

## 9.

## VII. SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS IS VANITY

### Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:29

#### Introduction (6:10-12):

1. *Whatever it is that comes, its name already has been called, and what a man [will be] is known (6:10-11),*
  - a. *So he is not able to judge like the One who [is] stronger than he (6:10c).*
  - b. *Wherever words increase, vanity increases. What benefit is that to the man (6:11),*
2. *Because who knows what is good for the man during his life (6:12),*
  - a. *[During] the number of the days of his life of vanity, while he passes through like a shadow (6:12a)?*
  - b. *Because who will tell the man what will come after him under the sun (6:12b)?*

Many commentators have sought to connect these verses with the previous section, but they fit much more logically with the section that follows. They are an introduction to the section that follows, which discusses another topic that is vanity. That topic is righteousness that is obtained by one's own effort. Solomon introduced that subject by stressing man's inadequacy. Human inadequacy makes people unable to know what righteousness is, much less how to practice it. Solomon pointed to two ways in which people are inadequate.

**Verses 10-11. No one is able to see the future, as God does.** The first inadequacy of people that Solomon pointed out was their inability to see into the future. Though all major English versions translate this verse to say that what exists in the present was known before it happened, that statement contains little meaningful information. Because someone in the past knew an event was going to happen before it occurred does not provide any help to a person in the present. The sentence is capable of being translated in a much more meaningful way. Because Hebrew verbs do not contain time significance, it is just as accurate to translate the statement in future tense, by which it declares that what is coming in the future is known already. That statement is much more impressive and significant. The One who can see what is coming in the future is God, so Solomon was pointing out that God knows what a person will do before he does it. Because God knows the future, He is much stronger and wiser than people are.

The importance of that statement is that, since man cannot see the future, he not able to judge right or wrong like the One who is stronger than he is who is God. Because people cannot see into the end result of their actions, they cannot judge what is right wrong. Since they cannot determine what is right and wrong, they certainly cannot live righteous lives, without God to show them the way.

Solomon followed his statement about human inadequacy by saying a lot of words only produce vanity. He meant, when a person is incapable, much talk will not take his inability away. Many times, when a person realizes he is inadequate or uninformed, he tries to cover up his lack by talking a great deal. He intends for his long speech to sound intellectual and informed. Instead, it produces vanity, because people quickly recognize his predicament. So what benefit does he gain from all his empty words? What good is it for people to talk a lot about right and wrong when they really do not know what they are talking about?

**Verse 12. No one knows what is right for him to do during his lifetime.** The second inadequacy of people that Solomon mentioned was their inability to know what is right for them to do during their lifetimes. A person's life is just a number of days filled with vanity, so how can he know what is right for him to do? He is just passing through his life like a shadow. His life is as unstable and insecure as a shadow, so he certainly cannot know with certainty what is the right action for him to take in any given situation. The only way a person

might be able to judge what is right for him to do while he is still living is if he could know what the outcome of his actions will be after he is gone. No man has that knowledge, so he is left uncertain about what is right for him to do. Therefore, knowing how to do right and how to achieve righteousness is beyond his grasp.

Solomon's reason for pointing out these two inadequacies in people was to form a foundation for

### A. PROVERBS ABOUT SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS (7:1-29)

To prove his point, Solomon quoted a list of proverbs about becoming righteous. He was intimately acquainted with the method wise men used in that day to communicate and teach about righteousness. Their method was to speak or write short sayings about righteousness, which we call "proverbs." 1 Kings 4:32 says Solomon wrote 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs. He included many of his proverbs in the Book of Proverbs. The best of his songs, *The Song of Solomon*, is also included in the Bible. Out of his vast knowledge about the proverbs of the wise men, he selected seventeen for inclusion in this section of the Book of Ecclesiastes. His purpose was to show that wise sayings or even following the advice contained in wise sayings does not make a person righteous. That effort also is a vain enterprise.

Solomon would never have said that studying and the proverbs of the wise men or practicing what the proverbs taught was evil or worthless. He considered them to be so valuable that he spent years writing and gathering them, but his extensive study of them had shown him that they do not enable a person to become truly righteous. They are inadequate because they describe aspects of righteousness but do not provide the power to follow all their good advice.

The proverbs Solomon listed in this chapter should not be understood as statements that develop Solomon's theme for his book. They only contribute to his theme by being examples of wise advice about how to be righteous that is good but inadequate. They help a person understand how to be better, but they do not produce righteousness.

discussing another topic that was vanity. That topic was achieving righteousness through one's own effort. The seventh area he discussed was self-righteousness, not in the sense of pride but in the sense of making one's own self-righteousness. He declared that self-righteousness was another vanity because it could not be achieved.

Those who understand the proverbs in this chapter to be a means Solomon used to develop the theme for his book end up concluding that the Book of Ecclesiastes has no central message. They see the book as a disjointed collection of unrelated insights into many topics. That conclusion is severely erroneous. The theme of the Book of Ecclesiastes is that all human insight and activity is vanity. The book sticks to that theme throughout. This section of the book continues that theme by emphasizing that studying and following good advice turns out to be just one more of those vanities.

