



Proverbs - Chapter Sixteen

III Proverbs 10:1-22:16 - Wise Sayings of Solomon (continues)

Summary of Chapter Sixteen

A man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps. Kings detest evil. Pride goes before destruction. Wisdom is a fountain of life.

Introduction to Proverbs 16:1-9

The comparison between the plans of a man's heart (v.1a and v.9a) and the sovereign direction of the Lord (v.1b and v.9b) unifies this section. Verses 2-8 focus on the importance of the heart-action connection.

- ¹ The plans of the mind belong to mortals,
but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord.

Proverbs 16:1

The plans of the mind belong to mortals. God plans and prepares, and because man is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), it is in the nature of man to make preparations of the heart and mind.

The answer of the tongue is from the Lord. When wisdom is given voice (the answer of the tongue), it is from the Lord: <<*The human mind may devise many plans, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established*>> (Proverbs 19:21) - beyond the preparations of man's heart, i.e. his innermost thoughts.

- ² All one's ways may be pure in one's own eyes,
but the Lord weighs the spirit.

Proverbs 16:2

All one's ways may be pure in one's own eyes. By instinct, men and women justify themselves and see their own ways as pure, not always considering that: <<*Fools think their own way is right, but the wise listen to advice*>> (Proverbs 12:15), and: <<*There are those who are pure in their own eyes yet are not cleansed of their filthiness*>> (Proverbs 30:12). Some of the most criminal and violent people have thought themselves pure in their own eyes. Charles Spurgeon commented, "They who are best acquainted with mankind will tell you that self-righteousness is not the peculiar sin of the virtuous, but that most remarkably, it flourishes best where there appears to be the least soil for it."

The Lord weighs the spirit. Despite the constant self-justification of men and women, God fairly and accurately weighs the spirits of all. God knows and God measures: <<*Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed*>> (1 Samuel 2:3). Jesus warned Pharisees about their behaviour and the Lord's view of it: <<*You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God*>> (Luke 16:15b).

During the dedication service for the temple Solomon called upon God to judge all people fairly: <<*whatever prayer, whatever plea from any individual or from all your people Israel, all knowing their own suffering and their own sorrows so that they stretch out their hands towards this house; may you hear from heaven your dwelling-place, forgive, and render to all whose heart you know, according to all their ways, for only you know the human heart*>> (2 Chronicles 6:29-30).

³ Commit your work to the Lord,
and your plans will be established.

Proverbs 16:3

Commit your work to the Lord. Every man and woman should commit their works to the Lord. They should depend on God in their works and they should do those works as unto the Lord: <<*Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters*>> (Colossians 3:23). Derek Kidner observed, "Our activities and plans (AV, RV, thoughts) will be no less our own for being his: only less burdensome (commit is literally 'roll', as in Psalm 37:5), and better made."

Your plans will be established. Usually a person thinks of committing their thoughts or plans to the Lord, then committing their works to him. Here Solomon reversed that order, and told them to first commit their works, then trust that

their thoughts and plans will be established: <<They rose early in the morning and went out into the wilderness of Tekoa; and as they went out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, 'Listen to me, O Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in the Lord your God and you will be established; believe his prophets'>> (2 Chronicles 20:20), <<May he grant you your heart's desire, and fulfil all your plans>> (Psalm 20:4), and: <<Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths>> (Proverbs 3:5-6).

⁴ The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.

Proverbs 16:4

The Lord has made everything for its purpose. God, as creator of all things, has the right to claim all things for himself, for his own intended purposes. Although not everything that occurs in this life fulfils the will and purpose of God, Scripture shows that all the things that God does is in line with his own will and purpose: <<I cry to God Most High, to God who fulfils his purpose for me>> (Psalm 57:2), <<Assemble, all of you, and hear! Who among them has declared these things? The Lord loves him; he shall perform his purpose on Babylon, and his arm shall be against the Chaldeans>> (Isaiah 48:14), <<Sharpen the arrows! Fill the quivers! The Lord has stirred up the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it, for that is the vengeance of the Lord, vengeance for his temple>> (Jeremiah 51:11), <<The Lord has done what he purposed, he has carried out his threat; as he ordained long ago, he has demolished without pity; he has made the enemy rejoice over you, and exalted the might of your foes>> (Lamentations 2:17), <<For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, died, was laid beside his ancestors, and experienced corruption>> (Acts 13:36), <<We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose>> (Romans 8:28), <<In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will>> (Ephesians 1:11), <<Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel>> (2 Timothy 1:8-10), <<In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath, so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that

God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us>> (Hebrews 6:17-18), <<In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures>> (James 1:18), and: <<For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by agreeing to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled>> (Revelation 17:17).

