

PROVERBS 14 Selected Verses

² Those who walk uprightly fear the Lord,
but one who is devious in conduct despises him.

³ The talk of fools is a rod for their backs,
but the lips of the wise preserve them.

³² The wicked are overthrown by their evildoing,
but the righteous find a refuge in their integrity.

⁹ Fools mock at the guilt-offering,
but the upright enjoy God's favour.

²⁰ The poor are disliked even by their neighbours,
but the rich have many friends.

²¹ Those who despise their neighbours are sinners,
but happy are those who are kind to the poor.

³¹ Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker,
but those who are kind to the needy honour him.

²² Do they not err that plan evil?
Those who plan good find loyalty and faithfulness.

1) John 4: 20 says: "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." This verse from the New Testament is totally consistent with the first set of verses from Proverbs (2,3,32). And the message is super challenging as well. Imagine if all our behaviour, especially as it affects those around us, reflects how much we love, respect, and revere (fear) God. This is exactly what we are told. Does such an understanding put pressure on us, convict us and challenge us that much more? Perhaps this is exactly the perspective we need more of, especially with particular relationships and interactions in our lives.

I especially appreciate certain imagery that suggests our misbehaviour toward others seriously harms us as much if not more so than it harms our neighbour. "The talk of fools is a rod to their backs." Verse 3 is all about our words, and as we know our words can cause a lot of hurt and harm as much as they can soothe and raise up. Imagine if we thought of our bad words toward others as a rod (used to discipline and punish in the ancient world) on our own backs disciplining us. Imagine. It may be harsh to our modern ears, but also confronting, no?

I also love the imagery of our integrity being a kind of refuge for us (32). A refuge is a place we go to for safety and protection from harm. Canada is a refuge for many a refugee on the run from terrible situations. Imagine thinking of our integrity of character as our best refuge.

Clearly proverbs like these imagine the kind of value we place on behaviour regardless of the consequences of what happens to us on the outside. Fear can shape our behaviour as much as the need to please in hope of some reward. Character is formed when we stand for truth, right and offer compassion despite how much it costs us or regardless of any appreciation or recognition. What do you think?

2) Verse 9 refers to a guilt offering. The act of offering an animal from your flock for sacrifice (the animals are then used for food) to atone for some guilt is a recognition that you need forgiveness. It is only the upright who recognize when they need forgiveness and recognize how they have hurt or harmed another. It takes courage to face up to our shortcomings and seek out those who have been affected by our actions or neglect. It takes courageous listening to give someone our attention as they tell us how our behaviour has hurt them.

3) Verses 20,21,31, are all about our relationship to those who are poor and needy. Verse 20 on its own can fool us if we don't also read it alongside 21 and 31. On its own it suggests that the rich have many friends while the poor have few. But having friends in the world is not the same as having the favour of God. Money attracts friends in this world, while the poor and needy can be a drain on our attention and care. But God's metrics are totally different. How we treat the poor speaks volumes for how much we love, revere, and worship God. Abusing our neighbour, especially one vulnerable and impoverished is a direct assault on God, and neglecting a neighbour in need is to disrespect God.

4) Finally there is verse 22. Whereas the book of Job is sensitive to the unfairness and injustice in the world despite how good or innocent a person is in their dealings, Proverbs emphasizes the truth that good done to another comes back to you in some way. To be loyal and faithful to others breeds loyalty and faithfulness in return. And having relationships of loyalty and faithfulness are the best kind of support we can have when tough times come our way. It is good to know there is goodness, faithfulness and loyalty in this world, especially as we are bombarded constantly in the news with all the betrayal and harm people suffer and commit in our world. Church is a place where we celebrate and encourage the community building values all subsumed under the category: Love. And this definitely includes loyalty and faithfulness. What do you think?

PRAYER: Thank you, O God, for faithful and loyal friends who are there for us no matter what. Thank you for opening our eyes and hearts to those in need. Give us the perseverance to serve and give even when it seems to make little difference in the larger scheme of things. Thank you for the gift and opportunity that is forgiveness – your forgiveness and the forgiveness of others. And thank you for the gift of character and our desire to behave with compassion as our core value no matter when it costs us. Strengthen us when we falter and fall, and restore us when we have lost our way. In Jesus name, Amen.