

## Proverbs 23 – Stop and Think

One of the wisdom principles seen throughout Proverbs is clearly expressed at the start of chapter 23-"Consider carefully." And continuing throughout this chapter, Solomon exhorts us to stop and think about the choices before us each and every day. Whether making choices that involve influential people (v. 1-3), wealth (v. 4-5), relationships with unwise people (v. 6-9,17-18,20-21,27-28), or where we focus our attention (v. 12,19,22-26,31-35), our appetites are big.

As such, hasty decisions lead to foolish behavior. The questions our choices present can be endless, and they feed the ravenous discontent within us. Solomon knew the emptiness and frustration of discontentment all too well. When he penned the words of Proverbs 23:4, he was reflecting back on his own experience of chasing the temporary pleasures of this world. Through that experience he learned the value of careful consideration.

Careful consideration of God's wisdom compels us to set aside temporary pleasures to invest instead in eternal things. As we stop and think about God's wisdom, we recognize He is our source and provider, caring for every detail of our lives. We remember the temporary nature of our earthly appetites. The feelings associated with those big appetites are also temporary. Any benefits we may think they offer are not worth the cost of foolish decisions. But the benefit of carefully considering God's wisdom is certain and valuable forever-He refocuses our minds and hearts on eternal things.

### **Saying 7**

*<sup>1</sup>When you sit to dine with a ruler, note well what is before you, <sup>2</sup>and put a knife to your throat if you are given to gluttony. <sup>3</sup>Do not crave his delicacies, for that food is deceptive.*

**When you sit down to eat with a ruler:** The idea is of a generous invitation to eat with powerful people at a table loaded with delicious, well-prepared food. The rich do not give away their favors for free. They want something in return, and it is generally much more than what they have invested. One can lose one's own soul in the exchange.

**Consider carefully what is before you:** Don't be overwhelmed and seduced by the atmosphere of power and luxury. If you are vulnerable to these temptations, then beware.

The expression 'put a knife to your throat': (Proverbs 23:2) means 'to curb your appetite' or 'to control yourself' (like 'bite your tongue'). **Given to appetite:** Though referring here narrowly to food, can be interpreted broadly with reference to all appetites. Total prohibition is necessary for a person who cannot control his appetites; the disciple can give no place to lust (Matthew 5:29-30)

**They are deceptive food:** The ruler's table may be your ruin. You may be so seduced by the atmosphere of power and luxury that you surrender what should not be

surrendered, you promise what should not be promised, and in effect you worship and serve what should not be worshipped and served. So the warning is not to indulge in his impressive feast—the ruler wants something from you or is observing you.

### **Saying 8**

*<sup>4</sup> Do not wear yourself out to get rich; do not trust your own cleverness. <sup>5</sup> Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle.*

**Do not overwork to be rich:** Many times, the Book of Proverbs rebukes and even mocks the lazy man. Yet this does not mean that work and the wealth that comes from work should be made an idol. One may begin to worship work but shouldn't. You know better. **Riches certainly make themselves wings:** Though working hard is a mark of wisdom, we don't live for the riches that may come from that work. Those riches are too vulnerable and temporary to be a worthy focus of our life. **Like an eagle toward heaven:** The addition adds to the metaphor of the swift and powerful eagle that he outstrips all attempts to capture him. Riches will certainly disappear, and once gone, they are gone forever.

### **Saying 9**

*<sup>6</sup> Do not eat the food of a begrudging host, do not crave his delicacies; <sup>7</sup> for he is the kind of person who is always thinking about the cost. "Eat and drink," he says to you, but his heart is not with you. <sup>8</sup> You will vomit up the little you have eaten and will have wasted your compliments.*

**Do not eat the bread of a miser:** The ruler's table was a dangerous place ([Proverbs 23:1-3](#)), but so is the table of the penny pincher, the one with an evil or ungenerous eye. The penny pincher is the envious or covetous man, who secretly begrudges the meat which he sets before people. Eat and drink!" the stingy man says to his guests, but his heart is not with you. He doesn't want you to really enjoy yourself at his table. But there are no such dangers linked to the invitations of the Gospel. The table is ready, and the invitations have been sent out. The only qualification is our own hunger to accept the invitation and eat the heavenly food.

