

Verse 9 and verse 19 both stick out in our passage.

Most of the passage is about men.

Indeed, all of the wicked in verses 4-8 were described in masculine terms.

They were haughty men, wicked men, guilty men, hasty men.

But now we hear of a quarrelsome woman:

*⁹ It is better to live in a corner of the housetop
than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife.*

What are these interjections about quarrelsome women?!

Proverbs – as we have seen many times – is written from a father to his son,
teaching him the path of life –
showing him how to walk in the way of Wisdom.

Wisdom literature often takes this sort of form.

Song of Songs is sung by the Bride to her girlfriends

The Father says to his Son –

think about what sort of woman you should marry!

Nowadays we don't like to admit it –

but who you marry will deeply influence your life!

We like to think that everyone is an island –

I live my life the way I want!

But if you marry, then your life will be characterized by the person you marry.

You are still responsible for what sort of person *you are* –

but you will have a profound influence on the person you marry.

And that person will have a profound influence on you!

I didn't realize this in my early twenties – but I was terrified of getting married.

I *thought* that I really wanted to get married.

I pursued one woman after another – thinking that I wanted to marry.

But any time I started getting close enough to a real relationship...

I said something stupid – I did something that would sabotage the relationship,
and convince her that I wasn't the one for her.

By the time I turned 27, I began to realize what it was:

my parents had an “ideal” marriage.

For 22 years, my parents looked to the outside world (and to their children)

as though everything was fine.

And then, all of a sudden, everything fell apart.

Those who had eyes to see (namely, the one couple who got close enough!)
could see that things were not what they appeared –
but from my standpoint as a 13-year old,
my mother suddenly changed.

So as I approached the thought of getting married,
I was terrified at the thought that I might marry someone who seemed great –
and then 22 years later, everything could fall apart.

Perhaps now you will understand why I have been highlighting the importance in Proverbs
of why you are not *controlled* by your parents' failures!

Ginger and I are approaching our twenty-second anniversary.
We don't have to replay the failings of our parents.
Sure, we all have tendencies to be "like" our parents!

But that doesn't mean that we are *doomed* to repeat their stories.

Introduction: "The LORD Weighs the Heart" – the Importance of Discipleship (20:29-21:2)

I've been noticing that an awful lot of our passages
begin with a proverb about the importance of discipleship.

²⁹ *The glory of young men is their strength,
but the splendor of old men is their gray hair.*

But how do you get there?
How do you get to being that splendid gray haired old person?!

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

We need discipline – we need discipleship.
We need a good beating every once in a while!
The problem is that we are not very wise,
and so we do not administer beatings very well.

I waiting for the other shoe to drop.
Our society has become so averse to anything like corporal punishment –
so we have resorted to all sorts of psychological punishments.

But now – as we learn more about how psychological punishment
can be really damaging,
I'm just waiting for the study that says,
 “Incarceration is really bad for people.
 We should just give them a beating and send them home!”
It's coming!
 (Of course, they'll have all sorts of qualifications about how
 it's *not* like the “bad old days” –
 but we have our “new and improved version”!)

But then again, as verses 1-2 of chapter 21 put it:

*21 The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD;
he turns it wherever he will.*

*² Every way of a man is right in his own eyes,
but the LORD weighs the heart.*

God knows what he is doing!

Rulers think that they are in charge –
and people generally think that they know the right way to go –
but the LORD weighs the heart.

He is God – you are not!

The theme of our passage tonight is stated well in verse 3:

1. Theme: “To Do Righteousness Is More Acceptable than Sacrifice” (21:3)

*³ To do righteousness and justice
is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.*

Righteousness and justice are synonyms.

But when they are used together, there is generally a slight distinction.
Righteousness has to do with how you order your community.
Justice has to do with the particular decisions that you make.

So an unrighteous judge might still pass a just judgment from time to time.

Or for that matter, a righteous judge may mistakenly make an unjust judgment.

Righteousness has to do with the big picture – justice with particular decisions.

Think of this way:

Your home is a community – a society.

What would mean to do “righteousness and justice” in the home.

Righteousness would have to do with the general ordering of your home.

Is your home characterized by love, forgiveness, truth-telling?
Are these the principles that govern your home?

