

Proverbs 24-02-07b

We're going to pick up our study here in Proverbs chapter 14, beginning in verse three. This is a section that extends down through verse nine, and the center of this is at verse six. So three, four, and five lead into it, and seven, eight, and nine extend from it.

To my eye, rather than there being a concentric bracket type structure to this, it is more a V that leads into it and another V that extends from it, meaning that the first verse after the center corresponds to the first verse of the whole structure. And then the middle verse, in other words, verse three and verse seven correspond, verse four and verse eight, and verse five and verse nine. So they're symmetrical in that way.

They don't reverse back out like a typical chiasm. And I think you'll see this as we look at it. Let's read it first, and then we'll note, and I like to use a pencil in my Bible.

Sometimes I even use a pen, but a pencil to circle like words, because it really draws out and emphasizes and makes visible the structure. In the mouth of a fool is a rod of pride, but the lips of the wise will preserve them. And immediately we see a change here from the preceding section that was talking about the walk, walking with the wise, lifestyle, companionship, fellowship, traveling life's road with someone, spending time in conversation, sharing meals, things like that.

This now is turning the corner and looking at speech. And Proverbs keeps moving from one area of our life to another. It can be our thought life.

It can be what's going on in our heart, our perceptions, our attitudes, our responses and reactions. Other times it is the fruit of the lips. And when you have the tongue and the lips and the rod that comes from the mouth and so on, this is conversation.

This is communication. And it is one of the signature impressions that we make as people. So in the mouth of a fool is a rod of pride, but the lips of the wise will preserve them.

And it seems a bit non sequitur, counterintuitive here, a rod that seems to be something you would beat somebody with. And then the mouth is going to have a rod of pride, but lips are going to somebody, whoever them is. Then verse four, where no oxen are, the trough is clean, but much increase comes by the strength of an ox.

That seems a bit inscrutable at first blush as well. Verse five, a faithful witness does not lie, but a false witness will utter lies. And this seems like sort of a tautology or a truism, a kind of an obvious thing.

Well, if you're a false witness, you tell lies. If you're a good witness, you tell the truth. How is this an inspired observation? Well, we'll take a look at it.

Then in verse six, this is what I would suggest is the center of this little section. A scoffer seeks wisdom and does not find it, but knowledge is easy to him who understands. Once again, everything is easy if you understand it.

It seems to me, what is this really telling me? I need to look at it more closely to figure it out. Then we come to verse seven, go from the presence of a foolish man. Now we have a tie back to our preceding section, don't we? To walk with the wise is wise, but if you shepherd fools, that's the way to destruction.

Here, go from the presence of a foolish man when you do not perceive in him the lips of knowledge. Lips of knowledge. Did I just hear something about lips and knowledge? Look how verse seven strongly goes back to verse three, the lips of the wise.

Now we've got the lips of knowledge. Lips of knowledge sounds like that would be the lips of the wise to me, right? So go from the presence of a foolish man, and in verse three, we had the mouth of a fool. So these things seem to tie back and forth, don't they? Then you come to verse eight, the wisdom of the prudent is to understand his way, but the folly of fools is deceit.

Well, interestingly, that verse eight would correspond structurally to verse four, where no oxen are, the trough is clean, but much increase comes by the strength of an ox. So I don't immediately see a connection to the wisdom of the prudent and the folly of fools, but I'll just hold that in abeyance because if the structure is inviting me to compare these, then each may cast light on the other. Finally, I come to verse nine, fools mock at sin, but among the upright, there is favor.

And that would go back to the faithful witness who doesn't lie, but the false witness that utter lies. And so, you know, the upright being a faithful witness and they're being favor and benefit versus a false witness who's going to utter lies and this mocking at sin. So this is the suggestion of the structure.

And then we would begin a new section at verse 10. So diving right in, in the mouth of a fool is a rod of pride. These are such succinct sayings and Hebrew is such a beautiful and flexible language.

There are different ways you can understand this verse. So for example, in the mouth of a fool, and this is a fool in the sense of being a self-sufficient quarrelsome mocker. It doesn't just mean devoid of knowledge or lacking experience.

