

Dr. August Konkell, Proverbs, Session 17

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This is Dr. August Konkell in his teaching on the book of Proverbs. This is session number 17, Instructions for a Civilized Life. Proverbs 27:23-29.27.

Welcome to a little talk on Proverbs that deals with the conclusion of the collection which is said to belong to the men of Hezekiah's court.

This is fairly much the substance of chapters 28 and 29. There's a whole variety of topics that are discussed within these two chapters, but they all seem to focus on the way in which we need a good government for a good society. But I'm going to introduce chapters 28 and 29 with the last section of chapter 27, which is rather unique in Proverbs.

There's nothing else quite like it, and no one ever quite knows where to place it. But verses 23 to 27 of the book of Proverbs, I think, may well be intended as an introduction to this whole section about a good society and a civilized life. Essentially, what these verses tell us is that God has given to us the provision that we need so that we can have the necessities of life satisfied.

And these verses tell us also that these things come from God. We should make no mistake about it. Now, they seem to come in very ordinary ways and very ordinary things, and they might not seem significant, and yet they are the most significant of all.

Tend your flocks well. Now, what does that pertain to? Well, it pertains to the two essential things that we need for life, food and clothes. Both are provided by the sheep.

As Paul says, having food and clothes be content. Now, if we really knew what that meant, and if we really knew how to follow that, we really could have a healthy and well-off society. But we don't know what that means.

And we spend our whole life finding out something more of what it must mean for us in our particular circumstance, in our place, and in our time. So, these little proverbs remind us that these provisions of food, whichever we make and lay up for ourselves in our storehouses, are just always temporary. We've constantly got to look for that steady provision that comes from God.

We can't store up in advance enough that's going to be our supply. So, it's a reminder that we really trust God day by day, moment by moment, for our health, for those things that we need. But God does provide for our future, because God does keep

sending the green grass, and he does keep providing for the life of the sheep and the goats.

And that if we care for these provisions well, our fields and our flocks, our households will all do well. And so, it's really almost that simple. And yet, because, of course, we can't be satisfied with simply food and clothes, and because we don't do a very good job of using those provisions that God has for us, we have many challenges in our society.

Now, there's a theme that runs through these two chapters, which I have called the good rule, or the ruin of society. And all of these proverbs that I've listed here are set in this kind of antithesis. There is a splendor for the rule of righteousness, but the rule of the wicked will obscure the good people that are in it.

So, it looks like everybody is bad. That's 28, verse 12. And then, the same thought repeats again in 28:28.

There is a bounty for the rule of the righteous. It enables good people, but wicked people destroy good people. Then, just a few verses after that, in chapter 29, verse 2, we have the happiness of the rule of the righteous.

The righteous rule enables good people, but wicked rule destroys good people. And then, finally, towards the end of these two chapters, in verse 16, the order of the rule of the righteous is very necessary, because when there's bad rule, what we get is crime. And when we get crime, invariably, we have the destruction of society.

Now, it's clear that these aren't, in any sense, spacings within these two chapters, because they aren't, in any sense, equally spaced, but they are a recurring motif. And as a recurring motif, they seem to tell us something about the way in which we are supposed to look at the fundamental message of these chapters. So, these chapters begin with what we have emphasized several times in these talks here on Proverbs, the values of the Torah, which means those things that are important according to divine revelation, those things that are important according to God's teaching.

And so, I've just picked out the verses in these first 11 chapters here that emphasize some of those values. They give you security. They enable you to contend for the right.

They give you an understanding of justice. Big, big question. What is just? But you have to have the right values to be able to be able to determine what is just in any particular situation.

That integrity has value over wealth. There needs to be honor for parents and the trust that God will right wrongs because they don't always turn out the way that they should. And then the converse of the good rule.

Sometimes poor people abuse other poor people. What a tragic situation. I remember a missionary to Chad talking about one of the most heartbreaking things that he saw was that the poor people of Chad would cheat on each other and would hurt each other in seeking to help themselves.

Where the prayer for those who are unfaithful is denied when we become trapped in the schemes laid for others. The self-deception of riches that we think there is a security in riches. Now, one of the greatest traps in life is greed.

Somehow or another, it's very hard to recognize that. I'd like to always think that I'm satisfied with what I have. And yet what I always find out about myself is it would be just a little bit better if I had a little bit more.