Even the wicked for the day of trouble. God's plan and providence includes the destiny of the wicked. He has appointed them for the day of doom. Kidner noted, "The general meaning is that there are ultimately no loose ends in God's world: everything will be put to some use and matched with its proper fate. It does not mean that God is the author of evil." Adam Clarke commented, "He does not make the wicked or ungodly man; but when man has made himself such, even then God bears with him. But if he repents not, when the measure of his iniquity is filled up, he shall fall under the wrath of God his Maker."

⁵ All those who are arrogant are an abomination to the Lord;
be assured, they will not go unpunished.

Proverbs 16:5

All those who are arrogant are an abomination to the Lord. God resists the proud (James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5) and regards them as an abomination. The proud man or woman imitates Satan in his proud rebellion against God: *<<How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of Zaphon; I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High.' But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit>> (Isaiah 14:12-15).*

Be assured, they will not go unpunished. One proud man or woman cannot succeed against God, but neither can many proud men or women. Even if they join forces against God as they did at Babel in Genesis 11:1-9, they will not go unpunished, even as at Babel.

⁶ By loyalty and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for,
and by the fear of the Lord one avoids evil.

Proverbs 16:6

This proverb portrays the sacrificial system, by which iniquity is atoned for, as an expression of God's loyalty and faithfulness, as confirmed in Exodus 34:6, Proverbs 3:3, 14:22, and 20:28. The right response is the fear of the Lord, by

which one turns away from doing evil, is a common ‘wisdom’ phrase such as those found in Job 1:1, 1:8, 2:3, and 28:28, Psalm 34:14 and 37:27, and Proverbs 3:7, 13:19, 14:16, and 16:17. The Bible consistently presents moral effort as the right response to God’s grace.

By loyalty and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for. God in his mercy and truth has provided atonement for iniquity. God’s mercy prompted the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the Cross, and his truth made it necessary to make atonement in a way that honoured the righteousness of God. Clarke observed, “This may be misunderstood, as if a man, by showing mercy and acting according to truth, could atone for his own iniquity. The Hebrew text is not ambiguous: *bechesed veemeth yechapper avon*; ‘By mercy and truth he shall atone for iniquity.’ He - God, by his mercy, in sending his son Jesus into the world, - ‘shall make an atonement for iniquity’ according to his truth-the word which he declared by his holy prophets since the world began.”

Some commentators believe that this refers to man’s mercy and truth, but are careful to point out that it does not teach the idea of self-atonement or self-salvation. Kidner stated, “The second line indicates that the mercy (*hesed*) and truth (better, loyalty and faithfulness, RSV) are man’s here, not God’s. This is not a denial of grace, but a characteristic demand for ‘fruits that befit repentance’.”

By the fear of the Lord one avoids evil. The great principle of the fear of the Lord is not only the beginning of wisdom as stated in Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10, it is also the foundation of a God-honouring life. To live in the fear of the Lord is to depart from evil.

⁷ When the ways of people please the Lord,
he causes even their enemies to be at peace with them.

Proverbs 16:7

When the ways of people please the Lord. It is possible for a man or woman to live a life that pleases God. This is not the idea that they can be perfectly pleasing to God before their salvation is completed in resurrection and glorification. Instead the idea is that in general, a man or woman can honour and please the Lord with the way they conduct their daily life.

He causes even their enemies to be at peace with them. One of God’s blessings on the man or woman who pleases him is to give them peace with others, even extending to their enemies: <<*he allowed no one to oppress them; he rebuked kings on their account, saying, ‘Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm’*>> (Psalm 105:14-15), <<*I will grant you mercy, and he will have mercy on you and restore you to your native soil*>> (Jeremiah 42:12), and:

<<*Now God allowed Daniel to receive favour and compassion from the palace master*>> (Daniel 1:9). Clarke noted, “God is the guardian and defence of all that fear and love him; and it is truly astonishing to see how wondrously God works on their behalf, raising them up friends, and turning their enemies into friends.”

