

PROVERBS 21 – WHO GOD IS

Our culture increasingly operates under the assumption that respect isn't something automatically given, it must be earned. This way of thinking impacts our view of authority and how we respond to those who have authority over us.

We question them (at least in thought), at every turn.

Proverbs 21 teaches numerous truths about God that relate to the issues of respect and authority. He is in complete control (v. 1). He sees our motives clearly (v. 2). Righteousness and justice are His priority (v. 3). He will undo wickedness (v. 12). His wisdom will never be outmatched by anyone or anything (v. 30). He will bring victory (v. 31).

Proverbs doesn't only give wisdom about how we are to live each day; it gives wisdom about who God is. When we truly understand who God is, everything about who we understand ourselves to be changes—including how we relate to other people. How we respond to authority, then, is a reflection of who we believe God to be.

Verse 1 assures us that God is the ultimate authority. He has authority over the human heart and the human will. His authority remains secure, even when human authority exerts itself in sinful ways. All people, even the kings of this world, are under God's power and rule, and, ultimately, He will have His way. Our respect and submission to authority, then, is respect for the Lord and submission to Him.

¹ In the Lord's hand the king's heart is a stream of water that he channels toward all who please him.

² A person may think their own ways are right, but the Lord weighs the heart. ³ To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice. ⁴ Haughty eyes and a proud heart—the unplowed field of the wicked—produce sin.

The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD: God holds and can guide the human heart. If God can do this with someone as powerful and noble as a king, He can do this with any man or woman He chooses. God turned the heart of Pharaoh to Joseph; of Saul to David; of Nebuchadnezzar to Jeremiah; of Darius to Daniel; of Cyrus, and afterwards of Alexander the Great, to the Jews; of some of the Roman persecutors to the primitive Christians. God's inscrutable mastery extends to the king, the most powerful of human beings, and to the heart, their most free member. The Lord rules even the most free and powerful of all human beings. **Like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes:** This analogy illustrates how God may guide the heart of man. In moving a river, one does not need to carry each drop of water to a place where it is desired; if one can shape the banks and guide the direction of the river, the water will go where desired. So, God does not need to do violence to the human heart to guide it; He may do it simply through arranging other circumstances like banks of a river to guide the flow where He wants it. As a farmer channels the water where he wants and regulates its flow, so does the Lord with the king. No human ruler, then, is supreme; or, to put it another way, the Lord is truly the King of kings.

Every way of a man is right in his own eyes: By nature, we justify ourselves. Sometimes we do this in sincerity, sometimes with deception, but stubborn pride makes us generally think every way of a man is right in his own eyes. **But the LORD weighs the hearts:** Men and women are confident in their own way, but *God knows*. We justify things according to our **hearts** – “It was in my heart” or “I must follow my heart” or “In my heart, I know” – but God weighs the hearts of men and women, knowing that the heart itself doesn't justify anything. Yahweh's power of discernment goes beyond unmasking those who fool others; he even finds out those who have fooled themselves.

To do righteousness and justice: The way we treat people – what might be called our horizontal relationship – is important to God. He wants us to **do righteousness and justice** in this world. **Is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice:** Animal **sacrifice** was a way to walk in right

relationship with God – what might be called our vertical relationship. God says that how we treat others is more important than how we perform religious ceremonies such as sacrifice. This was the truth missed by the priest and the Levite in Jesus's story of the Good Samaritan ([Luke 10:30-36](#))

A haughty look, a proud heart: Often a **proud heart** is displayed through a **haughty look**. There is no shortage of either among humanity. This sin assumes so many different forms that until God's Spirit reveals a man to himself, he does not think it applies to him. Indeed, he manages to be proud of his pride! **And the plowing of the wicked are sin:** These three things – the **look**, the **heart**, and the **plowing of the wicked** are each called **sin**. Even the hard work (**plowing**) of the **wicked** can be regarded as **sin** before God because they often use the benefit of their hard work for an evil purpose. **Plowing:** The prosperity and posterity of the wicked; is sin-it is evil in the **seed**, and evil in the root, evil in the branch, and evil in the fruit. They are full of sin themselves, and what they do is sinful.

