## Lesson 2-12

# The Christian and Government

##### Proverbs 16:9-17:8

###### Memorize This Week

In their hearts humans plan their course,

but the Lord establishes their steps.

Proverbs 16:9 (NIV)

This passage teaches us that over government which God has placed over us, is God Himself to whom both citizen and ruler are subject to final judgment.

## authority over us *(16:9 – 15)*

1. How do humans and the Lord interact in making plans *(16:9)?*

The “better… than” proverb of the previous verse (16:8) reminds us that the Lord may allow the wicked to enjoy ill-gotten gain before He executes his justice.

16:9 stresses that it is within the heart that plans are made. Only those plans that are approved by God will succeed.

“Steps” is an implied comparison, along with “course” to indicate the events of the plan as they work out.

1. What do you learn about government *(16:10 – 15)?*

The heavenly Lord mediates justice on earth through his wise and just king (16:10–15). These verses cohere through the keyword “king” and through the topic of living within the king’s rule.

Elsewhere *oracle* describes pagan divination and false prophecy *(16:10)*. In the ideal king, it denotes a legitimate method of reaching a verdict in legal disputes. Divination is the art of discerning the mind of the deity to do the right thing at a particular time and in a particular situation. The Spirit of God gifts the king, Solomon, to reach a swift and correct verdict.

This proverb presents a truth, but not the whole truth, and must be held in tension with other Scriptures that represent the king as an error (Judges 9:21; 2nd Samuel 12:1 – 14; Ecclesiastes 8:9). It finds its ultimate fulfillment in the Messiah (John 5:19 – 30).

16:11 The law required that scales and measures be accurate and fair (Lev 19:36; Deut 25:13). These are not to be arbitrarily fixed by each king, but have been set by God and delivered into the king’s keeping to administer fairly.

A wise person knows how to pacify the king’s wrath (16:14) through virtues such as humility (15:33), repentance and confession (28:13), renewed community loyalty (16:6), and a gentle answer (15:1; 25:15).

16:15 The early, or autumn rain, falls from mid–October to early November, and the latter, spring rain, which falls in early April, marked the beginning and end of the rainy season. The early rains prepare the ground for plowing and sewing, and the latter rain provides the last bit of moisture on which the harvest depends.

Pray About This

In a just society, would your words and actions justify the government imposing a penalty upon you?

## The better life *(16:16 – 19)*

1. What should the upright avoid, and why *(16:16–17)?*

### 16:17

The second half of the verse uses two different words for “guard.” *Shomer* is “the one who guards his life and *notser,* “preserve.” To guard one’s way preserves one’s life.

Waltke notes that, “Written and archaeological evidence indicates that an iron age Israel (1100 – 600 BC) *the highway* was the main prepared thoroughfare and normally pass by cities, not through them. Those who wish to enter the city by way of an access road “turned aside” to enter it.”

1. Why is it better to be of humble circumstances *(16:18–19)?*

The imagery of this verse depends on the contrast between “high” in the sense of *pride* and “low” in the sense of *abased* (16:18).

The “better… than” proverb *(16:19)* qualifies the preceding proverb. For the proud stumble and fall, but they may trample the oppressed underfoot.

Pray About This

When in your life did you humble yourself in your pride and began to associate with the oppressed?

## wise speakers do *(16:20 – 24)*

1. What do you observe in *16:20–24* that is characteristic of wise speakers*?*

The lowly in spirit will pay attention to the sages teaching and trust in the Lord who inspired them, and such a person will himself be recognized as wise in heart and speech. [Waltke]

Although traditionally the word “blessed” is translated “happy,” such a translation can be misleading because the word means far more than that. It describes the heavenly bliss that comes from knowing one is right with God and following God’s precepts. The “blessed” could be at odds with the world *(Psalm 1:1–3).*

The “wise of heart” reveals himself in using language that influences people for good *(16:21)*. The community will characterize this person as being “discerning.”

The idea of “sweetness” must be gracious and friendly words. The wise and heart teaches the truth winsomely and thus influences the community for good and wins its respect. The proverb is fleshed out in the life of Christ (Luke 4:22; 19:48; John 7:46).

16:22 The Hebrew noun *sekhel*, “prudence; insight”; cf. KJV, NASB, NIV “understanding”; NAB, CEV “good sense” is related to the verb that means “to have insight; to give attention to; to act circumspectly [or, prudently],” as well as “to prosper; to have success.” These words all describe the kind of wise action that will be successful.

The point of the metaphor is that like a fountain, this wisdom will be a constant provision for living in this world. Those who possess prudence become a life-giving spring that is so attractive that they “turn away” the community from folly to drink from their teachings. Christians find that Jesus Christ becomes for them a spring of water welling up to eternal life (John 4: 14).

The “discipline” (*musar*) in this proverb is essentially the punishing consequences that sin brings (hence “punishment “).

Those who are wise say wise things (16:23). The proverb uses synthetic parallelism: The first line asserts that the wise heart ensures that what is said is wise, and the second line adds that such a person increases the reception of what is said.

