

PROVERBS

Chapter 20

Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise. 2 The terror of a king is like the growling of a lion; whoever provokes him to anger forfeits his life. 3 It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling. 4 The sluggard does not plow in the autumn; he will seek at harvest and have nothing. 5 The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out. 6 Many a man proclaims his own steadfast love, but a faithful man who can find? 7 The righteous who walks in his integrity—blessed are his children after him! 8 A king who sits on the throne of judgment winnows all evil with his eyes. 9 Who can say, “I have made my heart pure; I am clean from my sin”? 10 Unequal weights and unequal measures are both alike an abomination to the LORD. 11 Even a child makes himself known by his acts, by whether his conduct is pure and upright. 12 The hearing ear and the seeing eye, the LORD has made them both. 13 Love not sleep, lest you come to poverty; open your eyes, and you will have plenty of bread. 14 “Bad, bad,” says the buyer, but when he goes away, then he boasts. 15 There is gold and abundance of costly stones, but the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel. 16 Take a man's garment when he has put up security for a stranger, and hold it in pledge when he puts up security for foreigners. 17 Bread gained by deceit is sweet to a man, but afterward his mouth will be full of gravel. 18 Plans are established by counsel; by wise guidance wage war. 19 Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a simple babbler. 20 If one curses his father or his mother, his lamp will be put out in utter darkness. 21 An inheritance gained hastily in the beginning will not be blessed in the end. 22 Do not say, “I will repay evil”; wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you. 23 Unequal weights are an abomination to the LORD, and false scales are not good. 24 A man's steps are from the LORD; how then can man understand his way? 25 It is a snare to say rashly, “It is holy,” and to reflect only after making vows. 26 A wise king winnows the wicked and drives the wheel over them. 27 The spirit of man is the lamp of the LORD, searching all his innermost parts. 28 Steadfast love and faithfulness preserve the king, and by steadfast love his throne is upheld. 29 The glory of young men is their strength, but the splendor of old men is their gray hair. 30 Blows that wound cleanse away evil; strokes make clean the innermost parts.

20:1 *Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler.* Those who overindulge become mockers and brawlers (see Hos 7:5). Proverbs associates drunkenness with poverty (23:20–21), strife (23:29–30) and injustice (31:4–5). (CSB)

Wine has a stupefying affect in the drunk’s mockery of God and brawling (23:29–35). (TLSB)

strong drink. Not a distilled liquor but an alcoholic beverage fermented from grain, primarily barley. Sometimes translated “beer.” Forms of this word are used negatively in Scripture to condemn drunkenness. However, several occurrences of strong drink (31:6; Gn 43:34; Nu 28:7; Dt 14:26) remind us that it is not alcoholic beverages themselves that Scripture condemns, but the abuse of them. Ambrose: “It is a mark of liberality to receive the stranger, to clothe the naked, to redeem the captives, to help the needy. It is wasteful to spend money on expensive banquets and much wine” (NPNF 2 10:60). (TLSB)

20:2 In ancient times a king could issue the death sentence for the slightest provocation. Today’s monarchs don’t hold that kind of life-and-death power, although rulers in some totalitarian countries still have it. Yet the principle remains, that God our heavenly King wants us to respect those in authority. (PBC)

20:3 *keep aloof from strife* – He will not do this out of cowardice, but out of a godly desire for peace. (PBC)

20:4 *plow in the autumn*. Plowing fields following the harvest was important to prepare for the next planting, which occurred before the winter rains. The sluggard does not sow in due season and so reaps nothing at harvest. (TLSB)

have nothing. In a word, do your work today, get ready for the future, and then leave it all in the hands of God. (PBC)

20:5 *purpose*. Or “motives” (cf. 16:1–2). (CSB)

understanding – to-boo-naw’ – intelligence; by implication an *argument*; by extension *caprice*:—discretion, reason, skillfulness, understanding, wisdom. (QV)

draw it out. As if from a well. (CSB)

Some people may use careful language in order to keep their real intentions hidden in deep secrecy, but “a man of understanding” knows how to uncover them by probing beneath the surface of the schemer’s words. (TLSB)

A man of understanding knows human nature well enough that he can draw out from people these “deep waters.” Only the all-knowing God sees everything. He alone sees to the bottom of the waters. (PBC)