⁵ The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty.

⁶ A fortune made by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor and a deadly snare. ⁷ The violence of the wicked will drag them away, for they refuse to do what is right.

⁸ The way of the guilty is devious, but the conduct of the innocent is upright.

The plans of the diligent lead surely to plenty: When good planning is combined with diligent work there will be a harvest of plenty. **But those of everyone who is hasty, surely to poverty:** The one who wants to avoid work, find shortcuts, and cut corners will find failure instead of plenty. Their path leads surely to poverty. Here, the diligent person is compared to the lethargic sluggard. Here he is rash, impulsive and thoughtless. The lazy are defective in action; the hasty in thought.

Getting treasures by a lying tongue: There are some who hope to talk their way into money, and to do it with a lying tongue. They plan deals and make promises that aren't honest, hoping it can bring them treasures. **Is the fleeting fantasy of those who seek death:** The hope of great treasure through lying words is a dream of those who are on the path to destruction. They hope to find great treasures with little work and put their trust in fleeting fantasy instead of in God. The point of the verse, then, is that ill-gotten gain is a fleeting pleasure and a crime for which punishment is prepared. Instead of getting the fortune and life they hoped for, deceivers find that they were actually seeking death and so lose everything.

The violence of the wicked will destroy them: The wicked often love violence and use it for their gain. This does not please God, and God allows such people to reap what they have sown. Judas was eager to rid himself of his ill-gotten treasure – the 30 pieces of silver for Christ's life, as it became an intolerable curse. But he was unable to run away from his conscience, which tortured him. **Because they refuse to do justice:** It isn't only what the wicked do; it is also what they do not do. What they do is violence; what they refuse to do is justice. God cares about both what they do and don't do, and will pass judgment over both.

The way of a guilty man is perverse: Every life is on a way, and some people walk a way that is twisted and perverse. Those who walk this crooked way are **guilty** before God. **As for the pure, his work is right:** The crooked way belongs to the guilty man, but right work belongs to the pure man. The path we walk will display who we are.

⁹ Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife. ¹⁰ The wicked crave evil; their neighbors get no mercy from them. ¹¹ When a mocker is punished, the simple gain wisdom; by paying attention to the wise they get knowledge. ¹² The Righteous One takes note of the house of the wicked and brings the wicked to ruin.

Better to dwell in the corner of a housetop: The corner of a housetop is not a great place to live. It is small, confined, and exposed to the elements because it is on the roof. Yet in some circumstances, the corner of a housetop is a better place to live. The roof of the house, which in those countries was flat and plain, and habitable, but was exposed to all the injuries of the weather. A man had better abide abroad under the sun exposed to wind and weather than to cohabit in a convenient house with a contentious woman. **Than in a house shared with a contentious woman:** To have the whole house but live in constant conflict with a contentious woman is misery. The same principle would be true of the contentious man. One would be better off in a more humble living situation and have peace in the home. Also 'woman' is ambiguous for it could refer to other women in the household, mother, grandmother, mother-in-law, daughter (cf. [Proverbs 11:16](#), [22](#)), but the wife ([Proverbs 12:4](#); [19:13-14](#)) is more probably intended, as [Proverbs 18:22](#) validates.

The soul of the wicked desires evil: When a wicked man or woman does evil, it is because their soul...desires it. Their inward corruption is expressed through their desires. An important truth about depravity: men can sin not merely from weakness but eagerly and ruthlessly. Here is a graphic picture of Satan himself! He not only does evil – he craves evil. Here we see that evil is natural to the wicked, for it is in their nature. **His neighbor finds no favor in his eyes:** The evil that marks the wicked is expressed in their inability to get along with a neighbor. They look upon everyone else with no favor in their eyes. We should be careful of those who can't get along with other people.

When the scoffer is punished, the simple is made wise: There are degrees of fools and their foolishness. A scoffer (ridiculer) is hardened in their rejection of wisdom, while the simple is more naïve and inexperienced. A simple man or woman can learn wisdom when they see the scoffer is punished. **When the wise is instructed, he receives knowledge:** Wise men and women don't need to learn everything through their own misery or the misery of other people. The wise can learn as they are instructed. The simple learn wisdom, both from the punishment of wicked men, and from the prosperity of good men.

