

Wisdom in the Way

Proverbs 16:17-33

Proverbs 16:17-33 - *“The highway of the upright is to depart from evil. He who keeps his way preserves his soul.*

Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.

Better to be of a humble spirit with the lowly than to divide the spoil with the proud.

He who heeds the word wisely will find good, and happy is he who trusts in the LORD.

The wise in heart will be called prudent, and sweetness of the lips increases learning.

Understanding is a wellspring of life to him who has it, but the correction of fools is folly.

The heart of the wise teaches his mouth and adds learning to his lips.

Pleasant words are like a honeycomb: sweetness to the soul and health to the bones.

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.

The person who labors, labors for himself, for his hungry mouth drives him on.

An ungodly man digs up evil, and it is on his lips like a burning fire.

A perverse man sows strife, and a whisperer separates the best of friends.

A violent man entices his neighbor, and leads him in a way that is not good.

He winks his eye to devise perverse things. He purses his lips and brings about evil.

The silver-haired head is a crown of glory, if it is found in the way of righteousness.

He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.”

Background Notes

For background, let's look at the last verse of this chapter and talk a little bit about "lots." *“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord” (v33).*

Casting or drawing lots was an ancient means of deciding an issue for the Jews. It was a means of determining God's will in a matter. Some scholars believe the *“urim and thummim”* of the Jewish high priests were precious stones that were used as lots. We can't be sure, but most likely "casting the lot into the lap" did involve two stones, as also perhaps the *urim and thummim*.

In the Old Testament, God's people believed that God controlled the outcome when the priest used the *urim and thummim* for making decisions. They also believed this was true when the people made decisions and settled disputes by the use

of lots. This was the method used for deciding the land division among the twelve tribes in the book of Joshua. And this was the way the guilt of Achan was determined at the time of the conquest (Joshua 7). All these were decided at the direction of the Lord Himself.

In the New Testament, when Matthias was chosen as a replacement for Judas, the decision was made by prayer and by drawing lots (Acts 1:23-26). However, after the coming of the Holy Spirit to indwell and guide believers at Pentecost (Acts 2), the use of lots is never mentioned again in the New Testament.

For the believer today, Proverbs 16:33 is not the best counsel for making decisions. However, the truth of the sovereignty of God over all things is certainly taught here. Nothing is out of God's control. *"The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord."*

Doctrinal Point

The proverbs are wise advice for everyday living.

Verse 17: *"The highway of the upright is to depart from evil; he who keeps his way preserves his soul."* Stay on the highway of holiness, and don't get off onto side roads of sin! There is danger and damage to your soul when you don't stay on the highway.

Verse 18: *"Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."* How often we see the truth of this proverb operating in many walks of life – athletics, academics, and politics, for example. Remember, it was the sin of pride that led to Satan's downfall (Ezekiel 28). God hates pride! He opposes those who are proud, but He gives grace and shows favor to those who are humble (James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5).

Verse 19: *"Better to be of a humble spirit with the lowly than to divide the spoil with the proud."* The truth of this proverb is quite obvious, if the proud have obtained the spoil illegally or unethically. But let's say the windfall has been obtained legally and ethically. The Bible says it's still better to be humble and associate with the lowly!

Verse 20: *"He who heeds the word wisely will find good, and happy is he who trusts in the LORD."* Everyone wants to know the secret to happiness and living the good life, right? Well, here it is: read and obey your Bible, and trust the Lord! It doesn't get any simpler than that. Why can't people understand this?

Verse 21: *"The wise in heart will be called prudent, and sweetness of the lips increases learning."* This is a great proverb for teachers. You'll be much more successful in communicating wisdom and knowledge when you have a pleasant and attractive style. It even encourages and excites your students to learn more!

Verse 22: *“Understanding is a wellspring of life to him who has it, but the correction of fools is folly.”* The wisdom of wise people results in good prospects throughout life. The folly of undisciplined foolish people results in failure throughout life.

