

Wisdom in Justice

Proverbs 21:1-15

Proverbs 21:1-15 - *“The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD. Like the rivers of water, He turns it wherever He wishes.*

Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the hearts.

To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.

A haughty look, a proud heart, and the plowing of the wicked are sin.

The plans of the diligent lead surely to plenty, but those of everyone who is hasty, surely to poverty.

Getting treasures by a lying tongue is the fleeting fantasy of those who seek death.

The violence of the wicked will destroy them, because they refuse to do justice.

The way of a guilty man is perverse, but as for the pure, his work is right.

Better to dwell in a corner of a housetop than in a house shared with a contentious woman.

The soul of the wicked desires evil. His neighbor finds no favor in his eyes.

When the scoffer is punished, the simple is made wise, but when the wise is instructed, he receives knowledge.

The righteous wisely considers the house of the wicked, overthrowing the wicked for their wickedness.

Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be heard.

A gift in secret pacifies anger, and a bribe behind the back, strong wrath.

It is a joy for the just to do justice, but destruction will come to the workers of iniquity.”

Background Notes

For background notes, let’s go to verse 9: *“Better to dwell in a corner of a housetop, than in a house shared with a contentious woman.”* When you read this proverb, do you picture a man perched precariously on the roof of his house, about to slide down and fall off? In the biblical lands the houses had flat roofs, not pointed roofs. The people could not only walk around on the rooftops, but sometimes they built an extra room on part of the roof. Elisha’s “prophet’s chamber” was a rooftop room. *“One day Elisha went to Shunem where there was a notable woman... And she said to her husband, “Look, I know that this is a holy man of God, who passes by us regularly. Please, let us make a small upper room on the wall; and let us put a bed for him there, and a table and a chair and a lamp stand, so whenever he comes to us, he can turn in there” (2 Kings 4:8-10).*

“Better to dwell in a corner of a housetop than in a house shared with a contentious woman” is not suggesting separation or divorce. No! When a difference of opinion arises, rather than arguing, quarreling and fighting, it’s better for a husband and wife to put some distance between each other until emotions settle down. Very good practical advice!

Doctrinal Point

The proverbs are wise advice for everyday living.

Verse 1: *“The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD. Like the rivers of water, He turns it wherever He wishes.”* Just as a farmer channels and regulates the flow of water for his crops, so God controls the hearts and minds of kings on behalf of His people.

There are plenty of biblical examples of this proverb. Think of the Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus. Think of Nebuchadnezzar, humbled before God in Daniel 4. Think of the edict of Cyrus, permitting the Jews to return home from their Babylonian captivity. Think of Xerxes at the time of Esther. And think of Artaxerxes at the time of Nehemiah: *“They kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy; for the LORD made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king toward them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel”* (Ezra 6:22).

Can the Lord still move the hearts of kings and rulers on behalf of His people? Can the Lord still move the hearts of local officials or school authorities on behalf of His people? Can the Lord move the heart of your boss or your spouse in the right direction? Of course He can! And through His sovereign ways, He does so.

Verse 2: *“Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the hearts.”* This proverb has both the good news and the bad news. The bad news is obvious. You may be wearing a deceptive mask and convincing yourself and others that you’re a wonderful person - but your heart is filled with pride and jealousy and angry plans. And the Lord knows. But the good news is that if you’re really trying to do the right thing, the Lord sees your heart = even when others don’t appreciate your efforts!

Verse 3: *“To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.”* Under the Old Testament Law when people did wrong, they brought a sacrifice to the Temple. Unfortunately, some people got the idea that it was OK to do wrong as long as you later brought a sacrifice. Nothing could be further from the truth! Remember what the prophet Samuel said to King Saul when he wrongly sacrificed, rather than waiting for Samuel? *“Samuel said: ‘Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams’”* (1 Samuel 15:22).

This is still true today. Obedience and inward devotion are far more important to the Lord than outward ritual. For example, baptism means nothing if there is no true inward belief in the heart.

Verse 4: *“A haughty look, a proud heart, and the plowing of the wicked are sin.”* Some translations say, *“and the unplowed field of the wicked produce sin,”* and some translations say, *“the lamp of the wicked is sin.”* The point seems to be that the sins of the wicked are not only their haughty outward expression of pride, and their inward unseen proud heart, but everything they do is sinful. Why? Because pride motivates them and guides them.