I hope they are!
But of course, even in a righteous home,
that doesn't answer the question of whether *justice* is done in every case.
Your principles may be impeccable.
But there is a particular case before you.
What will you do about the broken dish
that no one seems to know how it got broken?!

Of course, this distinction between righteousness and justice is not absolute.
After all, every particular decision participates in establishing the principles!

For instance, if you have one child who is well-known for telling the truth,
and other child who constantly twists the truth for his own purposes,
you may tend to trust the first child (understandably, perhaps).
But that may lead to a particular situation where the first child wittingly or unwittingly
misstates what happened –
and so you pass judgment based on their testimony –
resulting in injustice.

That's why righteousness and justice always go together.
You can't rely on "having a good system" to always get the particulars right.

2. The Wholeness of the Righteous (21:4-8)

- ⁴ *Haughty eyes and a proud heart,
the lamp^[a] of the wicked, are sin.*
- ⁵ *The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance,
but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty.*
- ⁶ *The getting of treasures by a lying tongue
is a fleeting vapor and a snare of death.^[b]*
- ⁷ *The violence of the wicked will sweep them away,
because they refuse to do what is just.*
- ⁸ *The way of the guilty is crooked,
but the conduct of the pure is upright.*

In verses 4-8 I chose the phrase "the wholeness" of the righteous
because it captures well the way that the passage covers the character of the righteous.

Haughty eyes and a proud heart – this is what gives direction to the wicked.
They are proud – they don't want anyone telling them what to do!
Their eyes are haughty – they look down on others –
the "poor ignorant folk" who don't have their great wisdom!

In contrast, verse 5 speaks of the plans of the diligent that lead surely to abundance.

The diligent have *plans*!

They are not hasty – they do not rush in – they take time to prepare.

But those who are hasty come only to poverty.

More poignantly, verse 6 says that to acquire treasure by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor – and a *snare of death*.

And verse 7 adds that the violence of the wicked will sweep them away *because they refuse to do what is just*.

Resulting in the final contrast in verse 8:

“The way of the guilty is crooked, but the conduct of the pure is upright.”

Crooked ways – bent paths – lead to ruin and death.

This is why we speak of the *wholeness* of the righteous.

The straight path – upright conduct – as Waltke puts it

“Transparently sincere and untainted by duplicity, they can be counted on.” (174)

And then – verse 9 interrupts our discussion:

3. “Better... Than a Quarrelsome Woman” (21:9)

⁹ *It is better to live in a corner of the housetop
than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife.*

Now, in fairness to wives, the Hebrew here could just mean “woman.”

In the ancient world it was common enough to share a house with your mother,
your mother-in-law, an aunt, your grandmother.

To share a house with a contentious woman – whatever your relation to her –
is *not* an enjoyable thing.

Indeed, it would be better – it would be preferable to live in a corner of the housetop!

Think about the image:

Houses in those days had flat roofs.

So the picture is of a man sleeping on a corner of the roof,
exposed to the elements, unprotected from storms,
in danger of falling off the roof in his sleep –
while the quarrelsome woman has the run of the house!

Better to leave her in charge and you go sleep on the roof –
rather than quarrel and fight about every little thing...

How can a man avoid this?

By being the sort of person “who finds the LORD’s favor in a wife

who in mutual love submits to him and builds up the household.”
No where in scripture does it say that a man should make his wife submit.
That’s not your job!
That’s *her job* to submit.
It’s *your job* to love her – to humble yourself – to lay down your life for her!

Which means that if she is not doing a good job of submitting – what should you do?
If she is being quarrelsome and contentious...
hang out on the corner of the roof.
That’s better than fighting with her!
If she’s being a pain – it’s not your job to “fix her.”
It’s your job to humble yourself and trust God.

And in a very real way, verses 10-18 are all about what that looks like:

4. The Triumph of the Righteous (21:10-18)

There are three subsections here – three sets of three verses,
each ending with a statement about the righteous.

- ¹⁰ *The soul of the wicked desires evil;
his neighbor finds no mercy in his eyes.*
¹¹ *When a scoffer is punished, the simple becomes wise;
when a wise man is instructed, he gains knowledge.*
¹² *The Righteous One observes the house of the wicked;
he throws the wicked down to ruin.*

Verses 10-12 start off by moving from the desires of the wicked (for evil),
the punishment of the scoffer (bringing wisdom to the simple),
and the destruction of the wicked (by the Righteous One).

