



## Proverbs - Chapter Twenty

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

#### Summary of Chapter Twenty

Wine is a mocker, beer a brawler. Even a child is known by his deeds. The Lord hates false weights. It is a snare to make rash vows.

#### Introduction to Proverbs 18:22-20:4 (continued)

A number of proverbs in this section of the book are so similar to each other that they appear to serve as markers, setting boundaries for separate proverb collections. Proverbs 18:22 and 19:14 both assert that a good wife is from the Lord; while 19:15, 19:24, and 20:4 concern laziness. Proverbs 19:11-12 deals first with patience and then with the king's anger, and 20:2-3 deals first with the king's anger and then with patience. Between these markers, Proverbs 18:23-19:10 concerns misfortune, while 19:16-23 can be described as an inventory of the essential elements of a good life. Over against 19:16-23, the proverbs in 19:25-20:1 present the antithesis of the good life, the life of the mocker.

#### Introduction to Proverbs 19:25-20:1 (continued)

In contrast to the features of a good life described in Proverbs 19:16-23 is the description in these verses of the scoffer or mocker. This person is a complete reprobate and the quintessential fool. Of such a person it can be said: (1) the only hope for correcting his stubborn attitude lies in beatings, which may or may not have the desired effect (19:25); (2) he has no respect for parents (19:26); (3) he will not listen to sound teaching (19:27); (4) he rejects all notions of right and wrong (19:28); and (5) again, he gets beaten for his behaviour (19:29). Finally, wine is called a mocker and strong drink a brawler in Proverbs 20:1. That is, excessive drinking leads to picking fights and an abandonment of principles of right and wrong. It is implied that drunkenness is common among scoffers.

- <sup>1</sup> Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler,  
and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.

### Proverbs 20:1

Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler. This is true in at least two senses. First, alcohol mocks and fights with those who abuse it in any sense. Second, alcohol leads one to be a mocker and a brawler. Many men and women have had their lives dominated by the mockery and brawling of alcohol: <<**Wine and new wine take away the understanding**>> (Hosea 4:11), and: <<**indeed, wine betrays him; he is arrogant and never at rest. Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied, he gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples**>> (Habakkuk 2:5 NIV). Adam Clarke observed, "It deceives by its fragrance, intoxicates by its strength, and renders the intoxicated ridiculous."

Whoever is led astray by it is not wise. Wisdom is displayed by the ability to not be led astray by alcohol. For many this means not drinking alcohol at all, especially pastors and church leaders. For others this will mean the decided, evident moderation in their use of alcohol. Paul wrote: <<**Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit**>> (Ephesians 5:18).

- <sup>2</sup> The dread anger of a king is like the growling of a lion;  
anyone who provokes him to anger forfeits life itself.

### Proverbs 20:2

The dread anger of a king is like the growling of a lion. Using an image from a previous proverb: <<**A king's anger is like the growling of a lion, but his favour is like dew on the grass**>> (Proverbs 19:12), this proverb is a reminder that those in power and leadership have potential for a great and fearful exercise of wrath. The first line of this proverb is almost identical to 19:12a, but whereas 19:12b speaks of the king's favour, v.2b here continues to speak only of his anger; refer also to the comment made on Proverbs 15:10-12. The text does not say that a king's anger is always justified; only that it is lethal. Therefore, one should take care.

Anyone who provokes him to anger forfeits life itself. Since in many ways the king held the power of life and death over his subjects, to provoke the king to anger was to endanger one's own life. Knowing this principle should make Christians especially more reverent to the King of kings, and happy that this King is rich in mercy and slow to anger: <<**The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love**>> (Psalm 103:8), which is virtually repeated in Psalm 145:8.

- <sup>3</sup> It is honourable to refrain from strife,  
but every fool is quick to quarrel.

### Proverbs 20:3

It is honourable to refrain from strife. Many men feel that honour drives them to dispute and fight with others. This proverb is a reminder that often times it is even more honourable for a man to stop striving: <<*Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you*>> (2 Corinthians 13:11).

