

Wisdom in Sobriety

Proverbs 20:1-15

Proverbs 20:1-15 - *“Wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.*

The wrath of a king is like the roaring of a lion; whoever provokes him to anger sins against his own life.

It is honorable for a man to stop striving, since any fool can start a quarrel.

The lazy man will not plow because of winter; he will beg during harvest and have nothing.

Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.

Most men will proclaim each his own goodness, but who can find a faithful man?

The righteous man walks in his integrity. His children are blessed after him.

A king who sits on the throne of judgment scatters all evil with his eyes.

Who can say, “I have made my heart clean; I am pure from my sin”?

Diverse weights and diverse measures are both alike an abomination to the LORD.

Even a child is known by his deeds, whether what he does is pure and right.

The hearing ear and the seeing eye: the LORD has made them both.

Do not love sleep, lest you come to poverty; open your eyes, and you will be satisfied with bread.

“It is good for nothing,” cries the buyer; but when he has gone his way, then he boasts.

There is gold and a multitude of rubies, but the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel.”

Background Notes

For our background notes, let's consider verse 4: *“The lazy man will not plow because of winter; he will beg during harvest and have nothing.”* Why does this verse indicate that “winter comes before harvest” rather than “summer comes before harvest.”?

First of all, there are various translations of this verse. An explanation of the planting of winter crops in Israel will help us understand these translations. In Israel, the winter months are the “rainy season.” That’s when you want to plow and plant your seed so you’ll have a good spring harvest. The sluggard, however, is not only lazy, but he doesn’t like to work out in the fields during the cold and rainy winter season! So, as a result, he has nothing to eat and nothing to sell at the time of the spring harvest.

Doctrinal Point

The proverbs are wise advice for everyday living.

Verse 1: *“Wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.”* In this proverb, wine (made from grapes) and strong drink (made from grains) are personified to mockers and brawlers. These descriptive terms demonstrate what wine and strong drink can do to people who drink too much. They can't control themselves properly, and they get into trouble. Think of Noah and Lot.

Under the Old Testament Law, it's clear that drinking an alcoholic beverage was OK - as long as it was consumed in moderation. Deuteronomy 14:26, *“You shall spend that money for whatever your heart desires; for oxen or sheep, for wine or similar drink, or whatever your heart desires. You shall eat there before the Lord your God and you shall rejoice, you and your household.”* But both Old and New Testaments condemn drinking too much, and intoxication. That's not wise (v1) – and it's wrong in God's eyes: *“Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery”* (Ephesians 5:18).

Verse 2: *“The wrath of a king is like the roaring of a lion. Whoever provokes him to anger sins against his own life.”* This proverb is very practical. Try to stay clear of the wrath of governing authorities. This general truth does not mean that we compromise our Christian testimony. The good news here is that in general, the wrath of the king is directed against evildoers, and thus evil is kept in check.

Romans 13:3-4 teaches us: *“Rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same, for he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.”* Who was on the throne when Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Rome? It was **Nero!** Not Mr. Nice Guy. But still, governing authority was keeping law and order, and Christians are to respect proper civil authority.

Verse 3: *“It is honorable for a man to stop striving since any fool can start a quarrel.”* Did you ever notice how some people are always in an argumentative mode? They love to complain and be involved in causing strife. They're not peacemakers. Stay away from people like that! From God's point of view, it's honorable to avoid wrangling.

Verse 5: *“Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.”* In general, most people tend to be private in their thoughts and plans, like deep waters. So this proverb has more than one application. Young people who are wise will go to older folks and draw them out. Young people can learn so much from their thoughts and experiences. This proverb is also good advice for anyone involved in counseling. The job of the counselor is to wisely draw out the thoughts and plans of the one who needs counseling.

Verse 6: *“Most men will proclaim each his own goodness, but who can find a faithful man?”* The word translated as “goodness” here is the Hebrew word *hesed*, which can also be translated “loyal love.” It's easy to find folks who claim to

be characterized by loyal love and faithfulness, but it's not easy to find someone who really practices what they claim. This proverb is quite convicting, isn't it?

