

Wisdom in Sober Thinking

Proverbs 17:14-28

Proverbs 17:14-28 – *“The beginning of strife is like releasing water, so stop contention before a quarrel starts. He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, both of them alike are an abomination to the LORD. Why is the purchase price of wisdom in the hand of a fool, since he has no heart for it? A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity. A man devoid of understanding shakes hands in a pledge, and becomes surety for his friend. He who loves transgression loves strife, and he who exalts his gate seeks destruction. He who has a deceitful heart finds no good, and he who has a perverse tongue falls into evil. He who begets a scoffer does so to his sorrow, and the father of a fool has no joy. A merry heart does good, like medicine, but a broken spirit dries the bones. A wicked man accepts a bribe behind the back to pervert the ways of justice. Wisdom is in the sight of him who has understanding, but the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth. A foolish son is a grief to his father, and bitterness to her who bore him. Also, to punish the righteous is not good, nor to strike princes for their uprightness. He who has knowledge spares his words, and a man of understanding is of a calm spirit. Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace. When he shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive.”*

Background Notes

For background notes, let's consider the illustration that Solomon uses in verse 14: *“The beginning of strife is like releasing water, so stop contention before a quarrel starts.”*

Remember the story of the Dutch boy who stuck his finger in the small hole of the dyke to stop a small leak until help came? Why was it important to stop up that small hole? Could that small stream of water have flooded all of Holland? Of course not! But small leaks become larger leaks at an accelerating rate, and before long the whole dyke would have been breached. Unfortunately, small cracks have led to the collapse of many dams, with disastrous results downstream to homes and towns.

So now we can better appreciate the important warning in this proverb. When a dam or a dyke is breached, you can't get the water back - so don't let it get started! If you don't nip strife and quarrel in the bud, it snowballs. In the same way, whether in the family, or ministry, or church, don't let quarrels and strife break out. Arguments become feuds and factions. Strife becomes a lawsuit. Families and fellowships are ruined. No wonder the Lord Jesus said, *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God” (Matthew 5:9).*

Doctrinal Point

The proverbs are wise advice for everyday living.

Verse 15: *“He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, both of them alike are an abomination to the LORD.”* Which is worse: freeing a guilty person who should go to prison, or railroading an innocent person into prison? According to the Bible and this proverb, both are miscarriages of justice. Sadly, many injustices take place for political reasons. The worse case in history, of course, was when our Lord was condemned, and Barabbas set free.

Verse 16: *“Why is there in the hand of a fool the purchase price of wisdom, since he has no heart for it?”* This proverb says two things about wisdom.

1. You can't buy it, as if it's a loaf of bread.
2. You must be motivated to get it.

We can see how practical this proverb is. Take education, for example. If your teens are not motivated to learn, and just want to go to college to party, why pay good money to send them to college?

Verse 17: *“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.”* It's often been said that you find out who your real friends are when you have troubles. The point of this proverb is that true friends and good relatives stick with you through good times and bad. This proverb is also a measure of how true a friend and relative we ourselves are. It goes without saying that the Lord Jesus is the perfect Friend. He will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5).

Verse 18: *“A man devoid of understanding shakes hands in a pledge, and becomes surety for his friend.”* This proverb is a good balance to the previous one in verse 17. Being a good friend doesn't require you to act unwisely, such as co-signing for a loan that could leave you bankrupt if you have co-signed for someone who defaults!

This is the third time we've seen this same wise advice for everyday living in the book of Proverbs – in Proverbs 6:1, Proverbs 11:15, and Proverbs 17:18. And we'll see it again in Proverbs 22: *“Do not be one of those who shakes hands in a pledge, one of those who is surety for debts.”* How many times does the Bible have to say it? The message is clear: Be wise! Don't risk financial suicide, even for friends and relatives.