Verse 23: *“The heart of the wise teaches his mouth and adds learning to his lips.”* We’ve already seen in Proverbs that it’s better for fools to keep their mouths shut and say nothing, rather than to speak and prove to everyone that they are indeed fools. This proverb is the converse of that truth. The words of wise people prove their wisdom and carry the weight of authority.

Verse 24: *“Pleasant words are like a honeycomb; sweetness to the soul and health to the bones.”* It’s amazing how pleasant and encouraging words can help a person feel better emotionally and spiritually - and even physically. This works by speaking to a person in need, but it also works by writing an encouraging letter, for example. Try it - it works!

Verse 26: *“The person who labors, labors for himself, for his hungry mouth drives him on.”* The need to eat is a great motivator to get out and get a job. Laziness will not feed you! Unfortunately, our welfare system (run amok) dilutes the motivation to work. 2 Thessalonians 3:10 says that if a person won’t work, he shouldn’t eat! But this proverb has a spiritual application as well. Realizing our spiritual needs should motivate us and drive us to God’s Word and prayer.

Verse 27: *“An ungodly man digs up evil, and it is on his lips like a burning fire.”* Unfortunately, some believers in the church operate this way. They’re constantly digging up stuff that should be left unsaid. And they can’t stop talking about it, so they cause damage and injury like a scorching fire. This proverb is not advising us to sweep sin under the rug. It’s telling us not to dig up sin that’s already been dealt with.

Verse 28: *“A perverse man sows strife, and a whisperer separates the best of friends.”* Probably we’d all say this proverb doesn’t apply to us - but whenever we distort the truth about someone with a negative comment we’re involved in perverse and slanderous speech and gossip. Perhaps it happens because of pride or jealousy. Be careful! Idle gossip can separate the best of friends.

Verse 29: *“A violent man entices his neighbor, and leads him in a way that is not good.”* The point of this proverb is to warn us not to be taken in and led in the wrong direction by people we know and with whom we are close. Our guard is down when we’re with people we know, and we’re less likely to recognize a harmful path.

Verse 30: *“He winks his eye to devise perverse things; he purses his lips and brings about evil.”* The point of this proverb is that facial expressions and personal mannerisms are linked to character, and they often reveal motives and intentions. However, remember that this is a proverb – a general truth – so don’t try to determine **everyone’s** character by expressions or mannerisms. Sometimes facial expressions and nervous mannerisms are caused by physical conditions that have nothing to do with a person’s character.

Verse 31: *"The silver-haired head is a crown of glory, if it is found in the way of righteousness."* The glory of younger folks is their strength and their accomplishments. The glory of older folks is their wisdom gained over a long life, and (in general) longevity indicates that they lived a righteous life.

Verse 32: *"He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city."* My father quoted this proverb to me when I was a teenager. Can you control your emotions? Can you control your temper? From God's perspective, controlling yourself is better than becoming a successful military hero - or any kind of hero!

Proverbs are wise advice for everyday living.

Practical Application

Remember, the rough road may be the right road!

Verse 25: *"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death."*

Does that proverb sound familiar? It should! We looked at the same proverb back in Proverbs 14:12. This proverb has great application to the way of salvation, as we've seen. The interstate of sincerity and good works might look like the right road to Heaven - and most people are traveling that road. But we know from Scripture that it's the wrong road, and it leads to eternal death (Matthew 7:13-14). Personal faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to Heaven, because Jesus died as our substitute for the penalty of our sins.

Recently we pulled into a gas station to fill up before getting on I-95. A helpful man in a commercial van told us that there was a huge traffic backup on the interstate because of an accident. However, if we followed him on a back road, we could avoid the problem. Well, we believed him, and we were saved from a long delay. The back road was longer and narrow. It was not as wide and as smooth as the interstate. But it was the **right way!**

The wide and smooth interstates and superhighways of life may look like the right roads - but following Christ on the rough and narrow road is the **right road**. Remember - the rough road may be the right road!