

Sayings of the Wise – Wisdom in Integrity

Proverbs 23:1-16

Proverbs 23:1-16 - *“When you sit down to eat with a ruler, consider carefully what is before you, and put a knife to your throat if you are a man given to appetite. Do not desire his delicacies, for they are deceptive food.*

Do not overwork to be rich. Because of your own understanding, cease! Will you set your eyes on that which is not?

For riches certainly make themselves wings. They fly away like an eagle toward heaven.

Do not eat the bread of a miser, nor desire his delicacies; for as he thinks in his heart, so is he. “Eat and drink!” he says to you, but his heart is not with you. The morsel you have eaten, you will vomit up, and waste your pleasant words.

Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, for he will despise the wisdom of your words.

Do not remove the ancient landmark, nor enter the fields of the fatherless, for their Redeemer is mighty. He will plead their cause against you.

Apply your heart to instruction, and your ears to words of knowledge.

Do not withhold correction from a child, for if you beat him with a rod, he will not die. You shall beat him with a rod, and deliver his soul from hell.

My son, if your heart is wise, my heart will rejoice—indeed, I myself. Yes, my inmost being will rejoice when your lips speak right things.”

Background Notes

For background notes, let's look at verses 10 and 11. In Proverbs 22 we mentioned that large stones were used to mark property lines and boundaries in the ancient world. Look once again at Proverbs 22:28: *“Do not remove the ancient landmark which your fathers have set.”* Now we have the same prohibition in Proverbs 23:10-11, with some added warnings about the seriousness about this injustice. Verse 10: *“Do not remove the ancient landmark, nor enter the fields of the fatherless.”*

What is meant by that last phrase, *“nor enter the fields of the fatherless”*? In our last Talk we mentioned that by moving the stones just a little bit at night, little by little you could steal some of your neighbor's property. Another easy way to steal property was to move the stones soon after the property owner died, before the children who inherited the property had a chance to inspect the location of the boundary. In the context, that seems to be the primary idea in verse 10.

In verse 11 we have the repercussions of such action, and here again some background knowledge helps us to fully appreciate what is being said here. *“For their Redeemer is mighty. He will plead their cause against you.”*

The Hebrew word that's translated "Redeemer" here is *goel*, which can be translated "defender." *Goel* is the word that's used for the "kinsman redeemer" in the Old Testament. The kinsman redeemer was responsible to protect the property rights of a near relative if in some way they lost their land. Remember the story of Ruth? Boaz was the *goel*, and he was responsible to defend Ruth, and to redeem the family property that had been lost.

Verse 11 is saying that if you take advantage of the fatherless and those who can't defend themselves, God Himself is their *goel* – their Kinsman Redeemer. He is mighty, and He will plead their cause. How would you like to go against the Lord in court, if you had taken advantage of an orphan and He is their defender and advocate?

Doctrinal Point

The proverbs are wise advice for everyday living.

Verses 1-3: *"When you sit down to eat with a ruler, consider carefully what is before you; and put a knife to your throat if you are a man given to appetite. Do not desire his delicacies, for they are deceptive food."* The phrase "put a knife to your throat" doesn't mean commit suicide. It's figurative language. The point is that one should exercise extreme caution in the presence of a ruler or boss, or someone who has authority over you. Don't think of the dinner as an opportunity to get a free meal or to indulge. Don't be greedy! Put a knife to your throat rather than to your food!

Furthermore, keep in mind that the ruler or boss's invitation may have a few ulterior motives, rather than just a friendly dinner at his expense. Is he "buttering you up" for something? Is he about to fire you and send you packing with a final meal under your belt? Is he about to ask you to do something that would be unethical? All kinds of sinister purposes may be behind the seemingly nice hospitality. So control yourself! Bite your tongue, be warned, be on guard! Don't fall into a possible trap.