Every fool is quick to quarrel. In many circumstances it takes a man of honour to stop the fight, but any fool can start the quarrel and continue it. Of itself, this is another exhortation to patience, as seen in: <<*Those with good sense are slow to anger, and it is their glory to overlook an offence*>> (Proverbs 19:11). Its position after v.2 may suggest that a king and others in positions of authority also should learn patience.

- <sup>4</sup> The lazy person does not plough in season;  
harvest comes, and there is nothing to be found.

### Proverbs 20:4

The lazy person does not plough in season. The lazy man always finds some excuse not to do his work. It is always too early or too late in the season to begin. It is always winter and the ground is too hard for ploughing. Any excuse will work when the heart is set on not working: <<*The lazy person says, 'There is a lion in the road! There is a lion in the streets!' As a door turns on its hinges, so does a lazy person in bed. The lazy person buries a hand in the dish, and is too tired to bring it back to the mouth. The lazy person is wiser in self-esteem than seven who can answer discreetly*>> (Proverbs 26:13-16).

Charles Spurgeon commented, "Suppose it were not cold; do you know what he would say? 'Oh, it is so hot! I cannot plough; the perspiration runs down my cheeks. You would not have me ploughing in this hot weather, would you?' Supposing it were neither hot nor cold, why, then he would say, I believe, that it rained; and if it did not rain, he would say the ground was too dry, for a bad excuse, he holds, is better than none; and therefore he will keep on making excuses to the end of the chapter; anything will he do rather than go and do the work he does not like, – that is, ploughing."

Harvest comes, and there is nothing to be found. The lazy man will work, after a fashion - he will do the work of begging. Having no reward from the work of his

hands, he will even have to beg during harvest. Often his begging will go unrewarded, he will have nothing.

In Israel, the grain harvest began after Passover in spring, and the sowing of this crop, in a field that had just been ploughed, was done in the autumn, after the Feast of Tabernacles in the autumn.

### Introduction to Proverbs 20:5-21:8

The proverbs of this section primarily give teachings about judgement and, to a lesser extent, money. The section is framed by 20:5-7 and 21:8; 20:5 asserts that one must be discerning to understand what another person is really up to, and 20:6 observes that people's pretences of virtue are often false and asks how to find true goodness. Verse 7a of Chapter 20 answers the question of 20:6. While it looks like an empty truism, 20:7a really means that people's behaviour is a good indicator of what they are. The blessing of 20:7b serves as a transition line to the catalogue of proverbs that follows. It begins with the word 'happy' or 'blessed,' a word that often introduces wisdom poems, e.g. Psalm 1:1 and 112:1. At the end, Proverbs 21:8 repeats the basic rule of discernment found in 20:7a: crooked people do evil, and upright people do good.

- <sup>5</sup> The purposes in the human mind are like deep water,  
but the intelligent will draw them out.

### Proverbs 20:5

The purposes in the human mind are like deep water. Wisdom may lie deep within a man or woman, and not be immediately apparent. It may be a hidden reservoir, ready in the season of need: <<**He reached down from on high, he took me; he drew me out of mighty waters**>> (Psalm 18:16).

The intelligent will draw them out. Wisdom not only knows how to get and have wisdom, it also knows how to use it: <<**Who can search out our crimes? We have thought out a cunningly conceived plot.**' For the human heart and mind are deep>> (Psalm 64:6). The wise man - the man of understanding - knows how to draw wisdom out for practical and ready use.

- <sup>6</sup> Many proclaim themselves loyal,  
but who can find one worthy of trust?

### Proverbs 20:6

Many proclaim themselves loyal. It is true that most everyone feels they are good in their own eyes. Many are happy to proclaim it, wanting others to know all their supposed goodness. The question that Jesus asked is worth considering: <<**when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?**>> (Luke 18:8b). While the

church flourishes then the answer will always be yes, but it has to live by the Gospel of Christ in order to do so.

**Who can find one worthy of trust?** True faithfulness in a man is different than self-advertised goodness. A faithful man does not want or need to proclaim his own goodness. The quiet satisfaction of faithfulness to God and man is enough. This would then mirror the example of the Lord: <<*And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour*>> (Luke 2:52).