**The morsel you have eaten, you will vomit up:** The table of the stingy will be such an unpleasant experience that the food you enjoyed will come back to bother you. The pleasant words spoken at his table will seem wasted. These proverbs contradict the common notion that Proverbs regards the rich as righteous and thus favored by God. To the contrary, wealthy people often are viewed with a marked suspicion, and their company is not always valued.

### **Saying 10**

*<sup>9</sup> Do not speak to fools, for they will scorn your prudent words.*

**Do not speak in the hearing of a fool:** This assumes that the one doing the speaking is not himself a fool and is a wise man. It is direct address, not something overheard.

**He will despise the wisdom of your words:** The fool will not receive or appreciate your wisdom. It will be as Jesus later described – like throwing pearls before pigs ([Matthew 7:6](#)).

## **Saying 11**

*<sup>10</sup> Do not move an ancient boundary stone or encroach on the fields of the fatherless, <sup>11</sup> for their Defender is strong; he will take up their case against you.*

**Do not remove the ancient landmark:** Literally, the ancient landmark was normally a stone marker for a property line. Moving the landmark was a way to make your field bigger and to steal from your neighbor. Symbolically, the ancient landmark was a tradition or custom from ancestors.

**Nor enter the fields of the fatherless:** The field of the orphan needed special care and protection. It was evil to enter the fields of the fatherless to take some of the harvest from those who had trouble protecting it.

**Their Redeemer is mighty:** The orphan and all who are vulnerable have a special protector, a Redeemer. He has vowed to plead their cause against all who would come to take what they have. The Redeemer/Avenger was usually a powerful relative who would champion the rights of the defenseless; but if there was no human redeemer God would take up their cause (see [Genesis 48:16](#); [Exodus 6:6](#); [Job 19:25](#); [Isaiah 41-63](#)).

## **Saying 12**

*<sup>12</sup> Apply your heart to instruction and your ears to words of knowledge.*

**Apply your heart to instruction:** Wisdom can be given out, but it must be received to be of any lasting good. The reception of wisdom isn't passive; it is active, received with a heart that truly applies wisdom and instruction.

**And your ears to words of knowledge:** We mostly receive wisdom by what we hear, especially in the guidance we receive from the wise. Our ears must be tuned to receive and apply God's wisdom. When the heart and the ears work together to receive wisdom, much is gained.

## **Saying 13**

*<sup>13</sup> Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish them with the rod, they will not die. <sup>14</sup> Punish them with the rod and save them from death.*

**Do not withhold correction from a child:** The concept here is not that correction is imposed on a child, but that it properly belongs to a child and to not bring needed correction is to withhold it. **You shall punish him with a rod:** The figure of the rod in Proverbs is sometimes used literally and sometimes figuratively. There is place for both literal, physical correction of a child (such as spanking). However, the cleansing rod must be applied with the warmth, affection and respect for the youth. Parents who brutalize their children cannot hide behind the rod-doctrine of Proverbs.

Parents who find it only too easy to apply the rod, and especially those who lose their tempers when doing so, should consider Ephesians 6:4. - *Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.* An excessive use of this scriptural ordinance brings discredit on its value and sows the seed of bitter fruit. Children become hardened under an iron rod. Sternness and severity close up their hearts. It is very dangerous to make our children afraid of us.

**And deliver his soul from hell:** The word translated “hell” here is actually sheol, which first has the idea of the grave. Sometimes it is used in the sense of physical death, and other times in the sense of eternal death. Either or both may be in view here.

### **Saying 14**

*<sup>15</sup> My son, if your heart is wise, then my heart will be glad indeed; <sup>16</sup> my inmost being will rejoice when your lips speak what is right.*

**If your heart is wise, my heart will rejoice:** The general context of the Book of Proverbs is of a father teaching wisdom to his children. Here Solomon reflected on the great happiness he would have if his children actually received and lived in this wisdom.

**When your lips speak right things:** Wisdom (or the lack of wisdom) is often seen in the words we speak. When the father hears his child’s lips speak right things, he has reason to believe that the lessons of wisdom have been learned.

### **Saying 15**

*<sup>17</sup> Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the Lord.*

*<sup>18</sup> There is surely a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off.*

**Do not let your heart envy sinners:** This is an easy trap to fall into. On this side of eternity and the ultimate judgments of God it may seem that sin is unpunished and righteousness is unrewarded. Our hearts, instead of envying sinners, should be full of compassion for them, for they have nothing to look forward to but death.