Verse 19: *“He who loves transgression loves strife, and he who exalts his gate seeks destruction.”* What's the connection between the two parts of this proverb? Here's a paraphrase of what I think is the connection - keeping in mind that the “gate” could be either a boasting mouth or an impressive house. “Just as a person who loves to transgress is programmed for strife, so a person who loves to exalt himself by his mouth, or by his impressive dwelling, is programmed for destruction.” How true it is that pride goes before a fall!

Verse 20: *“He who has a deceitful heart finds no good, and he who has a perverse tongue falls into evil.”* The Bible makes a close connection between the heart and the tongue. The Lord Jesus said, *“A good man out of the good treasure*

of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). The heart refers to one’s ways and the tongue refers to one’s words. A crooked heart and a lying tongue go together - and they’re sure to result in trouble.

Verse 21: *“He who begets a scoffer does so to his sorrow, and the father of a fool has no joy.”* One of the greatest joys in life is having children who grow up to love and serve the Lord. And one of the greatest sorrows is children who not only grow up as unbelievers, but become mockers and scoffers of God, His Word, and the Christian faith. Remember, the “fool” here is someone who has no appreciation or desire for truth, or for the Lord. *“The fool has said in his heart, there is no God” (Psalm 14:1).*

Verse 23: *“A merry heart does good, like medicine, but a broken spirit dries the bones.”* The point of this proverb is that your emotional well-being and your physical well-being go together. Modern medicine would certainly agree. Once again we see how good science supports the truth of the Bible. Have you experienced the truth of this proverb? When you’re in good spirits, you have more energy and recover more quickly from illness, but if you’re feeling down, you don’t even have the strength to get out of bed. Knowing the Lord and His Word helps to provide us with a joyful and cheerful heart.

Verse 23: *“A wicked man accepts a bribe behind the back to pervert the ways of justice.”* The “wicked man” here is a judge or an official responsible for justice. Notice that the bribe is offered undercover. If he accepts the bribe and perverts justice in any way, he is wicked. And bribes can be items other than money. They can be promotions, vacations, protection, a prestigious award, and much more.

Verse 25: *“A foolish son is a grief to his father, and bitterness to her who bore him.”*

This verse is very similar to verse 21. The difference here is that the words in verse 25 are stronger. A foolish son or daughter not only takes away a parent’s joy, but also brings sorrow, grief, and bitterness. Bitterness is more than just the loss of joy. The Hebrew word here for “*grief*” can include the idea of provocation, annoyance, and irritation as well. Teens should hear this proverb as a warning if they care at all for the welfare and happiness of their parents.

Verse 26: *“Also, to punish the righteous is not good, nor to strike princes for their uprightness.”* Perversion of justice happens every day around the world. The trial of our Lord was the ultimate travesty of justice. The Prince of Peace was flogged and crucified. The perfectly righteous One was sentenced to death. A horrible perversion of justice!

Verse 27: *“He who has knowledge spares his words, and a man of understanding is of a calm spirit.”* You’re wise if you think before you speak. If you can control your tongue, you can control your temper. James 1:19-20 says, *“So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”*

Verse 28: *“Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace. When he shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive.”*

Two sayings come to mind that capture the truth of this proverb.

1. When the cupboard is closed, you can't see that it's empty!
2. It's better to keep your mouth shut and let people wonder if you are a fool, than to open it and remove all doubt!

The proverbs are wise advice for everyday living.

Practical Application

Think soberly.

Verse 24: *“Wisdom is in the sight of him who has understanding, but the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth.”*

What's the meaning of this proverb? Let me read the translation from the New International Version: *“A discerning man keeps wisdom in view, but a fool's eyes wander to the ends of the earth.”*

Wisdom is the main pursuit of the sensible person. A foolish person is arrogant, and his imagination dreams up goals that are far beyond the realm of possibility - *“at the ends of the earth.”* In other words, a foolish person doesn't think sensibly or soberly. Foolish people let their minds roam far afield. Their pipe dreams and fantasies keep them from wisely concentrating on important matters at hand. They don't think soberly.

Romans 12:3 challenges us to think of ourselves sensibly and soberly: *“For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.”* Think soberly!