It's not a problem of being a neophyte. This is a self-satisfied and arrogant fool. And in the mouth of this fool is a rod of pride.

The word for rod here means, can also mean a branch or a twig. Sometimes it's translated twig. And the normal way that this is taken, you can read Robert Alter.

He's got some wonderful translations of these. His take on the mouth of the fool here is in the mouth of the dolt is a rod of pride, but the lips of the wise will guard them. The mouth of a dolt.

And once again, dolt has the connotation that this is somebody's own fault. You're a fool at your own behest. You're not a victim.

You're not a gormless, hapless villager that just got left out of the briefing. You've made choices that have led you to this status of being a fool. But the rod and the idea here is what, a rod for the back of fools, spare the rod, spoil the child.

And that this is a rod of correction. You're beating someone with a branch. This is a switch.

The way my folks, their generation, you'd get taken out to the woodshed. What's in the woodshed? Wood. And you get a licking with a switch.

So in the mouth of a fool is a rod of pride. And so the fool is busy dispensing a kind of judgment, a kind of beating to others that is sourced in an unjustified pride. I know what's going on.

And so I'm going to beat this person verbally. You hear this a lot in politics. The rod of pride is applied by fools who don't really know what they're talking about.

Take a superficial news report and immediately draw conclusions and begin to badmouth someone and impugn their motives and their intelligence. The fool is assuming that somebody else is a fool, exposing their own foolishness. So this is a caution.

If we don't want to be a fool, then we will be very sparing and judicious in negative talk about others, especially when we are not close enough to render a valid judgment. I don't have the facts. I've gotten a second or third hand account of this happening.

I need more information before I start dispensing blows of abuse and derision and scorn on someone. But this is a mocking fool. And he feels free to take this rod of his mouth and just beat any and all comers.

And in many cases, this is trying to pull someone else down in an unconscious, subconscious effort to lift oneself up. If I were the president, I would never do that. If I were this person, if I were this fellow employee or fellow student or this other family member, whoever it may be, you know, how could they have done this? And it is weak and foolish to beat others with the verbal rod when the lips of the wise will preserve them.

Then here is the wise. The wise preserve themselves. And what this tells us is that the fool in giving out with these shallow and foolish opinions and trying to beat other people

with a verbal rod are harming themselves.

But the lips of the wise, the same wise that we saw that it's good to walk with and to learn from and to spend time with and to try to become and to be up building, building the house instead of tearing it down. These relate. You can go back to Proverbs chapter one, verse nine.

The instruction of your father and the law of your mother will be a graceful ornament on your head and chains about your neck. And these individual sections that we are seeing and identifying by their structure in this portion of Proverbs remind me of the links in a beautiful necklace or the beads in a necklace that are strung together. And they are sequenced to go together and to be appreciated the way you see Catholics and others that have something along the lines of a rosary.

And you start with a bead and you think about what that bead represents, and then you move to the next. And there is a sequence that flows from one to the other, and it's used as a memory aid and as a guide to contemplation. And there's nothing wrong with a guide to contemplation.

The merit is in what you are contemplating. The merit of faith is in the object and the value of our contemplation is in its content. And there are people who spend a great deal of time in contemplation of human sayings and distillations and ideas about how life ought to be and how Christianity ought to function.

There is no intrinsic power in those observations. They are at best applications of divine truths. The power comes into our lives through the content of the word of God.

The word of God is alive and powerful. So these are like beads. They're like links in this necklace.

We had the same thing in Proverbs 3. That was 1.9. But you can go to chapter 3, verse 21 and 22. These pieces of the Lord's wisdom, my son, let them not depart from your eyes. Keep sound wisdom and discretion.

They will be life to your soul and grace to your neck. You keep them. You string them together.

You think about them in sequence. You process them. You revisit them.

And power enters our life. The power of God comes into our life. We say, where's the power? You know, Paul complains in the middle part of Romans, you know, that wonderful section in 6, 7, and 8. And, you know, with my mind, I serve the law of God, but my flesh keeps falling into sin.

And to do well, I understand it. But the power to do it, I don't find within me. Who will

deliver me from the body of this death? But the Lord Jesus has given us the power and has pointed out the power.