- ⁸ Better is a little with righteousness
than large income with injustice.

Proverbs 16:8

Better is a little with righteousness than large income with injustice. Sometimes those who are righteous in this world have little of the material comforts of this world. Someone who has great wealth and vast revenues but little righteousness is worse off than the righteous man or woman who has little materially in this world. Vast revenues without justice can never give a peaceful conscience, freedom from guilt and sin, the love and joy of God, and a hundred other things the righteous enjoy. It is not that the only two options in life are to have either little with righteousness or vast revenues without justice. It is that when those two options are compared, the first is clearly better.

Other Proverbs reveal a similar truth: <<*Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it*>> (Proverbs 15:16), <<*Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife*>> (Proverbs 17:1).

- ⁹ The human mind plans the way,
but the Lord directs the steps.

Proverbs 16:9

The human mind plans the way. This is not a bad thing. Humankind, as the God in whose image they are made, thinks about and plan their way. Many people would do well to more carefully plan their way.

The Lord directs the steps. People plan as they can and should, but they should never think that their ability to plan makes them lord over their own lives. It is the Lord who directs their steps: <<*God indeed does all these things, twice, three times, with mortals, to bring back their souls from the Pit, so that they may see the light of life*>> (Job 33:29-30), and: <<*So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart*>> (Psalm 90:12). Every plan a person makes should be held in humility before God and surrender to his ultimate will.

Introduction to Proverbs 16:10-33

The remaining sections of Chapter 16 further illustrate the themes of vv.1-9 on the benefits of wisdom for the well-being of the heart (vv.16-19, vv.20-24 and vv.25-33), and in light of the sovereign governance of the Lord (vv.10-15 and v.33).

Introduction to Proverbs 16:10-15

These verses concern the king, who is mentioned explicitly in all but v.11. Verses 10 and 12 appear to represent the king as flawlessly wise, especially since he is descended from David. These proverbs represent the ideal and imply that people should have respect for their highest officials.

Verses 13-15 indicate that people should be careful around kings simply because absolute rulers – as all kings were in biblical times – have great power. Verse 11 seems out of place but is actually very important: ultimately, justice, as symbolised by the scales, representing commercial transactions in general, is maintained by God – it is above the power of the king.

¹⁰ Inspired decisions are on the lips of a king;
his mouth does not sin in judgement.

Proverbs 16:10

Inspired decisions are on the lips of a king. Inspired decisions is the NRSVA's translation of the Hebrew word *qesem* which is more widely translated as **divination**. The word is used here not in the sense of seeking occult or demonic guidance. It is used simply in the sense of wise guidance, the wisdom that should be on the lips of a king. It is used in this sense in the middle of: <<*For now the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, is taking away from Jerusalem and from Judah support and staff – all support of bread, and all support of water – warrior and soldier, judge and prophet, diviner and elder, captain of fifty and dignitary, counsellor and skilful magician and expert enchanter*>> (Isaiah 3:1-3).

The word *qesem* is used throughout the Bible in the negative sense of 'divination'; here it seems merely to mean his words from an oracular sentence, as if he speaks for God: <<*So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the fees for divination in their hand; and they came to Balaam, and gave him Balak's message*>> (Numbers 22:7), and: <<*Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel; now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, "See what God has done!"*>> (Numbers 23:23); and for a popular opinion of such: <<*In order to change the course of affairs your servant Joab did this. But my lord has wisdom like the wisdom of the angel of God to know all things that are on the earth*>> (2 Samuel 14:20).

His mouth does not sin in judgement. The same lips that must speak wisdom and discernment should not also be used to go beyond God's wisely appointed boundaries of judgement. Kidner observed, "The Old Testament lends no support to the idea that the king can do no wrong; rather, he is a man under authority: Deuteronomy 17:18-20."

- ¹¹ Honest balances and scales are the Lord's;
all the weights in the bag are his work.