The ESV capitalizes the “Righteous One” – suggesting that this is the LORD.
I do not object to this – because the LORD *is* the Righteous One
who observes the house of the wicked and throws the wicked down to ruin!

But it is equally important to recognize that God is showing us
what it means to be righteous!
And so when you look at verses 13-15, you realize that we are called
to imitate God in this respect:

- ¹³ *Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor
will himself call out and not be answered.*

Does God hear the cry of the poor?

Then we must hear as well.

It is so tempting to close our ears and pretend that we didn't hear...

But the righteous will hear – and answer.

Verse 14 is related:

*¹⁴ A gift in secret averts anger,
and a concealed bribe,^[c] strong wrath.*

Where are we at the end of verse 13?

Those in power have refused to hear the cry of the poor.

But they are quick to hear the chatter of money!

They will not heed the helpless –

but offer them a bribe – money talks!

Things that are hidden – secret – are generally *bad* in Proverbs!

If you have to hide it, that probably means that you are up to no good!

On the contrary, in verse 15:

*¹⁵ When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous
but terror to evildoers.*

If you are going to capitalize Righteous One in verse 12,

you should probably capitalize it in verse 15 as well.

When justice is done, it is a joy to the Righteous One!

It is a joy to the LORD God himself!

And it should be a joy to us as well.

When a particular case is decided well and properly,
then we rejoice!

On the other hand, when justice is done,

it is a terror to evildoers,

because they see that their days are numbered.

The third picture of the triumph of the righteous is seen in verses 16-18:

*¹⁶ One who wanders from the way of good sense
will rest in the assembly of the dead.*

The wages of sin is death.

If you wander from the way of good sense,
then you will rest in the congregation of the dead.

Likewise, even in this life:

¹⁷ *Whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man;
he who loves wine and oil will not be rich.*

Pleasure is a good thing.
Wine and oil are good things.
These are gifts from God.

Do not love them.

We should not *love* the gifts –
we should love the Giver!
Love God – and for his sake, love one another!

Enjoy his gifts – use his gifts for the purposes that he gave them!

The one who loves pleasure for its own sake will end in poverty.
The one who chases after the good gifts of God –
rather than chasing after God himself! –
will find himself chasing after wind...

And thus:

¹⁸ *The wicked is a ransom for the righteous,
and the traitor for the upright.*

What does it mean that the wicked is a ransom for the righteous?
One rabbi suggested that the book of Esther shows us what this means:
Hamann set a trap for Mordecai and sought to destroy him.
But through his own love of wine and oil – feasting at Esther’s table –
Hamann fell into his own snare –
and wound up hung on his own gallows –
the gallows that he made for Mordecai.
And thus the traitor became a ransom for the upright! (Rashi in Waltke, 182)

5. “Better... Than a Quarrelsome Woman” (21:19)

Our second interruption comes in verse 19:

¹⁹ *It is better to live in a desert land
than with a quarrelsome and fretful woman.*

In verse 9 we had decided that it was better to live on a corner of the roof
than live with a quarrelsome woman.

But if she is quarrelsome *and fretful*, well, then,
it is better to live in a desert land!

The picture here is of a woman who is contentious and provoking.
She stirs up conflict – with her husband – and with others!

Rather than that – go live in the desert!
Go live in the wilderness.

Ladies,
there is an exhortation here for you!

Don't be petty – don't stir up conflict!
Don't be quarrelsome and contentious!
That doesn't mean that you should ignore problems!
It means that you should deal with problems openly, clearly, and lovingly –
using the same principles of wisdom
that we have been discussing for the last few months!

6. The Endurance of the Righteous (21:20-29)

Verses 20-28 then set forth the *endurance* of the righteous –
contrasted with the fleetingness of the wicked.

Verses 20-23 describe the pattern of wisdom, starting with v20.

²⁰ *Precious treasure and oil are in a wise man's dwelling,
but a foolish man devours it.*

The contrast here is between the one who saves – thoughtfully planning for the future,
and the spendthrift who squanders his wealth.

