

Sayings of the Wise – Wisdom in Judgment

Proverbs 24:23-34

Proverbs 24:23-34 - *“These things also belong to the wise: it is not good to show partiality in judgment. He who says to the wicked, “You are righteous,” him the people will curse; nations will abhor him; but those who rebuke the wicked will have delight, and a good blessing will come upon them. He who gives a right answer kisses the lips.*

Prepare your outside work, make your field fit, and afterward build your house.

Do not be a witness against your neighbor without cause, for would you deceive with your lips?

Do not say, “I will do to him just as he has done to me; I will render to the man according to his work.”

I went by the field of the lazy man, and by the vineyard of the man devoid of understanding, and there it was, all overgrown with thorns. Its surface was covered with nettles; its stone wall was broken down. When I saw it, I considered it well. I looked on it and received instruction: A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest; so shall your poverty come like a prowler, and your need like an armed man.”

Background Notes

In Proverbs 22:17 we began a section of Proverbs known as “Sayings of the Wise.” This section includes wise sayings from Solomon and other wise believers. This section continues on to the end of chapter 24, but beginning with verse 23 the “Sayings of the Wise” is divided into two subsections.

We looked at the first subsection that contained thirty wise sayings. Now a new subsection begins in Proverbs 24:23: *“These things also belong to the wise...”* So in the last twelve verses of chapter 24, we have six more “Sayings of the Wise.”

Again, we mention that the noun “wise” here in verse 23 is plural, indicating that other wise inspired writers besides Solomon were involved in writing these wise sayings.

Doctrinal Point

The proverbs are wise advice for everyday living.

The first of these six additional “Sayings of the Wise” is in **verses 23-25**: *“These things also belong to the wise: It is not good to show partiality in judgment. He who says to the wicked, “You are righteous,” Him the people will curse; nations will abhor him; but those who rebuke the wicked will have delight, and a good blessing will come upon them.”* This wise saying is especially directed at judges, but it certainly can be applied to all of us.

All of us must make judgment calls about people from time to time: as parents, as employers, or as leaders of various groups. Our judgments should be fair and without partiality. We should not play favorites, but treat everyone with equal justice. Letting the guilty go free or just giving them a “slap on the wrist” for serious crimes is not only wrong – it’s dangerous. Wicked people will not stop with small crimes if justice is not carried out.

We’ve seen this call for equal justice in Proverbs 17:15: *“He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord.”* And Proverbs 18:15: *“It is not good to show partiality to the wicked or to overthrow the righteous in judgment.”*

Equal justice was demanded under the Old Testament Law. *“You shall do no injustice in judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor, nor honor the person of the almighty. In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor” (Leviticus 19:15).* So in Proverbs 24 we see that if a leader judges fairly, he will be blessed. However, the people will hate him if he shows partiality to the wicked.

Verse 27: *“Prepare your outside work. Make your field fit for yourself in the field; and afterward build your house.”* This proverb is about priorities. “First things first” is just common sense, both literally and metaphorically. In order to have food and a source of income, you need to plant your fields first - before you build your home and furnish it with creature comforts. For example, many American pioneers continued to live in their covered wagons until their new lands were plowed and planted. They didn’t begin to build houses until their fields were planted.

Looking at the proverb metaphorically, we would conclude that we should not rush into marriage and start a family without some serious spiritual, emotional, and financial preparation.

Verse 28: *“Do not be a witness against your neighbor without cause, for would you deceive with your lips?”* What would you do if your neighbor was accused of a crime and you were called into a court as a character witness? Your testimony could greatly affect the thinking of the jury and the outcome of the case. Whether you like your neighbor or not, your testimony had better be truthful. The fact that your neighbor lets his dog run loose all over your yard should not influence the truth of your testimony!

Verse 29: *“Do not say, ‘I will do to him just as he has done to me; I will render to the man according to his work.’”* The Golden Rule is “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Well, this proverb is more than the Golden Rule. It includes the opposite: do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you. We saw this truth in Proverbs 20:22: *“Do not say, ‘I will recompense evil.’ Wait for the LORD, and He will save you.”*

Verse 29 is a good example of a proverb that is more than just “a general truth stated in general terms.” Remember, we said that when a proverb is backed up by the rest of Scripture and is shown to be more than a general truth, then it is **more than just a proverb**. Is Proverbs 24:29 backed up by the rest of Scripture? Is it shown to be more than just a general truth? Yes, it is! We’ve already looked at some of the Scriptures that back up this proverb. The Lord Jesus said, *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust”* (Matthew 5:43-45).

And there’s this familiar passage in Romans 12:17-19: *“Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine. I will repay,’ says the Lord.”*

In addition, there’s 1 Thessalonians 5:15: *“See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.”* And 1 Peter 3:9: *“Not returning evil for evil, or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you are called to this, that you may inherit a blessing.”*

Verses 30-34: *“I went by the field of the lazy man, and by the vineyard of the man devoid of understanding, and there it was, all overgrown with thorns. Its surface was covered with nettles. Its stone wall was broken down. When I saw it, I considered it well. I looked on it and received instruction: A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest. So shall your poverty come like a prowler, and your need like an armed man.”*

The final five verses of the chapter form the six extra “Sayings of the Wise.” Thus it is the thirty-sixth and last saying of this last section of “Sayings of the Wise.”

Question: In this last wise saying, why is the sluggard’s field overgrown, and why is his stone wall broken down? Answer: Laziness. Sleep is good and necessary - but too much sleep is not good. Don’t sleep when work needs to be done! It takes work just to keep things from falling apart.

Obviously this proverb can be applied to more than just overgrown fields or broken down walls. I would always remind my students to remember Proverbs 24:33-34, and tell them that “poverty would overtake them” at exam time if they were too lazy to study, or if they cut classes to sleep in! The proverbs are wise advice for everyday living.

Practical Applications

1. Love the truth.

Verse 26: *“He who gives a right answer kisses the lips.”*

It's not easy to interpret this proverb. It seems to stand on its own, and is not linked with the equal justice of verses 23-25. By the way, this is the only place where kissing the lips specifically is mentioned in the Bible.

Kissing the lips is a sign of great affection. In the metaphor, this sign of great affection is a response to what is right or the truth. But who is doing the kissing in this verse? Is the truth kissing you - or are you kissing the truth? Or both? A case could be built for **both**, because two people are involved in a kiss of affection.

Don't you love it when you hear the **truth** of God's creation clearly taught, or the **truth** of man's history explained in light of Scripture, or the **truth** of the gospel of God's amazing grace? I love it! The truth has kissed me - and I have kissed the truth.

Love the truth!

2. Learn from the mistakes of others.

I hope we learn from our own mistakes so that we don't repeat them, but we can also learn from the mistakes of others. That's good advice, and it's taught right here in Proverbs 24. Where?

Verse 32: *“When I saw it, I considered it well. I looked on it and received instruction.”*

When the wise writer saw the sad consequences of the lazy man's mistakes, he took notice, he thought about it, and he was instructed by the result of the mistakes.

Take a look around you, and you'll see the sad consequences of too much TV, too much pleasure, too little work, and too little Bible study. Reflect on these sad cases, and be instructed by them.

Learn from the mistakes of others!