Proverbs 16:11

Honest balances and scales are the Lord's. Fair business and measures are so pleasing to God that it can be said that honest measures belong to him. All of God's measurements and assessments are fair and true. The proper measure does not come from the king, nor does it belong to the king. The right measure comes from God and belongs to him. The Lord requires that his people act fairly in business and personal matters, and that those responsible for the people ensure that justice is fair and equitable.

All the weights in the bag are his work. This assumes that the weights in the bag are those mentioned in the previous line - honest weights and scales: <<***A false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but an accurate weight is his delight***>> (Proverbs 11:1), and: <<***You shall have honest balances, an honest ephah, and an honest bath***>> (Ezekiel 45:10). Fair and honest business is God's business, i.e. in his work.

- ¹² It is an abomination to kings to do evil,
for the throne is established by righteousness.

Proverbs 16:12

It is an abomination to kings to do evil. This is more literally translated as 'for kings to do evil.' Solomon admitted that it was possible for kings to commit wickedness. Some think that because someone is a king or leader all they do is justified. Sadly, Solomon became a king who committed wickedness; refer to 1 Kings 11:1-10.

For the throne is established by righteousness. The righteous life of a king invites God's blessing upon his life and reign. Because of this great potential and influence, it is an even greater sin for kings to commit wickedness, especially if surrounded by officials that provide a negative influence: <<***Take away the dross from the silver, and the smith has material for a vessel; take away the wicked from the presence of the king, and his throne will be established in righteousness***>> (Proverbs 25:4-5). This was especially true of the Davidic kings

over the people of Judah but can equally be applied to all those who have been given the privilege and responsibility to govern and rule over any nation.

- ¹³ Righteous lips are the delight of a king,
and he loves those who speak what is right.

Proverbs 16:13

Righteous lips are the delight of a king. In their positions of authority, it is important for kings to hear from those who speak honestly and wisely. Therefore they find delight in righteous lips.

He loves those who speak what is right. Even when a man speaks what may be difficult for the king to hear, the one who speaks what is right should gain the respect of those who are in authority: <<*Those who love a pure heart and are gracious in speech will have the king as a friend*>> (Proverbs 22:11).

- ¹⁴ A king's wrath is a messenger of death,
and whoever is wise will appease it.

Proverbs 16:14

A king's wrath is a messenger of death. When a king or person of authority is angry, their reaction can bring death or a death-like fear to others. This is true of earthly kings; it is much truer of the King of kings: <<*Then the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?'*>> (Revelation 6:15-17). To be the target of his wrath is to receive messengers of death.

Whoever is wise will appease it. Wisdom can help people have the right reaction even in the difficult moments when a king or person of authority is angry and shows their wrath: <<*With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue can break bones*>> (Proverbs 25:15), and: <<*If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your post, for calmness will undo great offences*>> (Ecclesiastes 10:4). The wise man or woman will especially know how to appease the wrath of the King of kings - not by their own works and merits, but by receiving what God has provided in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

- ¹⁵ In the light of a king's face there is life,
and his favour is like the clouds that bring the spring rain.

Proverbs 16:15

In the light of a king's face there is life. The approval and favour of an earthly king could mean success or failure for anyone in his kingdom. To have his shining countenance give approval, i.e. **the light of the king's face**, meant a person was safe in the king's favour and had life. This was seen in the account of Queen Esther approaching her husband un-summoned, an action that could have led to her death but did not: <<*As soon as the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won his favour and he held out to her the golden sceptre that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the top of the sceptre*>> (Esther 5:2).

His favour is like the clouds that bring the spring rain. The welcome and approval of a king is like life-giving rain, especially the latter rain which ensured a good harvest. This proverb is especially true regarding the King of kings. The favour of his countenance is a blessing to receive: <<*the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you*>> (Numbers 6:25), and it gives light and life: <<*All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people*>> (John 1:3-4), and: <<*Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life'*>> (John 8:12).

Introduction to Proverbs 16:16-19

The 'better' sayings of v.16 and v.19 seek to instil the value of wisdom over wealth (v.16) and of humility with the poor over spoil with the proud (v.19). The middle verses offer guidance on how to continue in the way of the wise (v.17) and the humble (v.18).

¹⁶ How much better to get wisdom than gold!