The righteous God wisely considers the house of the wicked: The LORD is a righteous God, and what happens in the house of the wicked does not escape His sight. He sees it and wisely considers it. God considers the house of the wicked with perfect wisdom and justice. **Considers the house of the wicked:** He foresees its fall, and is not upset at their present prosperity; for God, he knows, will shortly overturn it. This consideration cures him of the fretting. The destruction of others should be an instruction to us. The wicked are judged for their wickedness. Whatever judgment they receive fits their actions.

¹³ Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered. ¹⁴ A gift given in secret soothes anger, and a bribe concealed in the cloak pacifies great wrath. ¹⁵ When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers. ¹⁶ Whoever strays from the path of prudence comes to rest in the company of the dead.

Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor: Though many proverbs tell of poverty caused by bad conduct, other proverbs express God's compassion towards the poor. God cares about the poor and He commands us to have a compassionate heart towards them. **Will also cry himself and not be heard:** We will reap what we have sown. It will be measured to us as we have measured to others. If we are silent to those in need, God may arrange it so we will not be heard in our time of need. See the conduct of the priest and Levite to the man who fell among thieves. Every man should learn from this. He who shuts his ear against the cry of the poor, shall have the ear of God shut against his cry. The words are quite plain; there is no difficulty here.

A gift in secret pacifies anger: This is among the proverbs that speak honestly about the effectiveness of a gift or a bribe. The secret nature of this gift shows that it isn't entirely proper, yet

it may work to calm anger in an official or leader. The wise man's drift here is to show how prevalent gifts are which takes away the shame of open receiving –paves the way to an amicable reconciliation. Thus Jacob pacified Esau; Abigail, David; Hezekiah, the Assyrian that came up against him. [[2 Kings 18:24-25](#)]. **A bribe behind the back, strong wrath**: Again, the secret nature of the gift or bribe is indicated. Though morally questionable, it may work with the corrupt leader or official.

It is a joy for the just to do justice: When a person is just (righteous, godly) in the inner man or woman, it gives them joy to do justice. Their good works flow out of who they are. For us to really walk in the way God wants us to walk, we need to be transformed on the inside. **Destruction will come to the workers of iniquity**: Those who work iniquity (evil) also show what is in their heart, and it should make them tremble under the judgment of God. Instead of the joy of the just, they will experience destruction. Wicked men are great workmen; they cater to the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof.

A man who wanders from the way of understanding: There are two paths or ways a man or woman can walk. It is dangerous to begin on the way of understanding but not to continue on it. To some extent, this became tragically true of Solomon, the author of Proverbs ([1 Kings 11:1-11](#)). The departure from the way of understanding doesn't have to be calculated and deliberate; it may feel like wandering. As every motion has an end, so every journey has a goal. **Will rest in the assembly of the dead**: If one wanders from the way of understanding, they may well end up in the assembly of the dead. The path we walk on – and remain on – matters in everything.

17 Whoever loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and olive oil will never be rich. 18 The wicked become a ransom for the righteous, and the unfaithful for the upright. 19 Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and nagging wife. 20 The wise store up choice food and olive oil, but fools gulp theirs down.

He who loves pleasure will be a poor man: To find success and prosperity, there must be a measure of discipline and self-denial. The person who loves pleasure lacks this discipline and self-denial and often ends up a poor man. **He who loves wine and oil will not be rich**: In this proverb wine and oil represent the luxuries of life. There is an appropriate way to enjoy wine and oil without setting one's heart on them; but if these are loved beyond proper measure, it is a pathway to poverty. The 'love' that is here portrayed must be excessive or uncontrolled, because it brings one to poverty. Perhaps other responsibilities are being neglected or the people are trying to live above their means.

The wicked shall be a ransom for the righteous: This is a way of saying that the righteous will ultimately succeed and will triumph over the wicked. God often in his judgments cuts off the wicked, in order to prevent them from destroying the righteous. And in general, we find that the wicked fall into the traps and pits they have dug for the righteous. **And the unfaithful for the upright**: God promises that in the end, all His righteous and upright will be lifted above the wicked and the unfaithful.