Man doesn't live by bread alone. Every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. So these links in the chain, you can view these sections in Proverbs as connected and yet individually valuable.

So the mouth of a fool swings this rod of pride and it's looking at the foibles and the failures of others and beating somebody else over the head for a failure instead of looking at oneself. What does the wise do? The wise, the lips of the wise preserve them. The lips of the wise are like the man beating his chest instead of praying on the street corner saying, Lord, I thank you that I'm not like other men.

Let me beat on them with my foolish rod. Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. And speaking to myself these truths, these words of wisdom, speaking the truth with others, walking with the wise, spending time speaking these things to myself that preserves me.

What is better, to go smack somebody else with a stick or to preserve myself, to find fault with someone else or to constructively examine myself and make myself better? I can swing the stick all I want, the rod for the back of fools, even if it were legitimate, which it isn't. Every one of us has to change his own heart. So why don't I use my lips to preserve myself? Then you come to verse four, where no oxen are, the trough is clean, but much increase comes by the strength of an ox.

This is a funny, this is a funny, it's a funny saying. And it continues the idea of wisdom versus foolishness. So, where no oxen are, the trough is clean.

And the idea here is, you know, if you're really proud of having a clean barn, if you love to show somebody, show off your clean barn, that's great. And the best way to keep a clean barn, don't put any cows in it. The best way to have a slick barn, wonderful manger.

This reminds me, I've known people, I occasionally go into people's houses when I'm tuning pianos. In fact, I regularly go into people's houses while I'm tuning pianos. But there was the idea, more so in the past than now, of a formal living room.

And you live in the den. That's where the kids' toys are scattered, and the magazines are folded and stuck in the cushions. And, you know, there's corn chips in the cracks of the couch and the rest of it.

But the formal living room is a thing of beauty. You invite somebody in, they come over, this is the, you know, the people are coming for visitation from church. And so you take them in the formal living room and you sit.

And the idea is, look at what an organized, wonderful housekeeper I am. Look at the

arrangement and the color coordination and the decor and the symmetry and everything harmonizes. That's not really you, but it looks great.

This is your empty manger. What a clean barn. This is a clean operation.

But in order to make that impression, you can't have any actual cows. And so what would you rather have? What is the value of showing off your slick, clean manger and trying to impress somebody with that? What do you come away with? Somebody walks away saying, well, yep, you sure got a nice clean corn crib there. Beautiful silo you built.

It's got no grain in it, but hey, it's a cool silo. This is like having a beautiful fishing boat, but you never go fishing because you might get scales, you might ding in on the dock. So, hey, admire my boat.

It's all hat and no cattle, almost literally here. This is all crib and no cattle. Would you rather have an endeavor to show off your clean crib or would you rather have the actual cattle? Because the strength of an ox brings in abundance.

It's substance. It is genuine benefit, not perceived benefit, not good opinion, not a show off. Would you rather impress somebody with how clean the trough is or with how full the barn is because your ox went out and plowed and threshed and hauled in carts full of stuff that, you know, wheat and chaff and so on? Do you want a working farm or do you want a pretty farm is kind of the idea.

So how does that compare now using the symmetry in verse eight? The wisdom of the prudent is to understand his way, but the folly of fools is a lie. Now this this connects, doesn't it? It's foolish. You fool yourself into thinking it's important to impress people.

The folly of fools is self-deception. It's deceit. It's a lie.

The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. And I tell myself I'm going to feel better if I make a great impression, if I can gain the good opinion by showing off. And also it's real easy to keep a manger clean when there's no cattle messing it up.

A little bit of work and then I can try to make a good impression. That's the folly of a fool and it's self-deception. There's no actual value there where the wisdom of the prudent is to understand his way.

Wow. This is a powerful verse. We've been talking about walking with the wise, about the wise woman who builds her house, about the importance and the centrality and the value of wisdom.

The wisdom of the prudent is to understand his own way, not to go beat somebody else with the rod of my mouth. To understand my way. Have my lips preserve me.

Oh Lord, set a watch on my mouth, keep the door of my lips. I know the tongue is a flaming fire and it is set on fire by the flames of hell. Let me bridle that tongue and bring my whole body into subjection.