Verse 5: *"The plans of the diligent lead surely to plenty, but those of everyone who is hasty, surely to poverty."*

Remember - this is a proverb: a general truth stated in general terms. In general, if you work hard, plan out your work, and count the cost, you will prosper. And in general, if you make hasty decisions and have no plan of action, you will not prosper. This proverb applies to more than just business ventures - it also applies to marriage, family, church, and ministry decisions.

Verse 6: *"Getting treasures by a lying tongue is the fleeting fantasy of those who seek death."* There are several translations of this proverb, but the point seems to be that if you seek to gain riches dishonestly, you'll never reach your goal - and you'll die in the process of trying. Have you ever seen a corrupt rich person who is happy and fulfilled?

Verse 7: *"The violence of the wicked will destroy them because they refuse to do justice."* Notice two things that are said about wicked people in this proverb: they deliberately do violence to others, and they refuse to do what's right. These are not sins of ignorance. God's has set His moral law in place in the moral universe, and ultimately wicked people will never get away with their violent acts. In some cases they will actually be trapped in their own violent acts.

Verse 8: *"The way of a guilty man is perverse, but as for the pure, his work is right."* Behavior reveals character. That's the point of this proverb. True character may not be immediately obvious, but with time a person's pattern of behavior will reveal his or her true character - either perverse and unrighteous or pure and upright.

Verse 10: *"The soul of the wicked desires evil. His neighbor finds no favor in his eyes."* You don't want a wicked person as your neighbor! Some people are addicted to evil. They'll take advantage of you and hurt you, even if they live next door to you and know you.

Verse 11: *"When the scoffer is punished, the simple is made wise; but when the wise is instructed, he receives knowledge."* Wise people learn through instruction. That's all that's needed. But simple folk live through example. They learn quickly when they see scoffers and mockers punished.

Verse 12: *"The righteous wisely considers the house of the wicked, overthrowing the wicked for their wickedness."* Some Bible translations capitalize "Righteous" - referring to God, and not just a human judge. Only God knows everything about what is going on in *"the house of the wicked,"* and He knows when and how to tear it down. We can leave judgment in the hands of God. As Romans 12:19 says, *"Dear friends, never take your own revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God, for the Scriptures say, 'I will take revenge; I will pay them back, says the Lord.'"*

Verse 13: *"Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be heard."* What goes around comes around is not a Bible verse, but it's a biblical principle. It works both ways. If you're generous and giving with your time, money, and talent to help meet the needs of hurting people, in general others will help you when you're hurting. But if you are stingy and miserly and mean, don't expect folks to run to your aid when you're in trouble.

Verse 15: *"It is a joy for the just to do justice, but destruction will come to the workers of iniquity."* How do you respond to justice? Does it give you joy to do the right thing, and to see the vindication of those who are in the right? I love it when court cases are decided in favor of people who did the right thing. And I love it when wrongdoers don't get off by a legal loophole. Workers of iniquity deserve destruction.

The proverbs are wise advice for everyday living.

Practical Application

Distinguish between bribes and gifts.

Verse 14: *"A gift in secret pacifies anger, and a bribe behind the back, strong wrath."* Most commentators interpret this verse as neither condemning nor condoning the practice of gifts or bribes. They say that this proverb is just stating the facts. Money talks! That's the way it is in life. However, by definition, bribery is always wrong, because it's wrong to induce someone to do wrong by offering them money or some other benefit.

But what about giving someone a secret gift to do what is right – perhaps to subdue anger and wrath, or to avoid problems, and maybe even avoid disaster? Is that wrong? I don't think so. As we explained back in chapter 17, the Hebrew word that's translated "bribe" here can include gifts that are not used in a bad way.

Here's an illustration. On one of our Holy Land tours, I got permission from the maitre d' of our hotel dining room to invite some Christian friends from Nazareth to join us for dinner. But the maitre d' said we could only have four guests because of the size of the dining room. But the Nazareth delegation arrived with eight guests! What should I do? It's amazing what \$50 slipped into the hand of a maitre d' can do. He squeezed all eight guests in - no problem. This was not a bribe. It was not given to encourage him to do wrong. It was similar to tipping a waiter for good service. It was a motivating **gift** - encouraging him to make room for our guests. Distinguish between bribes and gifts.