16:24 The metaphor of honey or the honeycomb is used elsewhere in scripture, notably Psalm 19:10. It is uniquely both sweet and a remedy. Gracious words are an instrument of healing to those hurt by the damaging speech of fools (see 4:22).

“Bones” is a metonymy of subject, the boney framework representing the whole person, body and soul. Pleasant words, like honey, will enliven and encourage the whole person (1 Samuel 14:27).

1. What are “gracious words” *(16:21, 24)?*

Gracious words are well spoken out of kindness in order to help other people who have strayed from the path of righteousness by following a way that appears to be right but is in destruction. *(Psalm 141:6)*

Pray About This

Where the words sweet and kind which turned you from the path of destruction on to the right path?

## foolish speakers *(16: 25–30)*

1. What key error to people often make, and why *(16:25–26)?*

Using solely human wisdom, a man decides a course of action that he thinks will solve his problem not recognizing that this is “the way of death” *(16:25; see 14:12).*

16:25 The word for “laborer” and “labors” emphasizes the drudgery and the agony of work. The idea of the proverb is clear—the need to eat drives people to work.

1. How do we recognize people who speak foolishly *(16:27–30)?*

16:27, 28, and 29 each begin with the Hebrew word for man (*‘ish)* before introducing a malicious person who each in their own way overturns the regulations for social order.*.*

*Scoundrel* in Hebrew is “a man of Belial.” This phrase means “wicked scoundrel.” Some translate “worthless,” but the phrase includes deep depravity and wickedness.

A *perverse* person (16:28) denotes one who overthrows God social order. The damage is done between close friends. The gossip causes problems between people who are at peace with one another.

He influences his friends toward violence *(16:29)*. The term *khamas*, “violence” often refers to sins against society, social injustices, and crimes. It denotes a cold-blooded murderer who is motivated by greed and hate and employs as his favorite instrument false accusation an unjust judgment. He has escalated from preparing evil (27), to stirring up conflict (28), to alienating a close friend (28), finally to entice his companion presumably to abet him in his crime.

The expression “a way that is not good” is an example of tapeinosis—a deliberate understatement for the sake of emphasis: It is terrible. The understatement is used to warn people away from villains and to remind them to follow a good path.

This verse (16:30) forms a proverb pair with verse 29, describing the violent person, depicting him gesturing with his eyes and mouth to his accomplice behind his victims back.

Pray About This

How good are you at spotting someone’s enticement to evil?

## a better old age *(16:31–17:8)*

1. How do you get gray hair *(16:31–17:1)?*

Instead of viewing old age as the time of physical weakness in decline, when the aged must resign their authority and hand over power to the new generation, this unit views it as a time of authority, status, and dignity symbolized by crowns *(16:31; 17:6)*.

This “better… than” proverb *(16:32)* shifts from the exalted teacher, who is to be emulated, to the disciple, reminding him that the foundation of righteousness is his ability to rule his unruly spirit when provoked.

Verse 33 adds a necessary caveat, ultimately, the Lord, not the disciple’s self-possession, rules his destiny, as is illustrated by “the lot.” The lot was a small stone used to reveal God’s selection of someone or something out of several possibilities where he kept people in the dark and desired their impartiality in the selection.

The phrase “a dry piece of bread” is like bread without butter, a morsel of bread not dipped in vinegar mix (e.g., Ruth 2:14). It represents here (17:1) a simple, humble meal.

The house is described as being full of “sacrifices of strife.” It suggests a connection with the temple (as in 7:14) in which the people may have made their sacrifices and had a large amount meat left over.

1. What insights do you gain from *17:2–8?*

In the ancient world, a servant rarely advanced beyond his station in life. There are notable exceptions, but this proverb focuses on a servant who is wise, one who uses all his abilities effectively—a Joseph figure.

The parallelism indicates that “ruling over” and “sharing in the inheritance” means that the disgraceful son will be disinherited.

The *crucible(17:3)* is used in scripture literally for refining and figuratively for the Lord’s purifying and cleansing and testing people. It is similar to *furnace* which can be used figuratively for the beneficial side of affliction (Isaiah 48:10). When the Lord “tests” human hearts, the test, whatever form it takes, is designed to improve the value of the one being tested. Evil and folly will be removed when such testing takes place.

### 17:4

The wicked person and a liar are to be avoided by all. The startling truth is that the one who listens to lies is himself a liar. The parallel line affirms that a person of this nature will eagerly listen to evil talk—it is part of his nature. Both the liar and his willing audience have no taste for truth.

### 17:5

The arrogant rich, having no sympathy for the poor person’s unfortunate situation of being without friends and financial security, regards them as an enemy he vanquished. His derisive words and mocking gestures, however, reproaches maker. The sovereign Lord made the poor, called him into existence as his image bearer (14:31; Genesis 9:6; Mark 12:16–17).

### 17:6

This verse completes what was begun in 16:31. Gray hair is not the only crown of the aged. The metaphor signifies that grandchildren are like a crown, that is, they are the “crowning glory” of life.