<sup>7</sup> The righteous walk in integrity —  
happy are the children who follow them!

### **Proverbs 20:7**

**The righteous walk in integrity.** For a righteous man or woman, their upright living and integrity will be actually lived out. They will walk in their integrity. David cried out: <<*Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering*>> (Psalm 26:1).

**Happy are the children who follow them!** The greatest gift a parent can give to a child is for that parent to be a righteous, upright person who walks in their integrity. That one will create a home and atmosphere that will be a blessing to the child. Derek Kidner added, “It answers the temptation to ‘get on’ at all costs ‘for the children’s sake’.”

**The apostle John also applied this principle to his spiritual children:** <<*I was overjoyed to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we have been commanded by the Father*>> (2 John 4), and: <<*I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth*>> (3 John 4).

### **Introduction to Proverbs 20:8-12**

This catalogue of proverbs looks at judgement from various angles. The purpose of a king, representing human government, is to curb evil through acts of judgement (v.8). Awareness of one’s own guilt should make one forbearing in judging others (v.9). Scales (economic tools that are also symbols of judgement) should be fair, balanced, and impartial (v.10).

The first principle of discernment, that people’s actions show what they are, is simple and obvious; it applies even to evaluating children (v.11). Since it was God who made both eye and ear, he better than anyone knows how to assess a person or situation, and his judgement will be final and decisive (v.12).

Sometimes these proverbs balance one another. God’s people do need to be forbearing, but that does not mean being unwilling to discern good and evil in others.

- 8 A king who sits on the throne of judgement  
winnows all evil with his eyes.

#### Proverbs 20:8

A king who sits on the throne of judgement winnows all evil with his eyes. In the ancient world kings did not only govern, they were also the highest court and judge in their kingdom. A faithful king would carry out this responsibility and sit on his throne of judgement, as did Solomon: <<*He made the Hall of the Throne where he was to pronounce judgement, the Hall of Justice, covered with cedar from floor to floor*>> (1 Kings 7:7), and so will Jesus: <<*Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them*>> (Revelation 20:11).

Winnows all evil. That is, he sorts and separates it out, and then removes it. The presence alone of a king in judgement over his realm is enough to scatter all evil. When a people know that evil will be punished by godly and just leadership, it makes evil to scatter. Kidner observed, “The practised eye of a true ruler sifts the chaff from the wheat; still surer is the Spirit of the Lord: Isaiah 11:3; 1 Corinthians 2:15.”

- 9 Who can say, ‘I have made my heart clean;  
I am pure from my sin’?

#### Proverbs 20:9

Who can say, ‘I have made my heart clean’. It is part of human nature to overestimate and boast over one’s self. Many can say what this proverb says; but none with real humility and integrity: <<*What are mortals, that they can be clean? Or those born of woman, that they can be righteous?*>> (Job 15:14).

‘I am pure from my sin’? If meant in any ultimate sense, this is the boast or the claim of a fool. Sometimes there are claims to a clean heart or purity from sin by godly men in the Bible, but those are only true in a relative sense, such as the comparison between one’s self and one’s enemies. Clarke commented, “No man. But thousands can testify that the blood of Jesus Christ has cleansed them from all unrighteousness. And he is pure from his sin, who is justified freely through the redemption that is in Jesus.” Despite the Cross, sin remains a problem for almost every Christian: <<*Surely there is no one on earth so righteous as to do good without ever sinning*>> (Ecclesiastes 7:20), and: <<*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*>> (1 John 1:8). Yet there is great hope in the truth: <<*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*>> (Romans 8:1).

- <sup>10</sup> Diverse weights and diverse measures  
are both alike an abomination to the Lord.

#### Proverbs 20:10

Diverse weights and diverse measures are both alike an abomination to the Lord. God wants business and trading to be done fairly and justly. To have diverse weights and measures means that both the buyer and the seller will be cheated. God wants weights and measures to be proper and consistent, fair and just. God feels so strongly about deceptive business practices that he used the strong word abomination to describe them: *<<Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, 'When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practise deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.' The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds>>* (Amos 8:4-7), and: *<<Can I forget the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked, and the scant measure that is accursed? Can I tolerate wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights?>>* (Micah 6:10-11). God himself has fair weights and measures; he expects humanity made in his image to have them also.

