

## WISDOM FROM HEAVEN FOR LIFE ON EARTH - Practical Studies From Proverbs

Part fourteen - Teaching #1857 - Sunday, January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016 - 6:00 p.m.

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### THE SUPREME VALUE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

People used to flock to hear Solomon the way they now might come to hear Oprah Winfrey. The Bible says world leaders would cross the globe just to have a chance to listen to Solomon speak:

**1 Kings 4:34 - "And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom."**

What you and I can read from the book of Proverbs, lying on the couch on a rainy Saturday afternoon, people used to risk life and limb, and spend half a years' pay crossing the seas just to glean a few precious hours of his words. And they came to hear Solomon talk about **righteousness**. The reason they came, and the reason they listened, and the reason they came back, was they knew Solomon told them the truth when he spoke about the rewards of righteousness **right in this present age**:

**Proverbs 11:31 - "If the righteous is repaid on earth, how much more the wicked and the sinner!"**

Both righteousness and wickedness pay dividends to their investors. Solomon taught it was a terrible mistake to think of righteousness as a **spiritual, non-profit, other-worldly concern**. That's why the people flocked to Solomon. They came hungry for profit. They came the way people might gather around the Toronto Stock Exchange or a Blue Jays race for the World Series. And one of the things Solomon taught about was the practical blessing and fruit of everyday righteousness:

1) **RIGHTEOUSNESS IS A PATH, AND THE BENEFIT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS COMES AS GROWING FRUIT OR LIGHT TO THOSE WHO CONSISTENTLY WALK IN IT**

In other words, the fruit of righteousness doesn't **explode** and **overwhelm** the life immediately. You always have to **trust** your way into the path of righteousness. Righteousness always requires a certain measure of **patience**. This is because the **rewards** of everyday righteousness are found more at the **end** of the path than the **beginning**. This truth is underlined over and over in Proverbs:

**Proverbs 4:18-19 - "But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. [19] The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble."**

**Proverbs 11:18-19 - "The wicked earns deceptive wages, but one who sows righteousness gets a sure reward. [19] Whoever is steadfast in righteousness will live, but he who pursues evil will die."**

Notice that Solomon can't even teach about **righteousness** without contrasting it with **wickedness**. That's because some things are best explained by their **opposite**.

Here's the lesson: **Righteousness takes more patience than wickedness**. In fact, that's the **only** reason anyone would choose wickedness over righteousness.

The way of righteousness is like a **growing light** in the first passage. Its riches come into the life the way the sun comes over the horizon. You don't see it all at once. It starts small and grows brighter and brighter. This is the chief reason only the **wise** grow in righteousness. **Fools** can't be bothered waiting for life's best blessings. This is why the Devil does his best work in **ignorant** minds and hearts.

This is a lesson for life-seekers: The pleasures of righteousness **grow**. The pleasures of wickedness **diminish**. Righteousness pays enormous interest. Wickedness, whatever it promises, leaves you broke in the end.

But even though the pursuit of wickedness is **empty** it is still **enticing**. That's because wickedness doesn't demand **honesty**. It feeds **pride**. This is what Solomon meant in **Proverbs 4:19 - "The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble."**

The stumbling is nourished by blaming others - blaming God - or perhaps just feeling life is somehow unfair and organized against us. This is why wickedness is always linked with **darkness** in Proverbs. There's no **honesty** or

**correction** or **remedy** in the pursuit of wickedness.

Solomon follows this up in the second passage talking about the **deceptive wages** of wickedness - **"...the wicked earns deceptive wages....(11:18)**. Serving sin, in any form, is like working for someone, thinking you're getting \$25 an hour, only to find out too late you weren't even getting minimum wage. In fact, the New Testament makes the point even more powerfully by saying the wages of wickedness is **death (Romans 6:23)**. Who would want to work hard for that?

This is the whole point of **Proverbs 11:18**. Only those who are **"steadfast in righteousness"** get their money's worth in life. Before it is anything else, wickedness is the ultimate form of **cheating one's self**.

## 2) **SOLOMON TEACHES THAT ONLY RIGHTEOUSNESS CAN ESTABLISH A LIFE AGAINST INEVITABLE TRIALS AND STORMS**

**Proverbs 10:25** - **"When the tempest passes, the wicked is no more, but the righteous is established forever."**

**Proverbs 10:30** - **"The righteous will never be removed, but the wicked will not dwell in the land."**

Every Jew knew what Solomon meant when he talked about **"dwelling in the land."** The land represented everything good God wanted to give His people. The land was their future, their security, their promised heritage from the LORD Himself.

Righteousness prepares the way for everything good you will ever receive from the Lord's hand. The wicked don't have a chance. They may know the promises of the Word, go to church, sing the songs, and quote Bible verses, but they won't be around when the storm of God's judgement comes.

The lesson here is that life can't be secured apart from righteousness. Your friends can't fill up your heart long-term. Money won't endure even a shaky economy, let alone buy a character that is pleasing to God.

Because the wicked has ignored the permanent blessings of righteousness, his very existence can't be abiding. Solomon says when the whirlwind comes, he is no more. No one can save him from the consequences of his bad choices in this life.

