atoning for sin, the second half is about the transformation of life.

The cause of this is the fear of the Lord, a profound sense of the Lord's holiness with a corresponding sense of humility and a desire to obey him and honour him in all that one does.

If you want to turn away from evil, look to the Lord. His greatness, his goodness, and his holiness are a spur to transformation of life. Verse 7 gives us another reason why it is wise to commit one's way to the Lord.

When the ways of a man are pleasing to the Lord, he will guard that person's way. He will protect them from harm. He will be a shield around that person. A significant example of the Lord's protection of his people, ensuring that their enemies will not strike them, can be seen in Exodus chapter 34 verses 23 to 24.

[8 : 58] Verse 8 is the exception in verses 1 to 9.

It's the one verse that does not include the name of the Lord within it. However, it is very similar to a verse from the previous chapter which does include the name of the Lord. Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it.

The righteous man won't necessarily be rich. However, he will be far more secure and blessed than the wicked man will be. The wicked man ultimately will face his doom. But the righteous man will be established by the Lord, and ultimately he will flourish and prosper.

Verse 9 returns us to the principle described in verse 1. The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord. Here, however, it is the Lord's establishment of the steps of a man that is especially emphasized.

Knowing the providence and the sovereignty of God, we should commit our ways to him. We do not know the uncertainties, the hidden dangers, the obstacles and the false paths that lie before us.

[10 : 12] We must therefore commit ourselves to the Lord, praying for his guidance, seeking that in his gracious providence he will preserve us from evil, that he will guide us in the good way, that he will establish the work of our hands, and in his goodness that he will bring us at last to his heavenly kingdom.

In verses 10 to 15 we move from the Lord to the king. However, the way that the king is described, we could replace the name of the Lord for the king, and the proverbs would be very similar to ones that we have encountered earlier.

The righteous king reflects the character of God. He acts in the name of God. Within the Davidic covenant, the righteous king is described as the son of God.

The king here speaks wisdom that comes directly from God. An oracle is on his lips. His lips are supposed to convey the judgment of God himself. Justice ultimately comes from God, and must be upheld by the king in the Lord's name.

Elsewhere we see the word and the authority of God closely aligned with the words of the wise, and also with the authority of parents. In addition to judgment, weights and measures must be true and just.

[11 : 20] False measures are driven by covetousness that are an attempt to defraud others. However, just weights and measures are pleasing to the Lord. They are in keeping with the Lord's own character.

The king is the exemplary man. In the character of Solomon and David we see this most powerfully. Solomon, for instance, is the one who exemplifies wisdom. He is a new Adam ruling in the midst of a new Eden.

Nations and kings' thrones are established by righteousness. As we read through the story of 1 and 2 Samuel and the story of the kings, the fortunes of Judah and Israel are repeatedly seen to depend upon the righteousness or the unrighteousness of their kings.

In addition to righteous deeds, the king is concerned for righteous lips. For a king to judge wisely, he has to be aware of the people around him. He has to be alert to their character and he has to surround himself with just people.

The king is on the lookout for those of righteous lips. Those who speak uprightly, manifest their righteous character, and as a result will be the sort of people with whom he wants to surround himself and by whose service and counsel he wants to rule.

[12 : 27] In the king's desire for people of righteous lips, he is once again comparable to the Lord. In Proverbs chapter 12 verse 22, Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight.

The king is a man not just of wisdom and righteousness, but a man of power. His wrath is able to bring death. He has the power of death and life committed to him as an agent of the Lord's judgment.

The wise man who counsels the king, however, is able to assuage the king's anger. This implies both the power of the words of wisdom, but also the tractability of the king.

A good king is someone who expresses anger when it needs to be, but also who surrounds himself with people who can assuage it when it would best be appeased. The king's countenance when it shines upon someone in favour is like the life-giving light of the sun.

Alternatively, his favour is like the clouds that bring the spring rain, the rain that would come to ensure the harvest. If death is in the power of the king in verse 14, life is in the power of the king in verse 15.

[13 : 33] Waltke suggests that in verses 16 to 19, we have something akin to a miniature prologue. It reminds us of much of the material of chapters 1 to 9. Chapter 3 verses 13 to 14, Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding.

For the gain from her is better than gain from silver, and her profit better than gold. Proverbs chapter 8 verses 10 to 11, Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold.

For wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her. Chapter 8 verse 19, My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold, and my yield than choice silver.

The righteous man is once again defined by his way. He both turns away from evil, and he guards his way from unrighteousness. By the negative implication of verse 18, he is also defined by humility.