To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver.

Proverbs 16:16

How much better to get wisdom than gold! The riches of this world have their use, but it is better to have wisdom than gold: <<*People who have wealth but lack understanding are like the beasts that perish*>> (Psalm 49:20 NIV). Wisdom is much more helpful and useful in this life, and it is far more profitable for the life to come. Clarke commented, "Who believes this, though spoken by the wisest of men, under Divine inspiration?"

To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver. One should make the main pursuit of their life to gain wisdom and understanding in the fear of the Lord. This has value far more than gold or silver, but it also often leads to material prosperity as it did for Solomon; refer to 1 Kings 3:5-15.

- 17 The highway of the upright avoids evil;
those who guard their way preserve their lives.

Proverbs 16:17

The highway of the upright avoids evil. The upright man or woman knows that the path of their life - their highway - should move away from evil, not towards it or with it. This was a command emphasised by Jesus during the Sermon on the Mount: <<*Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it*>> (Matthew 7:13-14).

Those who guard their way preserve their lives. The one who walks well upon the right way will find his life preserved. He will stay away from the evil way that may cost him his life, even his very soul.

- 18 Pride goes before destruction,
and a haughty spirit before a fall.

Proverbs 16:18

Pride goes before destruction. God is opposed to the proud as repeated in James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5, and the proud man or woman is an abomination to God (v.5). With God so set against the proud, no wonder that pride goes before destruction. Kidner observed, "The special evil of pride is that it opposes the first principle of wisdom (the fear of the Lord) and the two great commandments."

A haughty spirit before a fall. One of the many ways that pride is evident is in a haughty spirit - an attitude that communicates superiority over other people. Those who think themselves higher than others are ready to fall under the fair judgement of God: <<*Haman added, 'Even Queen Esther let no one but myself come with the king to the banquet that she prepared. Tomorrow also I am invited by her, together with the king*>> (Esther 5:12), <<*For you deliver a humble people, but the haughty eyes you bring down*>> (Psalm 18:27), and: <<*I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant, and lay low the insolence of tyrants*>> (Isaiah 13:11).

- 19 It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor
than to divide the spoil with the proud.

Proverbs 16:19

It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud. Because pride is an abomination to God (v.5) and leads to destruction (v.18), it is not so bad to live among the lowly and to have a humble spirit. A humble life among the lowly is better than having spoil or reward, i.e. wealth and influence, among the proud. This is because proud people are not pleasant company, and because it is never good to join those whom God is set against.

In part, this can be seen in the case of Pharaoh's army as they pursued the Israelites towards the Red Sea: <<*The enemy said, "I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them. I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them." You blew with your wind, the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters. 'Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendour, doing wonders? You stretched out your right hand, the earth swallowed them*>> (Exodus 15:9-12).

Introduction to Proverbs 16:20-24

These verses commend the speech characteristic of the wise of heart: the wise consider their words carefully so that their words are both persuasive and good for body and soul; they exhibit faithfulness to God and are considered discerning by others. Such wisdom is a fountain of life, and foolish speech is empty of any such benefits.

²⁰ Those who are attentive to a matter will prosper,
and happy are those who trust in the Lord.

Proverbs 16:20

Those who are attentive to a matter will prosper. Obedience to God - to heed his word and to do it wisely - will always bring good. This thought also suggests that there are unwise or foolish ways to heed the word, perhaps as the religious leaders in Jesus' day could strain out a gnat and swallow a camel as Jesus stated in Matthew 23:24.

Happy are those who trust in the Lord. The good, the obedient will find also comes because they have a true and confident trust in God. They can happily and calmly rest in the good God who loves and cares for them. Spurgeon related the following, "I have read a story of an old Doctor of the Church, who, going out one morning, met a beggar, and said to him, 'I wish you a good day.' 'Sir,' said he, 'I never had an ill day in any life.' 'But,' said the Doctor, 'your clothes are torn to rags, and your wallet seems to be exceedingly empty.' Said he, 'My clothes are as good as God wills them to be, old my wallet is as full as the Lord has been pleased

to make it, and what pleases him pleases me.’ ‘But,’ said the Doctor, ‘suppose God should cast you into hell?’ ‘Indeed, sir,’ said he, ‘but that would never be; but if it were, I would be contented, for I have two long and strong arms – faith and love – and I would throw these about the neck of my Saviour, and I would never let him go, so that if I went there, he would be with me, and it would be a heaven to me.’ Oh, those two strong arms of faith and love! If you can but hang about the Saviour’s neck, indeed, you may fear no ill weather.”