Each of the proverbs Solomon listed will be briefly discussed below, not because they prove Solomon's theme, but because they are examples of the type of goodness that in the end proves to be just one more vanity. The type of righteousness he talked about was self-righteousness, achieved by one's own effort. Self-attained righteousness is vanity because it is not true righteousness.

The proverbs Solomon listed in this section of his book have the potential of being enlarged and elaborated on at great length. Proverbs are seed thoughts from which a whole crop of helpful insights can grow, and it is hardly possible to exhaust the treasure trove of advice contained in the seventeen proverbs Solomon quoted. Therefore, the following comments on those seventeen proverbs are not intended to exhaust the meaning of those proverbs but to identify the basic truth each contains. After taking note of the truth contained in each of the proverbs, it is easy to agree with Solomon's point that, as good and useful as s are,

they do not empower a person to live a truly good life.

Solomon expressed in his own way a truth that is strongly emphasized in the New Testament, which is that everyone is a sinner and no one can become righteous by his own efforts. Everyone is a sinner and cannot change what he is by his own effort. Righteousness does not come from human knowledge or human effort. Righteousness is a gift that God bestows on those who trust in Him.

Solomon saved his statement about what can enable a person to be righteous until the end of his book, but it helps to understand the reason Solomon stressed the inadequacy of self-righteousness by looking forward to the concluding words of his book. His eternal and infallible conclusion about

*1. A good name is better than ointment, and the day of death than the day of one's birth (7:1).*

This proverb contains two comparisons that point to two values that are better than two others, but it does not talk about what is best. It illustrates one of the weaknesses of proverbs about righteousness. They point to better ways, but they do not define the best way.

The first comparison in this proverb is that a good name is preferable to a soothing ointment. A good name means having a reputation for being honest, good, kind, courteous, productive, or generous. Earning a good name requires hard work, sacrifice, and pain; and many people find the effort too high a price to pay. The same people would be pleased, even excited, to receive a soothing skin cream after being sunburned or after being scraped by a rough object, or they would be pleased to use a perfumed cream after a warm bath. However, the cream brings satisfaction only temporarily and soon washes away. A good reputation does not fade away. Instead, it spreads widely. It attracts business for a store, friends for an individual, admiration for a student, and a strong defense for one who is falsely accused. A pleasing ointment is good, but a good name brings advantages many times greater. This proverb advises people to put their emphasis on the better of two beneficial choices. The better of the two is a good reputation.

what will enable a person to be righteous is recorded in Ecclesiastes 12:13, “. . . *fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the all-in-all for mankind.*” At this point, Solomon is leading up to that conclusion by emphasizing that human effort to achieve righteousness is just another vanity. He is building a tension that will cause the reader to begin to cry out to know what is valid and trustworthy. When he becomes convinced that everything he can do for himself will end up inadequate, in desperation he will cry out for someone to tell him what can make him truly righteous.

With that perspective in mind, a discussion of each of the proverbs about righteousness that Solomon quoted is given below.

The second comparison in this parable is more difficult to understand. Solomon said the day a person dies is better than the day he is born. That statement is backwards from the way people think. People rejoice, celebrate, and send announcements far and wide when a new baby is born. Their feelings are exactly the opposite when a family member or friend dies. They cry over the loss. They feel depressed and lonely. They worry about what is going to happen to them without the person who is gone. People much prefer hearing about a birth than about a death. But Solomon points to another side to both situations. A baby is born into a troubled world. Growing up, studying in school, training for work, paying bills, and experiencing illnesses, misunderstandings, betrayals, and disappointments all lie ahead for every new-born baby. No baby ever born has ever been able to escape those problems completely. Solomon was right that it is appropriate to cry for a baby when it is born because of the suffering, stress, and sorrow that baby inevitably is going to experience in its life. By contrast, the person who dies is free of all his struggles. He leaves his worries and debts to others. His days of suffering on earth are ended. His loved ones and his friends should rejoice for him and be glad.

To be sure, from the viewpoint of eternity, if the person who dies rejected God as His Savior throughout his life, he faces even worse suffering in hell than it is possible to suffer in this life. However, if he trusted Jesus as his Savior, he will never suffer again and will live forever in peace and prosperity. So death for a believer is a time to rejoice. Death for a believer ends suffering and begins a life of righteousness, peace, and plenty forever. A funeral for a believing friend is a time to laugh and be glad.

The proverb Solomon quoted faced birth and death only from the viewpoint of the person's earthly condition. From that perspective, a baby's birth is the beginning of a lifetime of troubles, but a person's death ends all of his earthly troubles.

- 2. *Going to a house of mourning is better than going to a house of feasting (7:2),***  
***(1) Because that is the end of all men (7:2b),***  
***(2) And the living one should keep it in his heart (7:2c).***

This proverb is another statement about the better of two choices. Like the previous proverb, it has the weakness of not dealing with ultimate righteousness or with the way to obtain it. It only deals the better of two limited choices.