Verse 7: *"The righteous man walks in his integrity. His children are blessed after him."* A couple of weeks ago my seven-year-old grandson Dave and I went on a hike in the snow. Because the snow was deep, I told him to follow me by walking in my footsteps. He did, and we had a great hike together. I've since thought of the spiritual lesson for fathers and grandfathers in this proverb. The spiritual lesson is seen in the words of an old poem: "A careful man I have to be; a little fellow follows me. I do not dare to go astray, for fear he'll go the self-same way."

Verse 8: *"A king who sits on the throne of judgment scatters all evil with his eyes."* In the ancient world, the king would also judge. A righteous king would see to it that evil and wickedness were removed from his kingdom. When we read this proverb, it's hard not to think of our Lord as the righteous King and Judge. *"And in the midst of the seven lamp stands was One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire. His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters"* (Revelation 1:13-15). "His eyes like a flame of fire" is His piercing judgment of sin, as in this proverb.

Verse 10: *"Diverse weights and diverse measures are both an abomination to the LORD."* If you sell your used car to someone for more than it's worth, is that cheating? According to this Scripture, it is an abomination to the Lord. So whether it's by newspaper or eBay or Craig's List, God expects His people to be 100% honest in business dealings.

Verse 11: *"Even a child is known by his deeds, whether what he does is pure and right."* Deeds reflect character, especially in children who have not yet developed tricks of the trade to hide their true character. When you see the positive traits of righteousness and purity emerging in a child's life, this is evidence that the child is on the right track to bring glory to God throughout his/her life. We who are parents, grandparents, and teachers should do all we can to develop and strengthen those good character traits.

Verse 12: *"The hearing ear and the seeing eye: the LORD has made them both."* The point of this proverb is not just that God created eyes and ears, but that these important senses are to be used for God's glory. We are responsible to use our ears and eyes to please God. Do we? If I were to think about what I looked at or listened to in the last 24 hours, what percentage wouldn't make it onto the "pleasing to God" list?

Verse 13: *"Do not love sleep, lest you come to poverty. Open your eyes, and you will be satisfied with bread."* This proverb reminds us of Proverbs 6:9-11: *"How long will you slumber, O sluggard? When will you rise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep - so shall your poverty come on you like a prowler,*

and your need like an armed man.” Proverbs 20:13 isn’t saying that we don’t need a good night’s rest, or that we can’t sleep in a little on Saturdays. The point is that we shouldn’t overindulge in sleep, or be sleep when we should be working!

Verse 14: *“It is good for nothing,’ cries the buyer; but when he has gone his way, then he boasts.”* Two weeks from now, some of us will be taking a GCM study tour through Egypt, Jordan, and Israel. To get some good prices for gifts to bring home, we’ll haggle and bargain in the marketplaces. Some tour members will likely boast about the low prices they were able to get, while others will get ripped off. In any case, the point of this proverb seems to be a balance to what we have in verse 10: in business, we should sell at fair prices - and we should be willing to buy at fair prices.

Verse 15: *“There is gold and a multitude of rubies, but the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel.”* Gold and rubies certainly have their value, but how much more valuable to have lips of knowledge – knowledge that has been obtained from the Word of God. The good news is - you can have that valuable knowledge if you’re willing to spend time reading God’s Word.

The proverbs are wise advice for everyday living.

Practical Application

Praise God, Proverbs 20:9 is not the end of the story!

“Who can say, ‘I have made my heart clean; I am pure from my sin?’” And the implied answer for the question in this proverb is **no one**. Romans 3:10 tells us, *“There is no one righteous, not even one.”* Not even one! And Romans 3:23, *“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* No one can say their heart is clean, and that they haven’t sinned.

But, praise God – that’s not the end of the story! Proverbs 20:9 is not the last word revealed in the God’s Word. Romans 3:24-25 goes on to say, *“all are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of His blood - to be received by faith.”*

In His grace, God has provided salvation for us in Jesus Christ! Through His sacrificial death on the cross our hearts can be purified and made clean from sin. And we can obtain this gift of salvation by simply believing and putting our faith and trust in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior. Praise God, Proverbs 20:9 is not the end of the story!