Better to dwell in the wilderness: In a previous proverb ([Proverbs 21:9](#)) it was better to live in the corner of a rooftop than with a contentious woman. This proverb removes the man from the house entirely and sets his better place in the wilderness. **Than with a contentious and angry woman**: This proverb adds the idea of *anger* to the picture and sets the unfortunate man even further from the house. This shows the great value of peace and happiness in the home. Much prayer and patience are required to avoid being upset by everything. This will keep us from being irritated needlessly. We must also bear in mind that we have divine support for all our heavy crosses. We also look forward with intense longing for the home of everlasting peace

There is a desirable treasure, and oil in the dwelling of the wise: The wise man or woman lives a life blessed by God, and sometimes that blessing is shown in material things. They may have desirable treasure and good oil in their home. **But a foolish man squanders it**: The foolish man has

trouble gaining what the wise man or woman has. He doesn't have the character of life or blessing of God that leads to prosperity. Yet even if he were to gain it, it would not last. His foolish nature takes over and he squanders it.

²¹ Whoever pursues righteousness and love finds life, prosperity and honor. ²² One who is wise can go up against the city of the mighty and pull down the stronghold in which they trust. ²³ Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity. ²⁴ The proud and arrogant person—"Mocker" is his name—behaves with insolent fury.

He who follows righteousness and mercy: Each life is on a path, and here the path is righteousness and mercy. This is the path of wisdom, God's path for those who will listen and surrender to Him. **Finds life, righteousness, and honor:** The path of righteousness and mercy isn't easy and is often resisted and made fun of. Yet it is rewarded, and rewarded richly with life, righteousness, and honor. The wise path is worth it.

A wise man scales the city of the mighty: The walls of a city are difficult obstacles, especially the city of the mighty. Yet with wisdom one can overcome such obstacles. The wise man can accomplish things impossible for others. It is more effective to use wisdom than to rely on strength. **Brings down the trusted stronghold:** Because the wise man enjoys the blessing and guidance of God, he can defeat obstacles as difficult as a trusted stronghold. This is true in military and practical life; wisdom and ingenuity have won many battles and destroyed many strongholds. It is also true in spiritual life. Cities and strongholds that stand against the progress of the believer can be broken down with the wisdom and power of God. The truth that wisdom may succeed where brute force fails (cf. [Proverbs 24:5-6](#)), has many applications, particularly to spiritual warfare. So spiritual wisdom, a direct gift from God, overcomes formidable difficulties.

Whoever guards his mouth and tongue: What we say is important, and the instruments of speech are the mouth and tongue. It is good to guard what we say and not to speak everything that comes to mind. **Keeps his soul from troubles:** Unguarded words can bring a lot of trouble. Having the wisdom to guard the mouth and tongue will keep us from many troubles.

A proud and haughty man: Of the many types of fools, the scoffer is one of the worst. He is known to be proud and haughty, thinking himself better than others and even better than God. **He acts with arrogant pride:** The proud and haughty man will be known by his actions. His life will be marked with great pride, arrogant pride. The proverb aims to explain that his fury against God and humanity stems from his exaggerated opinion of his self-importance. This is a vivid picture of Pharaoh, who in a proud and arrogant way asked who the Lord was that he should obey him ([Exodus 5:2](#)).

²⁵ The craving of a sluggard will be the death of him, because his hands refuse to work. ²⁶ All day long he craves for more, but the righteous give without sparing.

²⁷ The sacrifice of the wicked is detestable—how much more so when brought with evil intent!

The desire of the lazy man kills him: The lazy man has desire; he just doesn't have the initiative or the energy to fulfill it. His life of unfulfilled desire is unsatisfying and feels as if it kills him. This is a death to self, but not in the good and blessed way described by Jesus for His disciples ([Matthew 10:38](#); [Luke 9:23](#)). Mere desire isn't enough. "Balaam wished well to heaven; so did the young Pharisee in the gospel, that came to Christ hastily, but went away sad. Herod for a long time desired to see Christ, but was not willing to go out and seek him. Pilate asked Christ, What is truth? but never stayed his answer. **For his hands refuse to labor:** Having the desire for good and blessing and prosperity, but not the desire to work, the lazy man lives a life of constant frustration and disappointment. He does not know the satisfaction of earned achievement. Living in a world of wishful thinking and not working will bring ruin...the verse teaches that doing rather than desiring brings success.