The noun *tif’arat* “crown” means “beauty; glory. Here it seems to be identified with “glorying; boasting”; so a rendering that children are proud of their parents would be in order. Thus, “glory of children” would be a subjective genitive, the glorying that children do.”

Godless families collapse (17:1), and godless children bring their parents shame (10:5; 17:2; 19:26). This complementary splendor proves that the family heritage is ancient, enduring, and true. Israel boasted of the renowned father, Abraham (Matthew 3:9; John 8:33). Ancient Israel regarded children as a market divine blessing and reckon them among the things that gave a man weight and influence in the community (Psalm 127:3 – 5; 128:3 – 4; 144:12 – 15), while childlessness was occurs (Jeremiah 22:30). By contrast, in the new covenant dispensation, Jesus Christ, who had no biological children, less the church to reproduce spiritually, not physically (Matthew 28:18 – 19; Luke 24:50 – 51; John 20:22; compare 15:5 – 8; 1st Corinthians 7:8 – 9, 25 – 35).

### 17:7

The word *yeter* could be rendered either “arrogant” (cf. NIV) or “excellent” (cf. KJV, NASB; NLT “eloquent”) because the basic idea of the word is “remainder; excess,” from the verb “be left over.” It describes “lofty” speech (arrogant or excellent) that is not suited for the fool. The Greek version, using *pista*, seems to support the idea of “excellent,” and makes a contrast: “words that are excellent do not fit a fool.” The idea of arrogance (NIV) fits if it is taken in the sense of lofty, heightened, or excessive language.

The “fool” proper, described by the term *naval (or nabal)*, occurs only here, in v. 21, and in 30:22 in the book. It describes someone who is godless and immoral in an overbearing way (e.g., 1 Sam 25:25; Ps 14:1). He curses God (Joe to: 9 – 10), insults him (Psalm 74:22) and his servants (39:8), and has no regard for his benefits (Deuteronomy 32:6) or judgment (2nd Samuel 3:33; 13:13; Jeremiah 17:11) because he denies that God exist to uphold a moral order (Psalm 14:1). Isaiah describes is unethical behavior against God’s image: “[He] speaks folly, his mind is busy with evil; he practices ungodliness and spreads error concerning the Lord; the hungry leaves empty, and from the thirsty withholds water” (Isaiah 32:6 – 7). A healthy society regards him as a scamp and a scoundrel (1st Samuel 25:3, 17, 25; 2nd Samuel 13:33; Job 30:8; Isaiah 32:5).

A fool should restrain his words lest his foolishness spew out.

Arrogant and pretentious speech match the pariah’s character, as Nabal demonstrated (1st Samuel 25:10 – 11).

This “ruler” (KJV, NASB “prince”; NAB “noble”) is a gentleman with a code of honor, to whom truthfulness is second nature (W. McKane, Proverbs [OTL], 507). The word describes one as “inclined, generous, noble” (BDB 622 s.v. נָדִיב). It is cognate to the word for the “free will offering.” So for such a noble person lies are not suited. The argument is from the lesser to the greater—if fools shouldn’t speak lofty things, then honorable people should not lie (or, lofty people should not speak base things).

### 17:8

A “charm” is in *Heb* “a stone of favors”; NAB, NRSV “a magic stone.” The term *shokhad*, “bribe” could be simply translated as “a gift”; but the second half of the verse says that the one who offers it is successful. At best it could be a gift that opens doors; at worst it is a bribe. The word is never used of a disinterested gift, so there is always something of the bribe in it (e.g., Ps 15:5; Isa 1:23). Here it is “a stone that brings favor,” the genitive being the effect or the result of the gift. In other words, it has magical properties and “works like a charm.”

The giver of the bribe sees it as the means of his success. It denotes a fool state of self-delusion and reliance on his own opinion. He thinks he will succeed and perverting justice, but in Proverbs this is ironic (compare 17:15). The fool’s Poulton instrument succeeds with depraved officials, but not with God and not with the wise. The lobbyist momentary success is leading him to eternal do. The law forbade bribery because it oppose God, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribe (Deuteronomy 10:17; Exodus 23:8). The Christian even invites to his table those who cannot repay him (Luke 14:12 – 14). Felix apparently failed to get a bribe out of Paul. Instead he received a message on righteousness, justice, and the judgment to come (Acts 14:24 – 26).

As C. H. Toy points out, the sage is merely affirming a point without making a comment—those who use bribery meet with widespread success (*Proverbs* [ICC], 341). This does not amount to an endorsement of bribery.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A bribe is never used of a disinterested gift but to one that adversely affects the administration of justice. This practice is a can to robbery (1st Samuel 8:3; Isaiah 33:15), used by the rich to exploit the poor (Psalm 15:5; Isaiah 5:23), and will come under God’s judgment (Job 15:34; Psalm 26:9 – 10; Micah 3:11). [W]

Pray About This

Are you living the kind of life that will make your children and grandchildren proud of you?

1. Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition Notes* (2006) Pr 17:2-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)