Verses 4-5: *"Do not overwork to be rich; because of your own understanding, cease! Will you set your eyes on that which is not? For riches certainly make themselves wings. They fly away like an eagle toward heaven."* In this wise saying, there's a warning about trying to become rich. Verse 4 says, "**Don't do it!**"

That advice is right in line with what we read in the New Testament: *"But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful desires that drown man in destruction and perdition" (1 Timothy 6:9).* There the Bible gives us several reasons why we should not try to get rich:

1. You can't take it with you. 1 Timothy 6:7, *"For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out."* The only way to take your bank account to Heaven is to invest your money now - in the work of the Lord.
2. You cannot serve God and money. The Lord Jesus said, *"You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24).* Some Christians have tried to serve God and money, but it can't be done. Money will always win. Now if God makes you

rich without you trying to get rich, then use your money for the Lord, not for yourself. *“Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life”* (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

3. It can disappear overnight. Verse 5: *“Will you set your eyes on that which is not? For riches certainly make themselves wings. They fly away like an eagle toward heaven.”* You can never have enough money, because it has wings! Expenses you never dreamed of are always popping up. Just think about how much money you’ve spent on your vehicle lately!

Verses 6-8: *“Do not eat the bread of a miser, nor desire his delicacies, for as he thinks in his heart, so is he. “Eat and drink!” he says to you, but his heart is not with you. The morsel you have eaten, you will vomit up, and waste your pleasant words.”* Here’s another wise saying with very good practical advice. In Hebrew, the miser or stingy person is literally one who is described as having an “evil eye”! In contrast, the one who is generous has a “generous eye.” Look back at Proverbs 22:9: *“He who has a generous eye will be blessed, for he gives of his bread to the poor.”*

The person in view in Proverbs 23:6-8 is the person who invites you to dinner, or to his vacation house for the weekend, and tells you to enjoy yourself. Meanwhile he’s counting every penny of what it’s costing him, and letting you know in sneaky ways how much he is spending on you. And he lets you know that he’s expecting you to invite him in return, and spend at least the same amount! Have you ever known people like that? What a waste of time and words. That’s exactly what verse 8 is saying: *“The morsel you have eaten, you will vomit up, and waste your pleasant words.”*

Verse 9: *“Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, for he will despise the wisdom of your words.”* You’re wasting your time when you try to teach a fool. In fact, they will despise your wise counsel. This proverb is very similar to what the Lord Jesus taught: *“Do not give what is holy to the dogs, nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet and turn and tear you into pieces”* (Matthew 7:6).

Verses 13-14: *“Do not withhold correction from a child, for if you punish them with a rod, they will not die. Punish them with the rod, and save them from death.”* Were you spanked when you were a child? Does the Bible allow spanking? This verse says spanking, yes. But the Bible never condones abuse! Some people say that the “rod of discipline” here is only figurative, and doesn’t mean physical punishment, but verse 13 says: *“If you punish them with a rod, they will not die.”* These verses indicate that spanking may in fact keep a child from a reckless and dangerously undisciplined lifestyle, and even an early death. Of course there are other forms of discipline, but spanking is not unbiblical.

Verses 15-16: *“My son, if your heart is wise, my heart will rejoice - indeed, I myself. Yes, my inmost being will rejoice when your lips speak right things.”* One of the great joys in life for believing parents is to see their children become believers and mature in the faith. This is true of your own children and grandchildren, but it’s true of your children in the faith as well. Sunday school teachers can appreciate what the apostle Paul said in 3 John 4: *“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.”*

The proverbs are wise advice for everyday living.

Practical Application

Don't have one without the other!

Verse 12: *"Apply your heart to instruction, and your ears to words of knowledge."*

Applying your heart to instruction or discipline refers to diligence and desire. Applying your ears to the words of knowledge refers to paying attention and listening. If you want to be an effective servant for the Lord, you need both. Don't have one without the other!

Some Christians have willing hearts, and want to serve the Lord, but they don't know God's Word. Why not? They're not diligent. They don't apply their hearts to instruction. They don't study the Bible much on their own, and they don't attend Bible studies or classes where they can listen and learn. I know a lot of Christians like that.

On the other hand, there are Christians who love Bible studies. They love to listen and learn more about the Word of God - but that knowledge is not translated into zeal and action! They don't seem to have any desire to be actively involved in serving the Lord.

We need to have the desire, discipline and diligence to serve the Lord, and we also need to have the desire to listen, study and learn the Word of God.

Don't have one without the other!