20:6 *proclaims*. Professions of loyalty to others are plentiful, but people are rarely faithful to their promises to help. (TLSB)

a faithful man who can find? Cf. Ecc 7:28–29. (CSB)

In seeking companions, we will ask God’s help. He can bring that rare person into our lives. Until He does, and afterwards, we can be sure we have the most faithful friend of all – the Lord Himself. (PBC)

20:7 *blameless life*. See note on 2:7. (CSB)

blessed are his children. Children who can observe their parents teaching and living a Christian life are doubly blessed. (PBC)

20:8 *winnows out all evil*. Ps 11:4. (CSB)

Scatters or fans in the air, the means of separating grain from the worthless chaff. Tossing both in the air allowed the breeze to carry away the lighter chaff, leaving the heavier grain to fall back to the ground and be collected. A king separates truth from falsehood, good from evil, innocent from guilty, by the examination of his eye. This proverb serves as a reminder that if standing before

such earthly authority is frightening, how much more ought we to fear the heavenly king who sees all (Ps 33:13–15)? (TLSB)

As in Bible times, in the Middle East, farmers separate the good grain from the worthless husks or chaff by winnowing. This involves using a pitchfork to throw the threshed grain into the air so that the light chaff blows away, while the heavier grain falls straight down. This verse speaks of a discerning king who watches his kingdom and can judge between the good and the evil there. King Solomon himself was known for his wisdom in judging cases brought before him. The almighty King also watches and judges. Speaking of Jesus, John the Baptist declared, “His winnowing fork is in His hand to clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:17). None escape the eye of this King, who judges all. (PBC)

20:9 *Who can say.* The self-evident answer is no one (Ap V 205–6). This confession of universal human failure to keep the heart clean of sin applies also to “a righteous man who walks in his integrity” (v 7; cf Ps 14:3. (TLSB)

pure ... clean ... from my sin. No one is without sin (cf. Job 14:4; Ro 3:23)—but those whose sins have been forgiven have “clean hands and a pure heart” (Ps 24:4; see also 51:1–2, 9–10). (CSB)

The words of David are the Christian’s constant prayer, “Create in me a pure heart, O God” (Psalm 51:10). Because of Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross, we can be sure that God answers that prayer. (PBC)

20:10 Ancient merchants might have tampered with their weights, balances, and measure to cheat the buyer. Modern businessmen might use more sophisticated means to juggle books and swindle the unsuspecting. What God hates is the sin behind such practices – dishonesty. (PBC)

A member of Emmanuel is a detective in the area of “white collar” crime. He deals with cases where there is a suspicion of financial misdeeds. He states that his division has the highest case load.

20:11 *even a child* – Already in childhood, we begin to reveal traits that remain distinguishing features of our personality throughout life. Although they do not have an adult’s understanding, children are moral creatures. They have consciences. They also are sinners, already from the time of conception and birth (Psalm 51:5). They, too, need the Savior, and by God’s grace can believe and be saved. (PBC)

The kind of character training an individual needs is apparent at an early age. Those who deny original sin are missing the witness borne by children’s selfishness, disobedience, bickering, temper tantrums, lying, and rebellion. (TLSB)

20:12 *hearing ear and the seeing eye* – All of our abilities and body members are from God our Maker. Though we often take these gifts for granted, we should reflect on them and thank the Lord. We should also use whatever gifts we have to His glory. (PBC)

Senses with which the Creator has endowed us are to make us aware of the way of life that conforms to God’s revealed will (Jer 5:21; Ezk 12:2). See SC, First Article, p xxxvi. (TLSB)

20:13 *sleep ... come to poverty.* This verse expresses a warning against sloth. It leads to poverty. Laziness is especially reprehensible if it affects not only oneself, but his family as well: “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8). (PBC)

20:14 *bad, bad!* Prices were often agreed upon by bargaining, so the buyer is questioning the quality of the article in order to buy it more cheaply. (CSB)

In the Near East, much shopping still involves bartering. This practice illustrates the human desire to get the better of others. The Lord doesn’t say we can never barter for anything. But He does not want us to cheat or take unfair advantage of others. (PBC)

when he goes away, then he boasts. Humorously reveals how buyers try to cheat sellers, devaluing the merchandise when negotiating a price, but later boasting of the bargain they made. Cheating happens on both sides of the counter. (TLSB)