Let me understand my way. Again, Psalm 51 is the long version of this idea. Let God expose the inner man of the heart.

Try me, see if there'd be any wicked way in me, purge me with hyssop, clean me, wash me so that I can be whiter than snow. The wisdom of the prudent is to understand his own way. So I know what foolishness looks like.

It's described over and over in this section of Proverbs. I know what folly looks like. To understand my own way, to take these chain links and apply them to myself, to take a hard look at my day and how I spend my time.

If you want to know what you love, look at where you spend your time. If you want to know your priorities and your goals and your values, look at where you invest your time. Redeeming the time because the days left to themselves are evil.

So how do I invest this capital, this unreturnable, unrecoverable asset of time? Second by second, minute by minute, it comes to me. What do I do with it? Do I vegetate it away? Am I just waiting to get to the end? I was sitting in a waiting room earlier this week and I was very impressed with the efficiency of the facility to which I went. I got there, checked in at the window and said, hi there, I'm Sam.

This is what I need. Before my bottom hit the chair in the waiting room, there was somebody calling my name to come back and get my blood pressure taken and my vitals and to get kind of signed in. Did that, see that room at the end of this corridor? Go sit there.

So thank you very much. Went down and sat and I mean within a minute and a half, somebody was in there getting on with it. What's the problem? All right, here's what I think.

We're going to get x-rays. We're going to get you some pain medicine. Clip, clip, clip, clip, clip.

So I'm there. The doctor leaves within less than two minutes. Lady comes, hop in this wheelchair.

I'm taking you down for an x-ray. Get all these x-rays, wheel me back into the room. Somebody's going to be coming shortly with the pain medicine.

I mean, minute and a half later, here comes somebody. Well, it's a hip pocket shot. I haven't had one of those in a while.

Last time I had one of those, it was gamma globulin. It made a lump the size of a golf ball and I had to sit on it all the way to Europe. Got that thing and so then I sit in the waiting room and then just nothing happened.

Minutes go by, five minutes, 10 minutes, 15 minutes, 20 minutes. I'm thinking they're looking at the x-rays. What's going on? So how can I use this time? I'm in a room, I'm kind of waiting.

So this as sands in the hourglass, these are the days of your lives. These are the minutes, these are the seconds. What can I do with this time? I'm in a room, I read all the charts, read the signs, looked at the small, medium and large nitrile gloves.

I mean, you can find ways to entertain yourself. I thought, that's a lot of gloves. They have got a ton of gloves in here.

Everything is stocked to the nines. I looked at the state of the walls, speculated on how nicely they'd pay. I mean, you can do things, but pretty soon I thought, well, what did I bring in with me? I haven't got a book, but what have I got in my soul? What can I review? What have I been studying lately? Pull up my mental copy of this section of Proverbs and thinking about it, going over it.

Here's the point. There is never a time that we can't productively use our time. Sometimes you think you're just going down a rabbit trail, but for somebody like me, sometimes those rabbit trails provide illustrations.

I was thinking, boy, fast, fast, fast, fast, fast, fast, stop. This appointment couldn't have gone better and now I'm at a complete dead stop. So much so that I eventually just put my jacket on, walked to the front.

I said, you know, I think they must be waiting on these x-rays. And she looked at the chart and said, yeah, there's still two of them that are out. I said, well, is there any reason for me to stick around? Can I just go? And she said, yeah.

I said, if anything comes up in the x-ray, they'll call me, right? If it's something out of the ordinary. Oh yeah, they'll call you. Great.

Thanks so much. Adios. Ocio.

You know, out I go. And it was great. One of the best health appointments I've ever had.

But we have to take charge of our time and decide when we're being good stewards of it. And when it's time to do something different, because it is an asset given to us by God. It is a direct gift from God, not to be frittered away, not to be wasted.

Nothing wrong with entertainment, nothing wrong with relaxation, but to what extent in what proportion for how long is there really nothing better that I could be doing than

bubble gum for the brain, chewing gum for the mind here? Because I'm not getting these minutes back. And the older you get, the more you think, wow, I've got far less of these left than I had when I entered the game. How am I going to spend what's left? And are we waiting for something to be over? Are we just, well, let me just, if I could just make the time pass, that is not good stewardship.