His heart is not lifted up. He fears the Lord, and as a result does not hold an exalted opinion of himself. His lowliness of spirit and his association with the poor might make us think of the Beatitudes, and the way that Jesus blesses the meek and the lowly in spirit.

[14 : 43] Verses 20 to 24 are particularly concerned with speech. In verse 20 we see that the person who gives thought to the word will discover good, something that is paired with the blessedness of the one who trusts in the Lord.

The implication here is that trusting in the Lord is associated with giving thought to the word. The word here might be the word received, the word of the wise, the commandment of the Lord that is meditated upon.

It might also refer to words that are spoken, that the wise man meditates upon and reflects upon before he utters. The words of the righteous and the wise are not just upright and true.

They are words that are carefully fashioned for the situation. They are words that are beautiful and persuasive. They are sweet here, and as a result they move people to appropriate action.

Aristotle spoke of the various forms of persuasion as ethos, pathos, and logos. The first relating to the personal character of the speaker, ethos.

[15 : 40] The second putting the audience into a certain frame of mind in order to move them, the pathos. And the third, the logos, the reasoned discourse by which the case is proved.

The wise person has a depth, soundness, and integrity of character that enables him to marshal ethos powerfully. He also has the faculties to make a strong and reasoned case for a position.

And beyond these things, he also has the power to delight and to move an audience, to speak to them in a way that moves their feelings. In its own distinctive terminology, the book of Proverbs here is speaking about all these different aspects of speech.

The ethos of deep moral character and integrity that renders the speech of the wise man a fountain of life of good sense. The insight and understanding by which the heart of the wise can speak judiciously and persuasively.

And the pathos by which he can speak graciously and beautifully. Words that are like a honeycomb. Words that bring delight, but also which bring healing. In verse 25, once again we see the limitations of man's understanding of his way.

[16 : 47] A man may be presumptively confident in his actions, and yet be on the way to death. This is why it is so important that we commit our ways to the Lord. This reminds us of verse 2.

The worker's appetite is one of the things that drives him on. If a man had no appetites, he would not be spurred to act. A man's hunger, a man's desire for love, a man's desire for honour and status.

All of these things drive him to work, to create, to produce, to perform great deeds. In this way, a man's mouth, his hunger, can properly handled be something that plays in his favour, that serves to inspire him to productivity and greatness.

Verses 27 to 29 all concern different types of evil men. The worthless man, the dishonest man, and the man of violence. The first man, the worthless man, is a troublemaker who plots evil and whose speech ignites and causes damage.

The dishonest man, through his lies, his rumours, and his tail-bearing, spreads discord, and he divides people who were once close together. The man of violence is one who spreads his violence to others by enticing other people to join him.

[17 : 58] Verse 30 describes the way that he communicates in a way that is deceptive and underhand, communicating furtively with his body language, while saying something very different with his mouth.

The fifth commandment, to honour father and mother, can be applied more broadly in the honouring of elders. Respect for those of greater age is on a number of accounts. First, we are the beneficiaries of the sacrifices of such persons, and those that inherit the legacy that they have left for us.

Second, they are people who have experienced a number of different seasons of life, and as a result, have the experience of sowing and reaping, and the wisdom that comes with experiencing and observing a number of these different cycles in their own lives and in the lives of others around them.

Such experiential wisdom can be communicated in words, but it cannot just be reduced to words. Verse 32 expresses one of the great principles of the book of Proverbs.

The person who is slow to anger, who is not reactive, and who is patient, is someone who is truly mighty. While an impetuous man can perform great deeds of greatness in the world outside, if he cannot master himself, he is not able to exercise true rule.

[19 : 10] True authority and control begins with mastering yourself. Once you have mastered yourself, you will be able to lead others. The person who cannot master themselves, however, is the reactive victim of all the forces that are around them.

They are not operating by their reason, but they are the plaything of their untamed passions. The true mighty man, the true leader, is the one who rules his spirit, who has taken the inner city of his life.

This same principle is expressed in a negative form in chapter 25 verse 28. A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.

The analogy of the self and the walled city is a powerful one. The walled city can be besieged by all sorts of forces. There can be great tumult and unrest and war outside of the city.

But if the city has sure and certain and strong walls, life within the city can continue calm and untroubled. The final verse of the chapter returns us to the principles with which it began.

[20 : 12] The Lord is the one who disposes all events, the greatest event to the smallest event. Even the small events that might be attributed to chance are actually the actions of God, in this case the lot that is cast into the lap.

A question to consider. If a man's spirit is like a city that must be taken and ruled, what in our governing of our spirits might be comparable to the walls by which a city is defended?