20:15 *Gold ... precious jewel.* Earlier, wisdom itself was valued more highly than gold or rubies (3:14–15; 8:10–11). (CSB)

One reason precious metals and jewels are so valuable is that they are so rare. They are also beautiful, and to give them to another is a sign of love and friendship. Even more rare is a person who speaks with true knowledge. Just as there is dime store jewelry and fold’s gold, there is a lot of talk that is not genuine. We can offer a priceless gift to others if we speak wisely and share the knowledge of salvation in Jesus Christ. (PBC)

knowledge – dah'-ath knowledge:—cunning, know(-ledge), awares (wittingly).(QV)

20:16 *Take a man’s garment.* A garment could be taken as security for a debt (Dt 24:10–13). Anyone who foolishly assumes responsibility for the debt of a stranger, whose reliability is unknown, or of a wayward woman, whose unreliability is known, ought to be held accountable, even to the degree of taking his garment as a pledge. (CSB)

Clothing had much greater value in ancient times because everything had to be made by hand. The outer garment was deposited by the borrower as security for a loan (Ex 22:25–27). This proverb seems to say with subtle irony that once you have made a speculative investment with unknown foreigners, all you can do is vainly hold them to their contract, which will likely prove worthless. We should be wary of lending to those who are likely to default. What better security than to take a person’s clothing? (TLSB)

20:17 *tastes sweet to a man.* Cf. the sweet “food” prepared by the adulteress in 9:17. Zophar observes that evil is sweet in the mouth of a wicked man, but it turns sour in his stomach (Job 20:12–18). See note on 10:2. (CSB)

Warning against dishonest gain. (TLSB)

Initially, we might feel satisfaction in having gotten away with something. When we are found out, we’ll live with remorse. And even if no human rebukes us for the sin, our conscience tells us that God has seen everything. (PBC)

20:18 *counsel... guidance.* See Lk 14:31. (CSB)

When we make plans, it's wise to seek the advice of others. For military leaders to wage war without consulting their advisers would be foolhardy. (PBC)

If plans are not to go wrong, they should be reviewed by "many advisers" (15:22; 11:14). The disastrous results of an ill-advised war demonstrate the need for counsel on a large scale. (TLSB)

guidance – properly *steerage* (as a management of ropes), that is, (figuratively) *guidance* or (by implication) a *plan*:—good advice, (wise) counsels.(QV)

20:20 *curses his father or mother.* Punishable by death (see Lev 20:9; cf. Pr 30:11, 17). (CSB)

20:21 *inheritance gained hastily ... will not be blessed.* Cf. 19:26; cf. also the sad experience of the son who "squandered his wealth in wild living" (Lk 15:12–13 Prodigal Son). (CSB)

Impatience with respect to gaining riches often leads to wastefulness, poverty, and desperation. The parable of the prodigal son is a classic example (Lk 15:11–32). (TLSB)

Parents are not doing their children a favor by making things too easy for them. Valuable lessons in hard work, patience, and appreciation will not be learned. And "at the end," the inheritance won't bring the blessings that everyone had hoped it would. (PBC)

20:22 *I will repay evil.* Vengeance was God's prerogative. He would repay the wicked for their actions (see Dt 32:35; Ps 94:1). (CSB)

Vengeance belongs to God, and so God's people are counseled against private revenge (25:21–22; Dt 32:35; Rm 12:17–21). We are not thereby forbidden from reasonable self-defense or from using a godly means of redress when we are injured by another. We may serve in law enforcement, the armed forces, and as agents of the judicial process, since earthly government is God's means of punishing wrongdoers and protecting those who keep the law (Rm 13:1–5; AC XVI). (TLSB)

Wait for the LORD. See Ps 27:14; 37:34. (CSB)

God calls on us to forgive. In His own good time, He will take revenge where necessary. (PBC)

20:23 The sinful heart is always looking for loopholes. The Lord does not give us a legal system so that we can play games trying to get around this or that rule. (PBC)

