

Wisdom in Diligence

Proverbs 27:14-28

Proverbs 27:14-28 - *“He who blesses his friend with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, it will be counted a curse to him.*

Continual dripping on a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike. Whoever restrains her restrains the wind, and grasps oil with his right hand.

As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend.

Whoever keeps the fig tree will eat its fruit; so he who waits on his master will be honored.

As in water face reflects face, so a man’s heart reveals the man.

Hell and Destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied.

The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, and a man is valued by what others say of him.

Though you grind a fool in a mortar with a pestle along with crushed grain, yet his foolishness will not depart from him.

Be diligent to know the state of your flocks, and attend to your herds, for riches are not forever, nor does a crown endure to all generations.

When the hay is removed and the tender grass shows itself, and the herbs of the mountains are gathered in, the lambs will provide your clothing, and the goats the price of a field. You shall have enough goats’ milk for your food, for the food of your household, and the nourishment of your maidservants.”

Background Notes

For our background notes, let’s consider the mortar and pestle of verse 22: *“Though you grind a fool in a mortar with a pestle along with crushed grain, yet his foolishness will not depart from him.”*

A “mortar” is essentially a heavy bowl in which substances are crushed with a “pestle,” a club-shaped handheld tool that is used to mash or grind the substance in the mortar. Those of us in the older generation remember that pharmacies often used a mortar and pestle as a symbol on their store signs, because they were used for preparing medications. And you didn’t pass high school chemistry without using a mortar and pestle! Some people today have a mortar and pestle in their kitchen for grinding and crushing herbs and spices.

The point of the proverb is: although you can easily separate wheat from chaff with a mortar and pestle, it’s not so easy to separate a fool from his folly. However, remember that this is a **proverb**: a general truth stated in general terms. We know from the further revelation of Scripture that the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ **can** separate a fool from his folly, because what is impossible for man is possible with God! *“With men it is impossible, but not with God. For with God, all things are possible” (Mark 10:27).*

Doctrinal Point

The proverbs are wise advice for everyday living.

Verse 14: *“He who blesses his friend with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, it will be counted a curse to him.”*

What’s the point of this proverb? Did you ever get an early morning phone call that woke you up before your normal wake up time? And it wasn’t a necessary call? Even if the call was from a friend, and he or she said, “God bless you today!” - how did you feel? There are a couple of interpretations for this proverb, but the main idea seems to be that **tactful timing** and **sensitivity towards others** are important guidelines for living!

Verses 15-16: *“A continual dripping on a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike. Whoever restrains her restrains the wind, and grasps oil with his right hand.”* The Bible is not teaching here that all women are contentious, or that there are no contentious men. No. But just as rainy days would often cause continual dripping somewhere in the ancient homes - dripping that would be very annoying and hard to stop - so is the constant scolding and nagging and complaining of a contentious person. Trying to stop the continual dripping is like trying to stop the wind or hold olive oil in your hand. Try it. You will not be successful.

Again, this is a proverb: a **general** truth stated in **general** terms. Now, with the coming of the gospel, we know that a person who is contentious before their conversion can exercise control under the power of the Holy Spirit, enabled by the new life we have in Christ.

Verse 17: *“As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend.”* How do you keep your kitchen knives sharp? Today we have automatic sharpeners, but in ancient days you’d have to rub each side of the cutting edge along an iron rod with fine ridges like a file. Swords or plows were also sharpened this way. “Iron sharpened iron.”

In the same way, we help each other stay sharp by sharing opinions, exchanging ideas, and asking questions. My favorite teaching technique for the classroom or in seminars is when students are free to ask questions and give feedback. It’s helpful to me - and hopefully to the listeners as well!

This proverb relates to many areas of our social contacts with others. For example, it’s a good thing to talk to fellow workers on the job, or chat with neighbors, or discuss current events in small groups. It stimulates our minds to hear other peoples’ ideas and opinions. It helps to develop our personalities, and it helps to mold our character.