The foolish man says, “hey, I got cash, let's go spend it!”
The wise man saves to ensure that he can eat later.

²¹ *Whoever pursues righteousness and kindness
will find life, righteousness, and honor.*

²² *A wise man scales the city of the mighty
and brings down the stronghold in which they trust.*

²³ *Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue
keeps himself out of trouble.*

Verse 23 rounds off the pattern with the same theme.

The foolish man devours (with his mouth) –
but the wise man “guards his mouth and his tongue” –
thus guarding himself from trouble.
He controls his appetites.

And in the middle, verses 21-22 fill out the picture:

The one who pursues righteousness and kindness
finds life – finds righteousness – finds honor –
even to the point that he scales the city of warriors,
and brings down the stronghold in which they trust.

Whether literally or metaphorically,
the wise man is prepared for the day of trouble –
and so is about to conquer it.

Think of how our Lord Jesus accomplished this!

Yes, he went to the cross – he died in our place –
but in so doing, he scaled the city of man
and brought down the stronghold –
plundering the strong man’s house!

Verses 24-29 then wrap up this section

using the same images as the first part of the passage in verses 4-7:
the proud (v4, 24)
the sluggard – versus the diligent (v5, 25)
the liar (v6, 28)
and the brazenly wicked (v7, 29).

All of this is centered around verse 27 – “the sacrifice of the wicked” –
which reminds us of verse 3 –
“to do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.”

²⁴ *“Scoffer” is the name of the arrogant, haughty man
who acts with arrogant pride.*

We have so many examples of this today!
So many who think that they understand –
who think that they don’t need to listen to advice.
They scoff at others – and act with arrogant pride.

²⁵ *The desire of the sluggard kills him,
for his hands refuse to labor.*

Verse 25 speaks of how the desire of the sluggard kills him.
Why do his desires kill him?
Because *he wants* stuff – but his hands refuse to labor.

He wants stuff – but he will not do what it takes to obtain it.

In contrast:

²⁶ *All day long he craves and craves,
but the righteous gives and does not hold back.*

The sluggard craves for himself – in contrast to the righteous,
“who rejoices in doing mercy and justice.” (Waltke, 188)

If you are lying around – not actively giving to those in need –
then you are no better than a thief and a bandit!
The righteous seeks the good of the community –
The righteous looks for ways to benefit those in need.

I would challenge you young people to think about ways that you can do this.
It doesn't have to be anything fancy.
You don't have much money at this time in your life –
but you have time.
How can you use your time to do good to those around you?
Right now there are a lot of older people who feel isolated.
Write to them.
The righteous gives and does not hold back.

In contrast:

²⁷ *The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination;
how much more when he brings it with evil intent.*

The wicked will use his sacrifice to try to make it look like God is on his side.
(That's the idea of “evil intent” – he's manipulating religious practices
in order to further his own agenda).

But God will not be mocked.

Verses 28-29 show this:

²⁸ *A false witness will perish,
but the word of a man who hears will endure.*

²⁹ *A wicked man puts on a bold face,
but the upright gives thought to^[d] his ways.*

You want to be a person who hears.
You want to give thought to your ways.

Our passage is talking about what it means to be righteous –
what it means to organize your community rightly –
in ways that reflect who our God is!

Our God is one who hears.
And because he hears – he also speaks – and acts – rightly.
If you would speak and act rightly,
then you need to be a good listener!

Our passages concludes by reminding us that wisdom can never be isolated from its source:

Conclusion: “No Wisdom Can Avail Against the LORD” (21:30-31)

³⁰ *No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel
can avail against the LORD.*

³¹ *The horse is made ready for the day of battle,
but the victory belongs to the LORD.*

You may think that you are wise.
But no wisdom – no understanding – no counsel can avail against the LORD.

Don't confuse your bright ideas with wisdom!
You may be well prepared – but the victory belongs to the LORD.

The last line of verse 31 consists of two words in Hebrew.
“salvation is of the LORD”

We often think of salvation in purely religious terms.
But salvation was first a military term.

What can save you from your enemies?
A war horse?
Well, I suppose a war horse comes in awfully handy in battle.

Some trust in chariots and some trust in horses –
but we trust in the name of the LORD!