Happy or, more commonly, **blessed** translates the Hebrew word *esher* meaning also contentment. The truly happy person is happy because God showers him with favour and blessing. Jesus uses the Greek equivalent in Matthew 5:3-11; as confirmed by: <<***Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him***>> (James 1:12). The Latin translation, *beatus*, is the source of the word beatitude.

²¹ The wise of heart is called perceptive,
and pleasant speech increases persuasiveness.

Proverbs 16:21

The wise of heart is called perceptive. Those who are wise in heart will demonstrate it in their life. Others will see it and call them **perceptive** or prudent or wise. This is another reminder that true wisdom is demonstrated in life; it is not only having good or true thoughts in one’s mind.

Pleasant speech increases persuasiveness. The phrase **pleasant speech** is literally ‘sweetness of the lips’ but does not have to do with good tasting food or pleasant kisses. Like many proverbs, it refers to wise and well-spoken words, perhaps with a touch of eloquence, thus the NRSVA’s rendering. Such speaking increases learning, both in the speaker and those who hear him or her: <<***The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens— wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught***>> (Isaiah 50:4), <<***All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’***>> (Luke 4:22), and: <<***The police answered, ‘Never has anyone spoken like this!’***>> (John 7:46).

²² Wisdom is a fountain of life to one who has it,
but folly is the punishment of fools.

Proverbs 16:22

Wisdom is a fountain of life to one who has it. Wisdom or true understanding brings life to the wise man or woman. It is like a continually flowing wellspring of

life. In part, this is what Jesus was referring to when he said: *<<but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life>>* (John 4:14).

Folly is the punishment of fools. Wisdom brings life, but it is usually foolish to try to correct a fool. As soon as a fool decides to receive correction, they have started not being a fool and leaving their folly.

²³ The mind of the wise makes their speech judicious,
and adds persuasiveness to their lips.

Proverbs 16:23

The mind of the wise makes their speech judicious, and adds persuasiveness to their lips. Persuasiveness is a skill that can be learned and improved. This is one aspect of the wisdom taught in Proverbs as confirmed in v.21. A person's wisdom is shown by what they say, and by the control they have over the words that come from their mouth. Godliness and wisdom are evident when they teach the mouth what to say and not say. Wisdom is shown by a heart and mind that are continually learning. When learning is added to the lips, i.e. the words one says, then a person truly has wisdom and is growing in it: *<<Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God>>* (Colossians 3:16).

²⁴ Pleasant words are like a honeycomb,
sweetness to the soul and health to the body.

Proverbs 16:24

Pleasant words are like a honeycomb. There is wonderful power in the words that bring blessing and pleasantness to others. In ancient Biblical culture, nothing was as sweet as honey from the honeycomb: *<<But Jonathan had not heard his father charge the troops with the oath; so he extended the staff that was in his hand, and dipped the tip of it in the honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth; and his eyes brightened>>* (1 Samuel 14:27), and pleasant words can be just as sweet and wonderful.

Sweetness to the soul and health to the body. Encouraging and pleasant words bring enjoyment to the whole person, i.e. the soul, and health to the body, literally to the bones: *<<My child, eat honey, for it is good, and the drippings of the honeycomb are sweet to your taste. Know that wisdom is such to your soul; if you find it, you will find a future, and your hope will not be cut off>>* (Proverbs 24:13-14).

Introduction to Proverbs 16:25-32

People often have the wrong idea about what is good and what is bad. Hunger seems a bad thing, but it forces people to work and keeps them from idleness (v.26). Verses 27-30 likewise describe types of evil that seem clever to those who practice them but which are actually vile and destructive. This includes general troublemaking (v.27), spreading discord (v.28), drawing others to join in crime (v.29), and conspiring with others to commit crime (v.30). Grey hair seems to be a mark of infirmity but actually is a crown of glory: <<***The glory of youths is their strength, but the beauty of the aged is their grey hair***>> (Proverbs 20:29). Finally, a mighty warrior seems to be the strongest man of all, but in reality a man who can control himself is stronger than a conqueror (v.32).