God didn't give us time to figure out creative ways to waste it. It's given to us for a purpose. You are not your own.

You are bought with a price. Therefore glorify God in your body. You're not your own.

Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ, do laws. This is the same word people say, oh, he's just, he just means, you know, something innocuous. This is the same word that says that we no longer be slaves to sin.

This is an abject in control of by a master slave. It's not servant. It's not, you know, a wonderful dignified position.

It's slave, slave of Jesus Christ. What does a slave do? Work in the field all day, come in, make the master's dinner and say, I don't get to pat myself on the back. What have I done that was not required of me? I'm a slave.

I live to serve. I live to do the master's bidding. It's all about the master, not about me.

There's a reason why slavery is not condemned in the Bible, because it is a picture from which we should learn, not something to be shocked and horrified by and, and forget why it's there. So these concepts count verse five and nine go together. A faithful witness does not lie.

A false witness will utter lies. We are here to witness to the son of God, to the Lord Jesus Christ. We are his body, his personal presence and incarnational witness is complete.

Now we are the presence and the incarnational witness. Well, are we a true witness or are we a lying witness? Do we represent what a body of Christ faithful believer is supposed to look like or not? What does scripture say? A faithful witness does not lie, does not deceive, does not bear false witness. So much of formal self-identified Christianity today is bearing false witness to the Lord Jesus Christ.

That is a lie. That is not the plan and purpose of God. It isn't God's goals, values, and priorities.

It does not reflect the glory of the Lord Jesus. Many will come in that day saying, I am he, Jesus warned, saying, I am the Christ, saying Jesus is the Christ. And they will deceive many.

They will bear false witness to the Christ they claim to be promoting. It's a false witness.

Do we want to get to the judgment seat of Christ and be called out and judged as a false witness? I don't.

But the world is looking at Sam. This is what we've been seeing in 1 Timothy, isn't it? The world is looking at us. So when we stand up to pray, what are we saying about the government? Are we saying we should be agents of social and political change? We should be the moral majority.

We should be out there influencing the culture for Christ. Is that a true witness or a false witness? Is that the message of the New Testament? Does the Lord Jesus sponsor and call for and encourage his disciples to perpetrate social and political change? Did he send them to picket? Did he send them to carry signs? Did he send them to call out injustices of the Roman government? Did he himself do any of that? You've got to look far and wide to find Jesus even mentioning Herod's name. And when he does call out Herod, tell that fox, it's a cryptic reference.

He is standing in front of Pontius Pilate. How many wrongs and ills of the Roman Empire could the Lord Jesus, I'm finally here. Didn't I tell my disciples that when you stand before kings, it will be given to you what to say? What did Jesus say when he had the chance to call out all of the ills and evils of the Roman Empire? For this cause came I into the world, to bear witness to the truth.

Bear witness, tell the truth. It has ever been the calling of the people of God, Old Testament and new. Look at what it says.

A faithful witness does not lie. A false witness will utter lies, casually, repeatedly, as a pattern. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer.

We are witnesses. That's why we're here. Is our life and our conversation a lie or does it bear witness to the truth? Jesus said that was the reason he came into the world.

He left and put us here. So what's our purpose? To bear witness to the truth. And you see this parallel in this structure to verse 9. Fools mock at sin.

I'm not going to bear witness to the truth. I'm going to mock sin. I'm going to call out stooges and perpetrators and politicians and celebrities and bad actors.

Fools mock at sin. I'm going to call out sin wherever I find it and I'm just going to mock it. Where are we called anywhere in Scripture to be mockers of sin? We don't even make a railing accusation against Satan himself.

The Lord rebuke you. The Lord call out sin. That's the ministry of God's Holy Spirit is to convict the world of sin.

It's not my job to convict the world of sin, to mock sin and sinners. This is back to the rod of the mouth that fools try to use. Among the upright, favor.

What's our memory verse about whatsoever things are pure, right, noble, lovely, of good report. Think on these things, speak on these things, and the peace of God that passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. You will be back to that place where the wise dwell, where the blessings come, where the reward to those who are pursuing righteousness comes.