- <sup>11</sup> Even children make themselves known by their acts,  
by whether what they do is pure and right.

#### Proverbs 20:11

Even children make themselves known by their acts. Especially in the realm of religion and faith, it is easy for a person to think of themselves only by what they believe, instead of also by what they do. They are more than what they do, but even a child is known by their deeds: *<<You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?>>* (Matthew 7:16), and: *<<No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush>>* (Luke 6:43-44). They should not deny that others see and understand them by the measure of their deeds. Clarke noted, "We may easily learn from the child what the man will be. In general, they give indications of those trades and callings for which they are adapted by nature. And, on the whole, we cannot go by a surer guide in preparing our children for future life, than by observing their early propensities. The future engineer is seen in the little handicraftsman of two years old."

**By whether what they do is pure and right.** The outside world, the realm of the Christian community, and God in heaven look at the church's deeds to see if they are pure and right.

<sup>12</sup> The hearing ear and the seeing eye –  
the Lord has made them both.

### **Proverbs 20:12**

**The hearing ear and the seeing eye – the Lord has made them both.** God has given men and women remarkable capacity to see and understand the world around them. A Christian's ability to hear and see should be for them gateways to wisdom. Since hearing and sight are gifts from God, Christians should determine to use them for his honour and glory. It is also a reminder that people can hear and see because they are made in God's image; the Lord has a hearing ear and a seeing eye: <<*But know that the Lord has set apart the faithful for himself; the Lord hears when I call to him*>> (Psalm 4:3), and: <<*Be gracious to me, O Lord. See what I suffer from those who hate me; you are the one who lifts me up from the gates of death*>> (Psalm 9:13).

### **Introduction to Proverbs 20:13-17**

These proverbs all relate to wealth: laziness leads to poverty (v.13); people will set a value on something as it suits them (v.14); wisdom is better than wealth (v.15); one should not trust a man who gets involved in foolish debts (v.16); and the pleasures of dishonest gain are brief (v.17).

<sup>13</sup> Do not love sleep, or else you will come to poverty;  
open your eyes, and you will have plenty of bread.

### **Proverbs 20:13**

**Do not love sleep, or else you will come to poverty.** To love sleep and the laziness connected to it is to bring one's self to poverty.

**Open your eyes, and you will have plenty of bread.** It takes some initiative and energy to open the eyes, to get out of bed and get to work. However, the reward is worth it; the worker and their family will avoid poverty and they will be satisfied with bread. In God's economic system, hard work is rewarded.

**It is also worth reflecting on the words of Moses:** <<*He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord*>> (Deuteronomy 8:3).

14 'Bad, bad', says the buyer,  
then goes away and boasts.

#### Proverbs 20:14

'Bad, bad', says the buyer. The buyer says the item he desires is worth very little, in order to drive the price down. But after he buys it, the item belongs to him, so his words change: now he boasts of its value: <<*A trader, in whose hands are false balances, he loves to oppress. Ephraim has said, 'Ah, I am rich, I have gained wealth for myself; in all of my gain no offence has been found in me that would be sin'*>> (Hosea 12:7-8). The proverb says this happens, without commending such activity. Elsewhere, Solomon acknowledges that it has always happened and probably always will: <<*Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'? It has already been, in the ages before us*>> (Ecclesiastes 1:10). Wisdom requires weighing the words of other people.

Then goes away and boasts. The bargaining words of the buyer are empty. They are only a strategy for negotiation. This proverb is a reminder that what people say is not always what they believe, and people will speak falsely for their own advantage. Clarke commented, "How apt are men to decry the goods they wish to purchase, in order that they may get them at a cheaper rate; and, when they have made their bargain and carried it off, boast to others at how much less than its value they have obtained it! Are such honest men? Is such knavery actionable?"