And I think that that is something that it's hard for us to get away from. And the other thing is that if I lose something I already have, even though I can get along fairly well without it, I just feel like some terrible injustice has happened to me. So, we need to be careful about this trap of greed.

And the Proverbs here start off by telling us about the blessedness of mercy. This theme has come up before, but all of us are wrong sometimes. And what we need to have is the opportunity for mercy to be shown and forgiveness to take place.

Greed has its own punishment. Taking life for profit leads to a flight to the pit. The pretension of doing right leads to the pit.

The favoritism for a crust of bread will bring ruin. A very, very poignant ways in which these Proverbs make their point. But maybe worst of all, plundering parents is the worst kind of vandal.

And then of course the section concludes here with the contrast of destinies. The greedy rulers create hardship. Honest work earns a living, but of course, the wrong kinds of pursuits lead to poverty.

Reliable people are blessed, but pursuing wealth for the sake of wealth actually ends up making us poor. Various ironies that there are in the way that we live our lives. So we move on to chapter 29, which I have called Wisdom for Correction and Justice.

And then here, are a few points that just help us to try to keep things in perspective. Rejecting correction will bring harm. It may seem hard sometimes to exercise the correction that we should have, and yet failing to do it is very hurtful.

Justice supports a community, whereas deceit, talmit, destroys it. Just people know the rights of the poor. The wicked don't understand this.

Wisdom provides for peace. And here again, are motifs that we have picked up before. But the wise will settle with the foolish, and the fools remain angry and scornful.

Murderers are hateful people. The wise will seek to save. Back to the motif of the ruler.

The ruler who doesn't perceive deceit and lies is going to end up working with liars. It's not easy to be a ruler. I've actually been a president, and you always have to be careful with what people tell you because there are various reasons why people tell you things.

And sometimes they tell you things in such a way that it's not meant to give a clear picture, it's meant to give you their picture. And rulers who don't perceive these things end up believing those who tell you things that aren't true. Just because someone has been oppressed does not mean that they're less than their oppressor.

It is rather interesting, there's always this tendency that when someone has means is influential, or has power, that we defer to that person. But that can be the worst kind of mistake of all. It's the king who seeks justice and has a secure kingdom.

And then finally a few comments here on correction. That there always needs to be a correction, and sometimes correction has to be quite harsh, and perhaps even be coercive. The scriptures aren't fearful of using the term rod.

Now sometimes, of course, actual physical coercion becomes necessary. And it has to be appropriate to whatever age and to whatever offense, but sometimes it simply has to be coercion. And if that coercion isn't done soon enough, then we end up with the coercion of the state, which means that you're forcibly put into prison or something else.

A short time ago, I was asked to write a commentary on Deuteronomy for the English Standard Version translation. But one of the most thought-provoking passages that I found was what parents do with a child that is absolutely recalcitrant, that they simply can't control. Well, the fact is that parents aren't supposed to be left alone.

And Deuteronomy, interestingly enough, makes provision for that. When a child goes beyond the bounds of what parents themselves are able to do, it becomes a community intervention, and the parents themselves need to take the child to the community in order that the proper course of boundaries can be set, even if they

have to be set by coercion. So, these are some instructions here about that, that what we call prophecy and what we call Torah are all part of this instruction, exactly as Psalm chapters 1, verses 1 and 2 say.

That lack of discipline is simply going to bring trouble. But on the converse, humility, and trust will bring life. If we fail to control our temper, there will be offense.

Pride is going to bring a fall. Receiving stolen goods will bring you guilt before God if it doesn't bring you guilt before everyone else. And there again, the Torah has words to say about that, that the fear of the powerful can be a snare.

What we need to do is to learn to trust the Lord. Of course, the righteous and the wicked feel very differently about things. The choice is not merely behavior, but it's rather an attitude.

It's how you observe things. It's what you think is valuable. It's what you think is important.

And the wicked are never going to like those who, are righteous, who by their own lives show up the conduct that is very, very bad. So, these are just various observations that we need to review again and again because we all live in conflicted societies. We all live in societies with imperfect rule.

And we need to think very carefully about how we ourselves act as wise in living righteously in order that it may make evident who it is that is the wicked that aren't righteous. And in order that we may enable those around us to have the kind of peace and life that they wish to have.

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