²⁵ Sometimes there is a way that seems to be right,
but in the end it is the way to death.

Proverbs 16:25

Sometimes there is a way that seems to be right. Some people walk a path of life that they know is wrong, and many proverbs speak to that person. Others walk a path of life that seems right to them, and they are mistaken: <<***Indeed, I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth***>> (Acts 26:9). It is not enough to feel good about a chosen path, or to follow the heart on life's way. God's revelation and word is always truer and safer than what seems right to any person. Paul confirms this: <<***Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realise that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless, indeed, you fail to pass the test!***>> (2 Corinthians 13:5).

In the end it is the way to death. Taking the wrong way - even if it seems right to a person - is not an innocent mistake. This is because the wrong path ends in death. The end of the wrong path is not temporary trouble or inconvenience; its end is the way of death.

²⁶ The appetite of workers works for them;
their hunger urges them on.

Proverbs 16:26

The appetite of workers works for them. This refers to both the need for a labourer to eat and also their desire to better their life. The Bible recognises the principle of personal property: <<***You shall not steal***>> (Exodus 20:15), and that the reward of work properly belongs to the worker. This argues against schemes of forced communal living, either on a small or national scale. It also argues against

excessive taxation, because it does not say the person who labours, labours for the government or state alone.

Their hunger urges them on. When people are rewarded with the benefit of their own work, they know that their work can fill their hungry mouth. When it is not necessary to work in order to fill a hungry mouth, much less work will be done. The NT provides many incentives to such work: <<*Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labour and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy*>> (Ephesians 4:28), <<*Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women*>> (Ephesians 6:7), <<*But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly towards outsiders and be dependent on no one*>> (1 Thessalonians 4:10b-12), and: <<*For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living*>> (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12).

²⁷ Scoundrels concoct evil,
and their speech is like a scorching fire.

Proverbs 16:27

Scoundrels concoct evil. The sense is that for the ungodly person, the evil they casually find is not enough to satisfy their desire. They dig up evil, finding the effort to pursue evil. David knew all too well of such people and sought the Lord's protection: <<*Deliver me, O Lord, from evildoers; protect me from those who are violent, who plan evil things in their minds and stir up wars continually*>> (Psalm 140:1-2). Clarke noted, "A wicked man labours as much to bring about an evil purpose, as the quarryman does to dig up stones." John Trapp relates how the enemies of both Augustine and Beza dug up their old sins and tried to discredit them on account of those sins.

Their speech is like a scorching fire. When an ungodly person digs up evil, he cannot keep it himself. He has to spread it to others, so he casts it from his lips as if it were a burning fire: <<*And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell*>> (James 3:6).

²⁸ A perverse person spreads strife,
and a whisperer separates close friends.

Proverbs 16:28

A perverse person spreads strife. Twisted, perverse people love to sow strife the way a farmer sows seeds. When there is much strife, there is some perverse person sowing the strife. Kidner stated, “It is, appropriately, the word used of the release of flaming foxes in the Philistines’ corn, Judges 15:5.”

A whisperer separates close friends. This is one way that the perverse person spreads strife - by whispering gossipy words. The strife they sow is so powerful that it can separate the best of friends: <<**Whoever teaches otherwise and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that is in accordance with godliness, is conceited, understanding nothing, and has a morbid craving for controversy and for disputes about words. From these come envy, dissension, slander, base suspicions, and wrangling among those who are depraved in mind and bereft of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain**>> (1 Timothy 6:3-5). Often, such people show they are perverse because they count it a victory and an accomplishment to sow such strife and to separate even the best of friends: <<**One who forgives an affront fosters friendship, but one who dwells on disputes will alienate a friend**>> (Proverbs 17:9).

²⁹ The violent entice their neighbours,
and lead them in a way that is not good.

Proverbs 16:29

The violent entice their neighbours. The violent man may do this by encouraging partnership in his violent works, or by inviting a violent response from his neighbour. The apostle gives out a warning against such people: <<**You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability**>> (2 Peter 3:17).