15 There is gold, and abundance of costly stones;  
but the lips informed by knowledge are a precious jewel.

#### Proverbs 20:15

There is gold, and abundance of costly stones. Solomon presents the picture of a large pile of gold and precious stones. One may think of this pile and be impressed at its value.

The lips informed by knowledge are a precious jewel. Now Solomon presented another treasure, the precious jewel of wise words (lips informed by knowledge). The value of the pile of gold and rubies is immediately seen and understood, but people need to better appreciate the value of wise words: <<*Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body*>> (Proverbs 16:24), and: <<*Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear*>> (Ephesians 4:29). Ultimately, it is the responsibility of each church member to share the wisdom of the Gospel, as Paul points out: <<*But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear*>>

*without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'*>> (Romans 10:14-15).

- <sup>16</sup> Take the garment of one who has given surety for a stranger;  
seize the pledge given as surety for foreigners.

#### Proverbs 20:16

Take the garment of one who has given surety for a stranger. Exodus 22:26-27 says an Israelite could take someone's outer garment as a deposit or a guarantee for a loan as long as they returned it each evening so it could be used as a night covering or blanket. Solomon's advice here is that if a person has already foolishly agreed to be surety for a loan made by someone to a stranger, make sure a deposit or guarantee have been received. If they were foolish enough to be surety for a stranger, they should be regarded as a credit risk. Kidner explained, "Take his garment means: 'Do not lend to him without security (Exodus 22:26); he is a bad risk!'"

Seize the pledge given as surety for foreigners. Here, the idea seems to focus on someone outside the covenant community. One should demand more security for a loan to someone outside one's knowledge and reference.

- <sup>17</sup> Bread gained by deceit is sweet,  
but afterwards the mouth will be full of gravel.

#### Proverbs 20:17

Bread gained by deceit is sweet. Sin and transgression have their attraction. There is something in the nature of rebellion that can make bread gained by deceit even sweeter: <<*Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant*>> (Proverbs 9:17). It satisfied a desire to rebel, a desire for adventure, and the love of forbidden thrills. Some might imagine that the forbidden fruit of Eden was delicious.

Afterwards the mouth will be full of gravel. The sweetness of forbidden bread or fruit is short lived. There is nothing sweet or pleasant about a mouth filled with gravel: <<*Though wickedness is sweet in their mouth, though they hide it under their tongues, though they are loath to let it go, and hold it in their mouths, yet their food is turned in their stomachs; it is the venom of asps within them*>> (Job 20:12-14), and: <<*He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes*>> (Lamentations 3:16). If a person really desires pleasure in a lasting, ultimate sense, then obedience is the pathway to it, as David knew only too well: <<*You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures for evermore*>> (Psalm 16:11).

## Introduction to Proverbs 20:18-19

One should not make major decisions without seeking the counsel of others. On the other hand, one should be careful about who is brought into one's private deliberations. The example of making war particularly points to the need to find advisers who can keep a matter private.

- <sup>18</sup> Plans are established by taking advice;  
wage war by following wise guidance.

## Proverbs 20:18

Plans are established by taking advice. There is help and wisdom in realising one's own limitations and seeking wise counsel: <<***Without counsel, plans go wrong, but with many advisers they succeed***>> (Proverbs 15:22). This often leads to plans being established in the sense of coming to fulfilment.

Wage war by following wise guidance. This shows that wise counsel is even more important when great matters are involved, such as life and death matters as in the case of war. By spiritual analogy, Christians can also say that they can only wage the spiritual warfare they must fight as believers with the wise counsel of God's word and other believers; refer to Ephesians 6:10-18. Clarke observed, "Perhaps there is not a precept in this whole book so little regarded as this. Most of the wars that are undertaken are wars of injustice, ambition, aggrandisement, and caprice, which can have had no previous good counsel."

- <sup>19</sup> A gossip reveals secrets;  
therefore do not associate with a babbler.

## Proverbs 20:19

A gossip reveals secrets. The man or woman who is a gossip loves to reveal things that should more properly be concealed. There are certainly some things that should be revealed: <<***Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them***>> (Ephesians 5:11), but many things should be concealed out of love: <<***Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins***>> (1 Peter 4:8). Wisdom will know which approach is appropriate in each situation.