A specific application of this proverb is the mutual benefit that we as believers receive when we study and discuss Scripture together. Yesterday I was discussing what the Bible teaches about time and eternity with four Christian men. It was amazing how each man added something different to the discussion. It wasn’t a debate, and it wasn’t one man doing all the teaching, and no one was trying to talk over the others. No. It was a friendly roundtable conversational Bible study, and we all benefited from the discussion. We were edified because the Word of God was before us, and each one

of us was sharpened up by the variety of comments and ideas and insights that came from different men with different backgrounds. As iron sharpens iron, so believers “sharpen” one another.

Verse 18: *“Whoever keeps the fig tree will eat its fruit, so he who waits on his master will be honored.”* Fig trees need closer attention than many other plants and trees, so the farmer who cares well for fig trees is rewarded with a good harvest of figs. In the same way, if you pay close attention to your job and serve your employer well, it’s generally true that you will be rewarded. It’s just a matter of time. This is certainly true in the spiritual realm. If we serve our Lord and Master well, He will reward us (see 1 Corinthians 3:11-14).

Verse 19: *“As in water face reflects face, so a man’s heart reveals the man.”* Do you want to know what you really look like? Not just that beautiful or handsome person you **think** you look like? Look in a mirror, or at a reflection in a clear pond, and you’ll see what you really look like. Do you want to know what kind of person you **really** are - not the wonderful person you **think** you are? Then examine the thoughts and desires of your heart in the light of God’s Word. Your real character will be revealed.

Verse 20: *“Hell and Destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied.”* Death and the grave are never full. There’s always room for more. And our coveting nature is never satisfied, because we still have a fallen sinful nature. All of us are vulnerable to the *“strong desire of the eyes”* - the strong desire for **more stuff**. *“For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust or strong desire of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world”* (1 John 2:16). Only by the grace of God in Christ can we resist the worldly desires of our fallen nature.

Verses 23-27: *“Be diligent to know the state of your flocks, and attend to your herds; for riches are not forever, nor does a crown endure to all generations. When the hay is removed, and the tender grass shows, and the herbs of the mountains are gathered in, the lambs will provide your clothing, and the goats the price of a field. You shall have enough goats’ milk for your food for the food of your household, and the nourishment of your maidservants.”* These verses are very practical, and they have a spiritual application for ministry. The main idea is to use diligence in serving with what we have, *“for riches are not forever, nor does a crown endure to all generations”* (v24). We should use our resources wisely because conditions may change, such as our funds or government regulations.

If we plant and harvest wisely, and manage our flocks and herds wisely, we’ll have enough milk and food and clothing and income for the whole household. *“When the hay is removed, and the tender grass shows itself, and the herbs of the mountains are gathered in, the lambs will provide your clothing, and the goats the price of a field. You shall have enough goats’ milk for your food for the food of your household, and the nourishment of your maidservants”* (v25-27).

The spiritual application for churches and ministries is obvious: if spiritual leaders carefully manage their resources and care for their “flocks,” stability and blessing and growth will be the result.

The proverbs are wise advice for everyday living.

Practical Application

Have you passed the “praise test”?

Verse 21: *“The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, and a man is valued [or tested] by what others say of him.”*

You may think the proverb ought to say, “The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, and a man is tested or valued by the problems he goes through.” But no! He is tested by the **praise** he receives! What’s the idea here? How are we tested by praise?

Some commentators suggest that our character is tested by what we put high on our priority list, and what we choose to praise. And that is certainly biblically true, but is that the main idea in this proverb? Probably not.

The parallel structure of Hebrew poetry is helpful for interpretation here. What is the parallel between being “tested by praise” and the refining crucible or furnace that burns away the dross and leaves the pure precious metal? The parallel is how you handle the praise you receive, as most translations indicate.

Does the praise you receive go to your head? Do you become proud and arrogant? Or does praise encourage you to continue to do what is right - perhaps with an even purer motive when the dross is removed by testing. Praise can go either way.

Praise becomes a test of your character. Have you passed the “praise test”?