

The Impact of the Righteous and the Wicked on their Surrounding Community

Proverbs 11.10-11

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The Book of Proverbs is often viewed as a collection of ancient and pithy sayings providing guarantees of prosperity to the wise individual, as well as warnings of destruction to the foolish individual. While it is certainly true that the content of Proverbs is beneficial for individual prosperity, there is also much to be gained by reading Proverbs with the broader community in mind. *In Proverbs we find that wisdom is beneficial not only for the wise individual, but also for the entire community. Similarly, folly is detrimental not only to the foolish individual, but also to the entire community.*

Take, for instance, Proverbs 11:10-11

10 When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices,
And when the wicked perish, there is joyful shouting.

11 By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted,
But by the mouth of the wicked it is torn down. (NASB)

10 When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices;
when the wicked perish, there are shouts of joy.

11 Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted,
but by the mouth of the wicked it is destroyed. (NIV)

In this passage, the actions of the righteous and the wicked are tied to the prosperity of the entire city. There seems to be a cause and effect relationship between the righteous, the wicked and the state of the city. In this case, the actions of the righteous and the wicked serve as the antecedent for either the prosperity or the destruction of the city.

In verse 10 the city is celebrating, but for two different reasons. In the first stanza, the city rejoices when it goes well with the righteous, presumably because when it goes well with the righteous, it goes well for everyone. The same sort of joyful shouting is reported in the second

stanza, but this time it is a response to the wicked perishing, presumably because anit-social behavior is punished. There is joy in both cases, but the joy is provoked by different circumstances.

In verse 11 the entire community is exalted, raised up or held in high regard, by the blessing of the righteous person. This blessing may be a blessing pronounced by the righteous, over the city, or it may be the blessing experienced by the righteous who would no doubt share their blessing with others. On the contrary, the entire community is torn down, overthrown or destroyed by the mouth of the wicked person. This may be by curses or lies that come from the mouth of the wicked person.

One may ask; “Who are the righteous and the wicked that this passage refers to, and what behaviors are associated with them?” In the mind of the Hebrew people righteousness was associated with wisdom¹, life, honor² and being clean. While personal hygiene was included in being clean, in this case “being clean” referred more to order than hygiene; “The key characteristic of the clean was that they were in place and functioning well...The unclean were out of line and not functioning properly.”³ By contrast, wickedness was associated with foolishness⁴, death, shame⁵ and being unclean. As Victor Matthews and Don Benjamin point out; “Life-giving behavior was labeled ‘wise’ or ‘clean.’ Destructive or anti-social behavior was ‘foolish’ or ‘unclean.’”⁶ In this case, to be unclean was to be dysfunctional or chaotic.

In the book of Proverbs, wise behavior and foolish behavior were not determined arbitrarily. Behavior that was considered wise was that which was good for the entire

¹ Benjamin, Don C. and Matthews, Victor H., *Social World of Ancient Israel: 1250-587 BCE*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011 (143)

² Ibid (142)

³ Ibid (144)

⁴ Ibid (143)

⁵ Ibid (142)

⁶ Ibid (143)

community. Behavior that was considered foolish was that which was considered detrimental to the entire community.

Wise behavior was considered righteous, life-giving and honorable. Foolish behavior was considered wicked, deadly and shameful. The righteous/wise had a positive impact on the community while the wicked/fool had a negative impact; “The wise enabled society to function successfully. Fools disturbed the calm...”⁷

Because the actions of an individual have a definite impact on the community, the community reserved the right to evaluate the actions of individual members. The community would respond well to wise behavior, but would have an adverse reaction to foolish behavior that put everyone at risk; “[These] labels do not indicate as much about what a household is actually doing or not doing as they do about how the village reacts to it.”⁸ The community's response to the actions of an individual resulted in the honor or shame ascribed to the individual in question.

It is clear that the Hebrew people distinguished between behavior that was wise, righteous, clean, honorable and life-giving and behavior that was foolish, wicked, unclean, shameful and deadly. What behaviours fell into those categories? Matthews and Benjamin suggest the following list:

By the way they ate their meals, did not get drunk, worked hard, made good friends, sought advice before acting, held their temper, paid their taxes and imposed fair legal judgements, the wise educated their villages to carry on successfully from generation to generation. By overeating, drunkenness, laziness, quarreling, selfishness, and perjury, fools endangered their very existence.”⁹

When a righteous person shares their resources, practices self-restraint, remains diligent, practices hospitality and speaks honestly, it has an obvious benefit to the entire community.

⁷ IBenjamin, Don C. and Matthews, Victor H., *Social World of Ancient Israel: 1250-587 BCE*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011 (143)

⁸ Ibid 143

⁹ Ibid (142)

Conversely, when a wicked person hordes resources, won't work and causes trouble, it compromises the quality of the life of the entire community.

When the Hebrew people thought about the broader community it was both geographical and generational. Wise, or righteous behavior not only benefited your neighbors, but also your grandkids. Wicked, or foolish behavior put future generations at risk. For this reason, the book of Proverbs provides wisdom not only for how to interact with neighbors, but also parents and children.

For a community that experienced generations of slavery and nomadic living before settling in their land, wisdom for the benefit of the community was paramount. Craig Keener explains;

Wisdom has social repercussions, as does folly, since it is identified with wickedness in Proverbs. Wisdom (the result of order and the fear of the Lord) brings joy to the city, because it unites people and they prosper. Folly (the result of disorder) brings grief, because it tears people apart and they languish."¹⁰

As we read and apply the book of Proverbs we must read it with our communities in mind. Proverbs is not written for the individual in isolation, it is written for the individual that is integrated into a larger community. We can read Proverbs to look for insights into living in community. Proverbs can help us understand how our actions impact others, and how to be a good neighbor, daughter/son and parent.

¹⁰ Keener, Craig and Walton, John, *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016 (Notes on Prov. 11:1-11)

Works Cited

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