Therefore do not associate with a babbler. The person who babbles or 'flatters with his lips' will often speak against someone as quickly as they speak for them. It is better to stay clear of such people, i.e. do not associate: <<***For such people do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded***>> (Romans 16:18).

## Introduction to Proverbs 20:20-21

The person who despises parental authority will not live long: <<*Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you*>> (Exodus 20:12), and: <<*Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death*>> (Exodus 21:17). Too much wealth given too soon will be used foolishly and will not be blessed later in life; refer to the comment made on Proverbs 13:11. In Israel, land was given to sons as an inheritance for the continued welfare of the family: <<*The good leave an inheritance to their children's children, but the sinner's wealth is laid up for the righteous*>> (Proverbs 13:22).

<sup>20</sup> If you curse father or mother,  
your lamp will go out in utter darkness.

## Proverbs 20:20

If you curse father or mother, your lamp will go out in utter darkness. The Bible commands that a person to honours their father and mother; refer to Deuteronomy 5:16. To curse one's parents is to do the opposite of this command. God promised to bless those who keep the command to honour father and mother: <<'*Honour your father and mother*' – *this is the first commandment with a promise*>> (Ephesians 6:2). As noted above, there is a corresponding principle that those who disobey and curse their father or mother will face the judgement of God.

<sup>21</sup> An estate quickly acquired in the beginning  
will not be blessed in the end.

## Proverbs 20:21

An estate quickly acquired in the beginning will not be blessed in the end. When a person gets too much too soon, it is often is not helpful for them. So a large inheritance that comes hastily and towards the beginning of life is a dangerous blessing. This is often how it ends when someone gains too much, too soon, apart from their own work and initiative: <<*Though they heap up silver like dust, and pile up clothing like clay – they may pile it up, but the just will wear it, and the innocent will divide the silver*>> (Job 27:16-17), <<*But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction*>> (1 Timothy 6:9). When large amounts are freely received, it can work against blessing at the end: <<*If you will not listen, if you will not lay it to heart to give glory to my name, says the Lord of hosts, then I will send the curse on you and I will curse your blessings; indeed I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart*>> (Malachi 2:2).

Clarke noted, “Gotten by speculation; by lucky hits; not in the fair progressive way of traffic, in which money has its natural increase. All such inheritances are short-lived; God’s blessing is not in them, because they are not the produce of industry; and they lead to idleness, pride, fraud, and knavery.”

### Introduction to Proverbs 20:22-25

These four proverbs teach that God, not people, is the judge and avenger, and that he detests all wilful distortions of human judgement, as represented by biased scales (v.23). Verse 24 emphasises the mystery of divine sovereignty: <<***Our steps are made firm by the Lord, when he delights in our way***>> (Psalm 37:23), and: <<***I know, O Lord, that the way of human beings is not in their control, that mortals as they walk cannot direct their steps***>> (Jeremiah 10:23). A person makes his own decisions and is responsible for them, but paradoxically God directs the steps of each. This paradox demonstrates the limitations of human discernment; if a person does not fully comprehend the pattern of his own life, how can he be competent to judge others? Verse 25 warns against falling under divine judgement by making ill-conceived vows: <<***When you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it; for he has no pleasure in fools. Fulfil what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not fulfil it***>> (Ecclesiastes 5:4-5).

<sup>22</sup> Do not say, ‘I will repay evil’;  
wait for the Lord, and he will help you.

### Proverbs 20:22

Do not say, ‘I will repay evil’. This is what the wise man or woman should not say. Wisdom and obedience to God teach that vengeance belongs to the Lord: <<***Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’***>> (Romans 12:19).

Wait for the Lord, and he will help you. Wisdom teaches people to rely on God and trust in him to recompense evil. This does not mean that wisdom is indifferent to evil and will never oppose it; it means that wisdom recognises that there are many times - more than one may think - when a person should let go of any kind of recompense towards evil and wait for the Lord to take action in his time: <<***So now, O Lord our God, save us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the Lord***>> (Isaiah 37:20), <<***They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you***>> (Jeremiah 1:19), <<***Do not be afraid of the king of Babylon, as you have been; do not be afraid of him, says the Lord, for I am with you, to save you and to rescue you from his hand***>> (Jeremiah 42:11).