He covets greedily all day long: The reference is likely to the lazy man of the previous proverb. With his desire, that lazy man covets greedily, and he does it all day long – yet the desire is unfulfilled because he does not work towards it. **The righteous gives and does not spare:** The lazy man experiences constant disappointment, but the righteous man – who, by implication, works hard – he has so much that he gives and does not spare – meaning that he gives to others freely. He is so blessed that he has enough for himself and to give generously.

The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination: God said, *to obey is better than sacrifice* ([1 Samuel 15:22](#)). Religious ceremonies do not cover over a wicked life, and God may regard those religious ceremonies as an abomination. **How much more when he brings it with wicked intent:** The religious ceremonies of the wicked are bad enough; they are even worse when made with wicked intent. When a sacrifice is offered, the priest or observers may not be able to see wicked intent, but God certainly can. It is abominable for any man who is living wrongly to make an offering to God in the way of worship. That abomination becomes worse when the offering of the wicked comes from an ulterior motive. For a wicked man to give for his own pleasure is an evil thing; but if he hopes by his gift to win some spiritual favor while he continues in sin, that is a still deeper evil.

²⁸ A false witness will perish, but a careful listener will testify successfully. ²⁹ The wicked put up a bold front, but the upright give thought to their ways. ³⁰ There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the Lord. ³¹ The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the Lord.

A false witness shall perish: God is against all liars, but a false witness is a special type of liar. The primary idea is of one who lies in court, such as those who gave false witness at the trial of Jesus ([Matthew 26:60](#)). **The man who hears him will speak endlessly:** The second line of this proverb has in mind another kind of injustice in the court – the judge or lawyer in the court who hears the false witness and may speak endlessly about the matter without ever coming to a just and fair verdict.

A wicked man hardens his face: One characteristic of the wicked is that they may be unsympathetic to others. Their face is hard and unfriendly to others, especially towards those in need. **Hardens his face:** He thinks to make good one lie by another; to outface the truth, to overcome it with a bold countenance. It seems to be a metaphor from a traveler that sets his face against the wind and weather, and holds on his journey, though he is headed towards destruction. One who has no shame and does not blush in the presence of sin, is a dreadful manifestation of a hardened heart. Cain stood boldly in God's presence while his hands dripped with his brother's blood. The traitor had the nerve to kiss the sacred cheeks of our Lord. **As for the upright, he establishes his way:** The upright man or woman does not face the same self-made obstacles the wicked man faces. The upright man or woman is established and made sure.

There is no wisdom or understanding or counsel against the LORD: To fight against God is to fight a losing battle. One can never succeed against the sovereign of the universe. This means, God wins and ultimately all His purposes will be accomplished. We have watched, we have trembled at the ways of this world. Yet look again. Just as persistent in human history, the futility, the feebleness, the failure of the evil ways have come to pass. Therefore it is true, full and finally, that 'There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against Jehovah. Wisdom or understanding or counsel are three similar terms used to express wisdom and right knowledge. God is the God of all wisdom and understanding and counsel, so those things are always for Him and never against the LORD. The proverb drives home the vast and unbridgeable gulf between the best of human wisdom and the Lord's sovereignty.

The horse is prepared for the day of battle: In the days these proverbs were written, the effective use of the horse in the war could be overwhelming against the enemy. These horses had to be trained; it was wise to prepare the horse for the day of battle.

But deliverance is of the LORD: Though it is wise to make the best preparations for battle, ultimately one should not trust in horses or preparation, but in God Himself. We often give the credit of a victory to man, when they who consider the circumstances see that it came from God. He gives deliverance to the side as He pleases, as he did to the Israelites in the conquest of Canaan, though they had no horses to help them, as their adversaries had, and chariots too, both Egyptians and Canaanites.