**Be zealous for the fear of the LORD:** Instead of being jealous of the wicked, be determined to have an eternal perspective rooted in the fear of the LORD, an active recognition of the greatness and righteousness of God.

In a sermon on this verse, Charles Spurgeon gave a wonderful definition of the fear of the LORD: The fear of the Lord is a brief description for true religion. It is an inward condition, promising hearty submission to our heavenly Father. It consists in a holy reverence of God, and a sacred awe of him. This is accompanied by a child-like trust in him, which leads to loving obedience, tender submission, and lowly adoration. Men must wake with God, walk with him, and lie down with him, be in continual communion with him and conformity unto him. This is to be in heaven beforehand.

**For surely there is a hereafter:** If this life was all there would be, then we would have much more reason to envy sinners. Yet, as the conclusion of the Book of Ecclesiastes

demonstrates, surely there is a hereafter, and therefore wisdom means that we should live in the fear of the LORD. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.

## **Saying 16**

*<sup>19</sup> Listen, my son, and be wise, and set your heart on the right path: <sup>20</sup> Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, <sup>21</sup> for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags.*

**Hear, my son, and be wise:** This repeats the basic context of Proverbs, that it is the wise instruction and guidance of a father to his children. In the reign of Queen Elizabeth I there was a law made that everybody should go to his parish church; but many sincere Romanists loathed to go and hear Protestant doctrine. Through fear of persecution, they attended the parish church; but they filled their ears with wool, so that they could not hear what their priests condemned. Preaching to a congregation whose ears are stopped with prejudices is futile.

**Do not mix with winebibbers, or with gluttonous eaters of meat:** The wise counsel to a son or daughter is that they should not mix with those who overindulge in alcohol or food. The drunk and the glutton have a bad future (poverty and rags), and the wise man or woman will not share it with them. The 'drunkard' and the 'glutton' represent the epitome of the lack of discipline. The self-indulgent are reduced to destitution ([Proverbs 23:21](#)a) due to the drowsiness that accompanies addiction to wine and over-eating. Their full stomachs empty their minds.

## **Saying 17**

*<sup>22</sup> Listen to your father, who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old. <sup>23</sup> Buy the truth and do not sell it— wisdom, instruction and insight as well. <sup>24</sup> The father of a righteous child has great joy; a man who fathers a wise son rejoices in him. <sup>25</sup> May your father and mother rejoice; may she who gave you birth be joyful!*

**Listen to your father who begot you:** Wisdom can never be learned until you pay attention. There must be a deliberate effort to listen. **Do not despise your mother when she is old:** This affirms the principle of honor your father and mother in Exodus 20:12 (and later in Ephesians 6:2). When parents become old, they should receive special attention and care.

**Buy the truth, and do not sell it:** We should have the mentality that we are willing to gain truth and wisdom and gain it at a cost instead of wanting to forsake it for profit. **Buy the truth:** Purchase it upon any terms, spare no pains nor cost to get it. Buy the truth; that is, be willing at all risks to hold to the truth. Buy it as the martyrs did when they gave their bodies to be burned for it. Buy it as many have done when they have gone to prison



for it. **Do not sell it:** It cost Christ too much. Do not sell it. You made a good bargain when you bought it. It has not disappointed you; it has satisfied you, and made you blessed. The hour of death is coming on, and the day of judgment is close on its heels. Do not sell it because, you cannot buy it again.

The Savior says that we should buy from him (Revelation 3:18). This settles the matter. If we do not really want the goods, we will not pay much attention to the proverb. For we only buy what we eagerly desire. Truth, instruction, and understanding are all ways of describing wisdom.

**The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice:** It is a great blessing for parents to have righteous and wise children. That parent will delight in him. **Let your father and your mother be glad:** One reason for a son or daughter to pursue and gain wisdom is that it will make one's parents glad. It will be an appropriate blessing and reward those who gave the son or daughter life and an upbringing.