It is so easy to join in, to pile on, to be caught up and sucked into the abuse, the derision, the bitter, acrimonious, hateful speech that characterizes so much of the world today. Mocking and even your allegedly conservative news outlets pride themselves. Some of their most popular hosts and opinion purveyors are mockers and vindictive and spiteful and cheap shot takers.

I don't need that. I don't want that. I don't want to be sucked into it.

I don't want to be conditioned by it. I don't want to become tolerant of it. A mocking, derisive, abusive attitude, even when it is towards sin, is the part of a fool.

It's not helpful. It doesn't change anything. Change is in me.

That's where I have the power for change. God has granted it to me. He has graciously imparted his spirit and given me access to his word.

If I want to make productive change, right here is where it happens. So, and interestingly, these are Old Testament witnesses to these timeless truths. It has always been this way.

It has always been the part of wisdom to tend to our own knitting, to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, instead of hopelessly trying to transform the world through calling out evil and mocking sin and, you know, quote unquote, being prophetic. You can't be a prophet when you yourself aren't qualified to prophesy. That prophecy needs to be applied to me, myself, and I. I've got lumber removal as a full-time project.

I've got no business hanging out a shingle for moats. And it is a timeless truth. God resists the proud.

So I don't want to be proud. God gives grace to the humble. So I want to cultivate humility.

And there's nothing like taking an honest look at myself to proliferate humility. I have a lot to be humble about. I have a kingdom of stuff that will keep me humble.

All I have to do is take a good look at me. Humility will flow like rivers. And that is exactly what God needs from us, is humility, because he can give more grace.

He gives more grace. And where sin abounded, grace much more abounded, Paul says. Well, I say, bring on the abounding grace, amazing grace for a wretch like me.

And in our weakness, God's strength is made manifest. And as long as I recognize my weakness and go to the fountain of living waters and let God do what God does, the glory is God's. The plan is God's.

The purpose and the fulfillment is God's. And we are vessels of honor. The great thing about a vessel is not the vessel, it's what's in it.

And if we become a vessel of honor, God can pour his power and his grace, his treasure into even the earthen vessel. We have this treasure in earthen vessels. It's about the treasure, not the vessel, right? Well, that's what we begin to see when we respect the structure of these proverbs, put them together, let them illuminate and interpret each other.

And what do we find right in the center? In verse six, a scoffer seeks wisdom and it says does not find it. This is the very same structure we had before. It's just ain, as in ain't.

A scoffer seeks wisdom and there ain't. No hay, they say in Spanish. N-O-H-A-Y.

No hay agua. No hay nada. Ain means there ain't.

He seeks it and it's not there. But knowledge is easy to him who understands. Understands what? Not understands the knowledge, that would be self-referential, would be circular.

To him who understands how important it is, what it is, where it is, and takes the time to invest in it. That's the key. That's the center.

All of these other, and if you look at this and think about that central idea in the light of these other V-shaped sayings, they all impinge, they all connect. And it's practical. This is what I can do tonight.

This is what I can do tomorrow. Remember our self-set task of taking one or two truths of the word of God, waking up in the morning with them, revisiting them partway through the day and reviewing them and visiting them again in the evening. We need to do that.

I know many of you already do this and you know what I'm talking about. You know the value, how just a little of the word of God has that nuclear power to transform hours and hours of the day. A little leaven leavens the whole lump, a little unconfessed sin, a little failure to examine ourselves and see if we're in the faith.

But by the same token, a little bit of the word of God in the hands of the Holy Spirit makes us greater than he that is in the world and those who follow him in this world and the systems and the machinations of the principalities and powers. It's all about what we

focus on, what we choose. It's made so clear in this section.

Well, that is Proverbs chapter 14 down to verse 9. We'll pick up at verse 10 next time. We'll close here in a word of prayer. Father, thank you that you guide us and lead us as a faithful and loving Father with instruction, with guidance, with rebuke and correction.

We pray that we can take these wonderful truths and principles on board, that your Holy Spirit will impress them on our hearts in such a way that they make a difference in how we think and live in the days ahead so that our lives can reflect your glory and the glory of the Lord Jesus. We ask it in his name. Amen.