23 Differing weights are an abomination to the Lord,  
and false scales are not good.

### Proverbs 20:23

Differing weights are an abomination to the Lord. God is righteous in all his measurements. When he measures something in the physical or moral realm, his measurement is always true. God tells his people to imitate him in this aspect, and to understand that he regards dishonest, diverse weights as an abomination: <<*A false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but an accurate weight is his delight*>> (Proverbs 11:1).

False scales are not good. God cares that people, especially Christians, do business honestly. The world often teaches that it does not matter how a person makes their money, but God warns that dishonest scales are not good: <<*You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, large and small*>> (Deuteronomy 25:13). There is no place for deception in the Kingdom of God.

24 All our steps are ordered by the Lord;  
how then can we understand our own ways?

### Proverbs 20:24

All our steps are ordered by the Lord. Men and women rightly make their plans, but God guides steps according to his own will and wisdom. He certainly does not leave it all up the choices and plans of men and women, but teaches them the right way: <<*So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart*>> (Psalm 90:12). They then have to choose to comply.

How then can we understand our own ways? This proverb teaches humility in regard to life choices and paths: <<*The human mind may devise many plans, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established*>> (Proverbs 19:21), and: <<*I know, O Lord, that the way of human beings is not in their control, that mortals as they walk cannot direct their steps*>> (Jeremiah 10:23). Christians should not think or act as if it were all under their own control or all according to their planned steps: <<*From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him – though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring”*>> (Acts 17:26-28).

25 It is a snare for one to say rashly, ‘It is holy’,  
and begin to reflect only after making a vow.

## Proverbs 20:25

It is a snare for one to say rashly, 'It is holy'. This has in mind the practice of dedicating things to God for his use alone. When it comes to promises of dedication to God, people should avoid the snare of emotional, rash promises. Kidner noted, "To pronounce a thing sacred is to dedicate it. Here, then, is an impulsive man, pledging more than he seriously intends."

Solomon also dealt with this matter in Ecclesiastes 5:4-7. These passages show that a commonly overlooked and unappreciated sin among God's people is the sin of broken vows - promising things to God and failing to live up to the vow. Those who honour God:

- Will not be quick to make vows to God.
- Will be serious about fulfilling vows made.
- Will regard broken vows as sins to be confessed and to be repented of.

It is a snare for one to reflect only after making a vow. When a promise to God is made foolishly, it forces the person to reconsider their vows - something wisdom would have protected them from to begin with. Leviticus Chapter 27 explains that Israelites could buy themselves out of rash vows; it was an expensive option.

## Introduction to Proverbs 20:26-27

For the health of his kingdom, a wise king must root out evildoers. That he drives the wheel over them is not meant literally but is an agricultural image using the picture of a heavy cart being drawn over the grain to separate the wheat from the chaff. The king can only look on the exterior; God, by contrast, sees the innermost parts: <<*But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart'*>> (1 Samuel 16:7). God's judgement is thus fairer and more effective.

<sup>26</sup> A wise king winnows the wicked,  
and drives the wheel over them.

## Proverbs 20:26

A wise king winnows the wicked. An earthly ruler understands how important it is to administer justice, and part of that is to carefully examine, i.e. winnow, the wicked. If it is wise for an earthly ruler to do this, it can be expected that God also does it, and does it perfectly. John the Baptist certainly expected this of the Messiah Jesus: <<*His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire*>> (Luke 3:17).

He drives the wheel over them. A wise earthly ruler not only knows how to carefully examine the wicked, but then also to bring whatever punishment is appropriate, to use what is wise and necessary to separate the evil from the good, just as a threshing wheel separates the chaff from the wheat grain. However, it is worth reflecting on the words of Isaiah: <<*Dill is not threshed with a threshing-sledge, nor is a cartwheel rolled over cummin; but dill is beaten out with a stick, and cummin with a rod. Grain is crushed for bread, but one does not thresh it for ever; one drives the cartwheel and horses over it, but does not pulverise it*>> (Isaiah 28:27-28).