## **Saying 18**

*<sup>26</sup> My son, give me your heart and let your eyes delight in my ways, <sup>27</sup> for an adulterous woman is a deep pit, and a wayward wife is a narrow well. <sup>28</sup> Like a bandit she lies in wait and multiplies the unfaithful among men.*

**Give me your heart:** Solomon understood that wisdom must be received with the heart. It can't only be a matter of facts or principles learned in the mind or even memorized. Wisdom must be received into a willing, given, heart. **Let your eyes observe my ways:** At the time of writing this, Solomon could point to his *own life* as an example of wisdom when it came to the dangers of an immoral woman. He knew teaching is most effective when it comes from a life that knows and lives wisdom. **Observe my ways:** Get a full sense of them, and diligently peruse them. Fix your eyes upon the best things, and keep them from looking at forbidden beauties, because they are windows of wickedness, and loopholes of lust.

**A harlot is a deep pit:** The pit is the trap dug and concealed to capture a large animal. Just like an animal might fall into such a deep pit, the danger of the harlot is real and concealed. This smooth-talking beauty engages in sexual intercourse for lust and/or money with no intention and/or capability of a binding and enduring relationship. Having trapped her victim, he cannot escape. Samson broke the bonds of his enemies, but he could not break the bonds of his own lusts.

**A seductress is a narrow well:** A well is a source of satisfying water, and the sexual relationship of a husband and wife is described as good water from a well (Proverbs 5:15). Here the idea is of a well that doesn't satisfy. The seductress offers great satisfaction but ultimately doesn't deliver, lacking the true intimacy and trust that build a satisfying sexual experience. **Increases the unfaithful among men:** This is not to lay all the blame upon the harlot or immoral woman, but her trap captures many. She is the cause of innumerable sins against God, and against the marriage-bed, against the

soul and body too, and by her wicked example and arts involve many persons in the guilt of her sins.

## **Saying 19**

*<sup>29</sup> Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaints? Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes? <sup>30</sup> Those who linger over wine, who go to sample bowls of mixed wine. <sup>31</sup> Do not gaze at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly! <sup>32</sup> In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper. <sup>33</sup> Your eyes will see strange sights, and your mind will imagine confusing things. <sup>34</sup> You will be like one sleeping on the high seas, lying on top of the rigging. <sup>35</sup> “They hit me,” you will say, “but I’m not hurt! They beat me, but I don’t feel it! When will I wake up so I can find another drink?”*

**Who has woe? Who has sorrow?** Solomon reminded us of many of the ill effects of alcohol and intoxicating drugs. They bring woe and sorrow. They bring contentions and complaints. They bring wounds and redness of eyes. Unrestrained, immoderate use of alcohol and abuse of drugs will bring these sorrows to one’s life, and countless tragedies prove it.

**Those who linger long at the wine:** The picture is of those who abuse alcohol or other intoxicants, and who are always looking for a stronger drink. Linger over’ alcohol describes those who derive comfort and security in knowing that a glass of wine is at hand, ready to deaden the senses. **It sparkles in the cup:** Wine can be pleasing on many levels – in how it looks, smells, tastes, and makes one feel. These pleasing aspects of intoxicants never justify their unrestrained or immoderate use. **When it swirls around smoothly:** When it sparkles, it seems to smile upon a man.

**At the last it bites like a serpent:** Eventually, the abuse of alcohol or drugs will bite and sting. As Solomon described, the eyes will see strange things, and your heart will utter perverse things.

**You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea:** The person who abuses alcohol or drugs will drown in their sin and misery. They will be like a person on a sinking ship who denies their danger. Living in denial, unable or unwilling to see their danger (they have struck me, but I was not hurt), their only thought is when they “may seek another drink.” In a ship in the midst of the sea. This phrase notes the temper and condition of the drunkard, the giddiness of his brain, the unquietness of his mind, and especially his extreme danger joined with great security.

**One who lies at the top of the mast:** Escalates his giddiness and danger by comparing him to one sleeping in the crow’s nest on top of the rigging where the ship’s rocking is greatest. The passage describes more than a night’s drinking and a morning’s hangover. It describes the increasingly degenerative effects, physical and mental, of the habitual drinker and the alcoholic. Wine and illicit drugs brings physical pain and debilitation,

exhausts one's resources, takes away mental acuity, and yet leaves one craving for more of the same.

Yet there is hope in Jesus for the drunkard and drug addict. "*Is anything too hard for the Lord?*" May his name be praised for a full deliverance from sin—to all sins and to every individual sin—and even from the chains of this giant sin. The drunkard becomes sober, the unclean holy, the glutton temperate. The love of Christ overpowers the love of sin.