And lead them in a way that is not good. Violence often leads to a way that is not good. Sometimes the threat or presence of strength is necessary to prevent violence, but often violence leads to a way that is not good: <<**My child, if sinners entice you, do not consent**>> (Proverbs 1:10), and: <<**The righteous gives good advice to friends, but the way of the wicked leads astray**>> (Proverbs 12:26).

³⁰ One who winks the eyes plans perverse things;
one who compresses the lips brings evil to pass.

Proverbs 16:30

One who winks the eyes plans perverse things. This is likely connected to the previous verse. The violent man of v.29 may entice his neighbour as he winks his eye, treating it as a light and clever thing to devise perverse things: <<*Their hands are skilled to do evil; the official and the judge ask for a bribe, and the powerful dictate what they desire; thus they pervert justice*>> (Micah 7:3).

One who compresses the lips brings evil to pass. With expressions of contempt, the violent man brings about evil. He does not seriously consider the bad effects of his actions.

³¹ Grey hair is a crown of glory;
it is gained in a righteous life.

Proverbs 16:31

Grey hair is a crown of glory. The cultural setting of its time, there was nothing unusual about this statement. Ancient cultures were sensible enough to honour and value the wisdom and experience of old age. They saw the white hair of the elderly as a crown of glory.

It is gained in a righteous life. This is a helpful and necessary follow-up statement to the first line of this proverb. It is not age itself that brings a crown of glory to a person, but age in the way of righteousness. The judge and prophet Samuel was aged in both respects: <<*See, it is the king who leads you now; I am old and grey, but my sons are with you. I have led you from my youth until this day. Here I am; testify against me before the Lord and before his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Or whose donkey have I taken? Or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed? Or from whose hand have I taken a bribe to blind my eyes with it? Testify against me and I will restore it to you. They said, 'You have not defrauded us or oppressed us or taken anything from the hand of anyone.' He said to them, 'The Lord is witness against you, and his anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand.'*>> (1 Samuel 12:2-5). The sad truth is that age itself does not make all people better and certainly not godlier.

³² One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty,
and one whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city.

Proverbs 16:32

One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city. Contrary to the many who would say it is good to vent one's anger, Proverbs advocates being slow to anger. Only a mighty

person, likened to the person who is strong enough to take a city, is capable of controlling his anger. On the harmful effects of anger, refer to Proverbs 14:29, 15:1, 15:18, 19:11, 22:24, 27:4, 29:22 and 30:33, refer also to Galatians 5:20, Ephesians 4:31, Colossians 3:8 and the associated comments.

One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty. There is someone better than the mighty man who can defeat many others on the field of combat. It is the man or woman who has control over their own anger, who can, when it is wise and necessary, be slow to anger. There are times for righteous anger of course. Clarke noted, “There have been many kings who had conquered nations, and yet were slaves to their own passions. Alexander, who conquered the world, was a slave to intemperate anger, and in a fit of it slew Clytus, the best and most intimate of all his friends, and one whom he loved beyond all others.”

One whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city. Under God’s wisdom and strength, to rule one’s own spirit is a greater accomplishment than to conquer a city. Some who can conquer cities should first be concerned with conquering self.

³³ The lot is cast into the lap,
but the decision is the Lord’s alone.

Proverbs 16:33

The lot is cast into the lap. Casting lots involves the random selection or distribution of objects in order to make a choice uncontrolled and unbiased by the participants. In Israel it was typically performed ‘before the Lord’ in order to receive his direction: <<*So the men started on their way; and Joshua charged those who went to write the description of the land, saying, ‘Go throughout the land and write a description of it, and come back to me; and I will cast lots for you here before the Lord in Shiloh’>> (Joshua 18:8).*

The decision is the Lord’s alone. Not only the careful plans of the heart (v.1 and v.9), but also the apparently random practice of casting lots falls under God’s providential governance. However, this is not necessarily so. Kidner’s view is, “The Old Testament use of the word lot shows that this proverb (and Proverbs 18:18) is not about God’s control of all random occurrences, but about his settling of matters properly referred to him.” On the question of whether Christians should make decisions in this way, refer to the comment made on Acts 1:26.