And these words from our Lord come flashing immediately to mind - **Matthew 7:24-27** - **"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. [25] And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. [26] And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. [27] And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."**

## 3) **ONLY RIGHTEOUSNESS CAN SHELTER THE LIFE IN THE FACE OF DEATH**

Proverbs frequently links up righteousness, not only with blessing in this life, but freedom from the fear of the end we must all face:

**Proverbs 12:28** - **"In the path of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death."**

At first glance this seems to fly right in the face of Solomon's teaching on other occasions:

**Ecclesiastes 9:2 & 11** - **"It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath....[11]....Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all."**

Solomon is right in both texts. We all know we face the same fate on this earth. No amount of wisdom, wealth, strength or even moral goodness can prevent the inevitable end of death. As far as the eye can physically see (that's what Solomon means when he talks about what he observes **"under the sun"**-11), everyone faces the same

fate.

But that's only the **appearance** of this earthly side of things. It is equally true, as Solomon says in **Proverbs 12:28** - **"In the path of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death."**

Do you see how people fear death today? Do you see the reaction to the word **"ebola"** on the news? What is the answer to that fear? What can keep a life on the **"pathway where there is no death"**?

Only righteousness can do that. Only righteousness can **secure** the heart and calm the mind: **Proverbs 14:32** - **"The wicked is overthrown through his evildoing, but the righteous finds refuge in his death."**

I think we can begin to see the growing, brightening fruit and blessing of righteousness. It even secures the life against the grave.

#### 4) **RIGHTEOUSNESS BRINGS GREATER CONTENTMENT AND PEACE INTO LIFE THAN ANYTHING ELSE ON EARTH**

**Proverbs 16:8** - **"Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice."**

These words are stamped on our minds over and over in Proverbs because we are so naturally inclined to underestimate the blessing and benefit of a quiet and clean conscience. Without righteousness nothing else can be deeply and lastingly enjoyed in this world.

The pursuit of righteousness is the best way to be true to our **deepest self-interest**. Solomon knew of what he spoke. His were not the words of some poor miser trying to convince the world and himself that money couldn't buy happiness. He was one of the richest men in the world. His words are not the envious words of sour grapes. He had proven the supreme value of righteousness over one of the greatest treasure chests on earth. His words, then, are worth hearing and remembering.

#### 5) **ONE OF THE CHIEF WAYS RIGHTEOUSNESS CAN GROW, EVEN IN IMPERFECT PEOPLE**

People who grow in righteousness aren't born with a special **"righteousness gene."** They don't have higher I.Q.'s. They don't all come from better homes and backgrounds, more conducive to holy behavior than others.

But there is something that is an absolute necessity if growth in righteousness is expected:

**Proverbs 9:7-9** - **"Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury. [8] Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you. [9] Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning."**

We should all rejoice that one doesn't have to be **brilliant** to reap the fruit of righteousness. But you **do** have to be **attentive**. And before we get too comfortable with that truth, we should all remind ourselves that **brilliance** is easier come by than **humility**.

This is what makes the pursuit of righteousness so costly and rare. Everyone **admires** righteousness. But that's not the same as **pursuing** righteousness.

Of course, as Christians, we are all **made** righteous through the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross on our behalf. You and I don't **learn** or **earn** that righteousness. Paul teaches we are justified (pronounced righteous) **freely**, as a **gift**.

But that's not the kind of righteousness being described by Solomon. He's talking about **righteous character**. He's talking about, what we would call, **sanctifying** righteousness - the growth of a **righteous life-style** and **patterns of behavior**.

It is this sanctifying, **outworking** of righteousness that is anything **but** free. It's extremely costly. And the first thing it costs is one's pride and ego. Solomon says it comes from receiving **teaching** and **instruction**. That means, I take it, that while the righteous aren't **perfect**, they **respond well** when their mistakes are **exposed** and **corrected**.

Remember, **mistakes** don't keep you from becoming righteous. **Rejecting truth** is what keeps you from becoming

more righteousness. Never let the Devil beat condemnation down on you for making a mistake. If you can **repent** and **learn** from it, you can grow in righteousness. Always remember, **wickedness is treatable** for the repentant.

In fact, the key to growth in righteousness is best highlighted, again, by its **opposite**. **Scoffers** and **mockers** can't receive righteousness precisely because they can't bring themselves to **listen** with carefulness and humility. They make the same mistakes, but can't be corrected. They will never become righteous no matter what else they do.

6) **REMEMBER THE ROOTS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS**

When we consider righteous character we naturally think of our **actions** - our **deeds**. This is proper as far as it goes, but the actual **roots** for those righteous deeds lie buried much deeper in our beings. Thoughts are your deeds in incubation. For that reason, Solomon has some closing words for us all to digest:

**Proverbs 12:5 - "The thoughts of the righteous are just; the counsels of the wicked are deceitful."**

You can judge **others** by their **actions**, but we must all measure **ourselves** by our **thoughts**. If this is true, then righteousness can't just be **fastened** on to the outward life like a Christmas ornament. It must start invisibly, on the inside. This is the place Christians can test their own seriousness in the pursuit of righteousness: **What gets put into the mind? What is allowed to enter this all determining part of the being?**

Security here is more urgent than at any airport or border crossing. And carelessness is more fatal. TV, internet, music, movies, the careless and unguarded influence of friends - all these are the silent, gradual destroyers of the seeds of righteousness in the heart.

How this age needs Christian **re**-education with Paul's words:

**Philippians 4:7-9 - "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. [8] Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. [9] What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you."**