<sup>27</sup> The human spirit is the lamp of the Lord,  
searching every inmost part.

### Proverbs 20:27

The human spirit is the lamp of the Lord. There are mysteries and truths of the inner man, i.e. the human spirit, that only the lamp of the Lord can expose. In this respect God's word can be thought of as a lamp and a light: <<*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*>> (Psalm 119:105).

Searching every inmost part. The lamp of the Lord - God's word - can search the depths of a man's heart like nothing else. This is because God's word is living and active: <<*Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart*>> (Hebrews 4:12). Clarke commented, "God has given to every man a mind, which he so enlightens by his own Spirit, that the man knows how to distinguish good from evil; and conscience, which springs from this, searches the inmost recesses of the soul."

<sup>28</sup> Loyalty and faithfulness preserve the king,  
and his throne is upheld by righteousness.

### Proverbs 20:28

Loyalty and faithfulness preserve the king. Any earthly king may be preserved by God's mercy and truth shown to the king, and by the loyalty and faithfulness, or mercy and truth, the king shows to others. Kidner added, "The principle of the proverb, which is the complement of verse 26, applies with equal force to lesser forms of authority."

His throne is upheld by righteousness. This is Hebrew *hesed*, the great covenant love God shows to his people and they should show to others. Men often assume that thrones are upheld by armies and raw power, but God has a better way to establish and uphold a king and his kingdom.

This verse balances what is said in v.26. Although a king must separate out and punish evildoers, the real security of his throne is in steadfast love and faithfulness. This may refer to the king's character, but more likely it refers to God's steadfast love and faithfulness, which was the foundation of the Davidic dynasty: <<And Solomon said, 'You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart towards you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today'>> (1 Kings 3:6), <<He said, 'O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart, the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David as you declared to him; you promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand'>> (1 Kings 8:23-24), and: <<For ever I will keep my steadfast love for him, and my covenant with him will stand firm>> (Psalm 89:28). This is the idea in view when steadfast love and faithfulness are said to preserve or watch over someone: <<Do not, O Lord, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe for ever>> (Psalm 40:11), and: <<May he be enthroned for ever before God; appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him!>> (Psalm 61:7). This is a striking truth, given that one expects a king's security to be in his army.

<sup>29</sup> The glory of youths is their strength,  
but the beauty of the aged is their grey hair.

### Proverbs 20:29

The glory of youths is their strength. God has so designed human development that young men excel in physical strength, and this is a glory to them. It is wise and suitable for young men to take on tasks that fit this glory.

The beauty of the aged is their grey hair. What the old men lack in physical strength, they should make up for in wisdom that is appropriate for those who have a grey head. Grey hair is a concrete example of a general truth: many of the physical evidences of old age have a dignity and splendour of their own, often representing experience, maturity, wisdom, and holiness: <<Grey hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life>> (Proverbs 16:31).

Kidner observed, "A proverb to lift the reader above the unfruitful attitudes of envy, impatience and contempt which the old and the young may adopt towards each other. Each age has its appointed excellence, to be respected and enjoyed in its time."

30 Blows that wound cleanse away evil;  
beatings make clean the innermost parts.

### Proverbs 20:30

Blows that wound cleanse away evil. Pain is a burden, but it can bring a benefit: <<*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin*>> (Psalm 51:2), and: <<*Folly is bound up in the heart of a boy, but the rod of discipline drives it far away*>> (Proverbs 22:15). If one allows the unpleasant fire of pain to refine and cleanse away evil, then sorrow and pain is not wasted. Something was gained.

Beatings make clean the innermost parts. Solomon probably used beatings or stripes here in a symbolic sense for the chastening that comes in life. If such discipline is received with wisdom, it will purify the inner depths of the heart. Kidner explained, “The paradox of Isaiah 53:5 stands out sharply against this background: that with his stripes we are healed.”

**Isaiah questions the wisdom of those who do not accept such discipline from God:** <<*Why do you seek further beatings? Why do you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint*>> (Isaiah 1:5).