20:24 By His Word, God directs the path of His people (Ps 1:1–2, 6; 119:97–105). He is not the author of sin (AC XIX), so we may not blame God for our wayward steps. Chemnitz: "The human mind, to be sure, has a residue of that gift of free choice in civil matters, but how can man see all of these things and take care that he not be deceived in his choices? Thus there is need for divine guidance and aid" (*LTh* 1:235). (TLSB)

This verse is quite profound. It reminds us that God is in control. WE make our plans. We grope around trying to figure out which way to go. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, the Lord is working out His purposes. He even uses the wickedness of men to serve His ends. The Lord knows what we are doing better than we ourselves do. And He directs our lives. For the believer this is a great source of faith and confidence. (PBC)

understand – bene A primitive root; to *separate* mentally (or *distinguish*), that is, (generally) *understand*:—attend, consider, be cunning, diligently, direct, discern, eloquent, feel, inform, instruct, have intelligence, know, look well to, mark, perceive, be prudent. (QV)

20:25 *it is a snare to say rashly.* Promise to make a special gift to the Lord if he answers an earnest request (see Lev 27:1–25; Dt 23:21; Jdg 11:30–31, 34–35; 1Sa 1:11). Sometimes such a vow was made hastily and was not carried out (cf. Ecc 5:4–6). (CSB)

In a momentary rapture of emotions, people sometimes make a rash vow in sacred things. They may find themselves caught in the predicament of being unable to pay for or do what they have pledged. *holy*. To consecrate or devote something to the Lord. *making vows*. Sacred vows should not be made hastily, since God expects us to keep them. See note, Nu 30:2. We should prepare carefully before taking vows, such as in marriage, confirmation, ordination, and in a court of law. (TLSB)

When we make promises, we should take them seriously. God does. (PBC)

20:26 *winnows...wheel.* The wheel of the threshing cart that separated the grain from the husk (cf. Isa 28:27–28). The wicked will be separated from the righteous and duly punished. (CSB)

First step in winnowing was to roll a heavy weight over the stalks of grain, separating the grain from its stalks and hulls (Jb 21:18; Ps 1:4; Is 28:27–28; Am 1:3). Lawful governments will use sound jurisprudence to separate the guilty from the innocent and apply firm judgment to punish lawbreakers. (TLSB)

20:27 *lamp of the LORD.* Perhaps his eyes (cf. 5:21; 15:3). (CSB)

searches all his innermost parts. “The breath of life” God breathed into Adam’s nostrils distinguishes humankind from all other creatures (Gn 2:7). It penetrates, illumines, and energizes every human faculty. God judges the heart and knows who are His (1Sm 16:7; 2Tm 2:19). It is a terrible prospect for God to look at our hearts, considering what lies therein (Mt 15:19; Rm 7:18). (TLSB)

It is a comfort to God’s people that He knows all our burdens and weaknesses and will be there to help. (PBC)

20:28 *steadfast love and faithfulness preserve the king.* Benevolence and kindness endear a king to his people and encourage them to be loyal subjects (cf. 3:3; 14:22; 16:12; 29:14). (CSB)

20:29 *their strength.* Cf. Jer 9:23. (CSB)

This verse declares that each age has its own glory. Yet, our greatest glory is not in our age and accomplishments, but in the Lord. (PBC)

20:30 *Blows that wound cleanse away evil.* Stern punishment is necessary to restrain evil. Several verses refer to fools whose backs are beaten (10:13; 14:3; 19:29), but even then, because they are fools, they may not change their ways (cf. 17:10; 27:22). (CSB)

In educating His adult children, the heavenly Father also resorts to “strokes” of adversity to “cleanse away evil” entrenched in “the innermost parts” of our being. (TLSB)

Yet the complete cleansing that we need from sin will never come from blows we receive. That must come completely from another source outside of us. Only the sinless Son of God, suffering in our place, could bring us that cleansing from sin. (PBC)

19:13–20:30 Children are born fools, since they are born sinful. No one should be surprised by their excesses and ill manners. Yet no one should abandon them to their sinfulness but nurture and admonish them through God's Word. God's dear Son became a fool for our sakes, pierced and lashed to rescue us from foolishness and to deliver us into the arms of our dear Father. • O Father, welcome me now—Your prodigal child—for Brother Jesus has borne the blows and strokes of my cleansing. Amen. (TLSB)