The two choices are accepting an invitation to go to a banquet at someone's house or going to a house where someone has died. Given a choice, who would not prefer to go to a house party than to a house where a family is mourning the death of a loved one? As strange as it sounds, however, this proverb says that going to the house of mourning is the better choice. When a person goes a house where people are suffering so he can comfort them, he provides help and encouragement to people in genuine need and he gains appreciation from them and from others. His concern for others also makes people want to help him when his time of need comes. Ministry to others builds character for the one ministering and gives comfort to the persons who are ministered to. Satisfaction that comes from

- 3. *Sorrow is better than laughter, because through a sad face a heart becomes glad (7:3).***

This third proverb is another that deals with the better of two alternatives. It does not deal with what is best or with what constitutes true

From that point of view a baby's birth should be a time to cry, and a person's death should be a time to laugh.

From an earthly perspective, both preferences recommended by this are correct; but the proverb does not deal with the basic meaning of righteousness, and it does not tell how to achieve it. From a believer's point of view, if a person is righteous through faith in God, the proverbs provide tremendously helpful advice about how to live out the righteousness he received as a gift from God. However, if a person has not found righteousness through faith, all the proverbs ever written will never make him righteous. Self-righteousness is a failure. It is vanity.

giving encouragement to a person facing sadness or rescue to a person facing danger gives more deep-down satisfaction to the one doing the ministering than a time of fun ever will.

The proverb concentrates on an even more important benefit that comes from going to a house where someone has died. That benefit is that it reminds the one ministering that he too will end in the same way. Everyone needs to keep in mind that he too is going to die, so he will prepare for his death by trusting God and obeying His commands. Going to a house of death reminds the one who goes there that he needs to get ready for his coming death, whereas partying makes a person forget that his death is coming and that he needs to prepare for it. If a person spends too much of his time in partying, he will come to the day of his death unprepared, and he will face a tragic eternity. Therefore, going to a house where someone has died brings more benefit than going to a banquet.

righteousness. It does, however, point out another surprising contrast. It says that sorrow is better than laughter because sadness produces a glad heart.

The way that sadness produces gladness is that people are discontent with sadness and want to make changes that will remove the sadness. Sorrow is actually productive because it motivates a person to make improvement. When a person works at making improvement, he soon makes the needed changes, and then everyone involved is glad.

Sadness over sickness makes a person seek a doctor, a nurse, a hospital, or a medicine. More often than not he gets well or better, and then he and his loved ones are glad. Sadness over lost income makes a man seek a new job or a way to start a new business. He works at it, succeeds, and then his friends rejoice with him. Sadness over a lost pet makes a person want another pet. He finds one that meets his interests, and then he is glad. A biting sermon may upset a person or even offend him, but often it can pierce through the hardness of someone's heart and bring him to God for salvation. The result will be gladness for everyone who hears of the change in his heart and life. Conviction of sin first produces sorrow, but then it produces

***4. The heart of the wise ones is in a house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of merriment (7:4).***

The fourth proverb Solomon quoted deals with contrasting places where the hearts of two different types of people seek to be. Like the previous proverbs, it does not define genuine righteousness or tell a person how to get it.

To the Hebrews, the heart meant the organs that are involved in a person's emotions and reasoning. A person's feelings and thoughts determined where he wants to go and what he wants to do. A wise person's heart will make him feel concern for those who are in sorrow. It will influence him to think about those who are unfortunate and about those who are lost in sin. Then he will go to them to minister and to witness, and many of them will be drawn to God. The wise person's heart not only will lead him to actions that will bring uplift to the hurting but also will bring a sense of worth to the person himself. It will result in good will to him from others and a feeling of self-worth to himself.

On the other hand, a foolish person's heart makes him be drawn to places of merriment,

repentance, forgiveness, correction, righteousness, and genuine inner joy. His friends and family rejoice. Even the angels in heaven rejoice with him.

Laughter produces the opposite effect. It makes a person feel so good he wants conditions to remain as they are so he can laugh again. Who wants to change something that makes him feel good? So laughter causes a person to seek after laughing again, and he spends little time in making his life or the lives of people about him better. Comedy draws people to television when they should be in church. A church party may draw people to a church's fellowship hall, but it seldom leads a person to salvation. Jokes in the pulpit draw people to the pews, but they do not draw people to repentance. Too much time spent in laughter makes a person unproductive.

Solomon was right. When it comes to producing beneficial results, sorrow is better than laughter.

entertainment, fun, and partying. The tone of the party may be coarse, crude, scatological, or even obscene, or it could be gossipy, scornful, disdainful, or sarcastic. Still again it might be a friendly fellowship with refreshments and talk about funny experiences or pleasurable moments. In any case, it is all for pleasure, a way to spend time with jokes and fun and no thought of benefit or learning or improvement or service. The person with a heart that leads him to spend too much time in merriment is foolish, because he puts his major emphasis on activities that produce no good. When the moments of fun are gone, he is no better than he was before. He spent empty hours that left no good benefit behind. Merriment is fleeting and temporary. When the laughter is over, nothing remains. The person who lives for merriment has to hasten to party again, because the entertainment has left nothing behind to sustain him.

The person with a heart that reaches out for cheap entertainment, coarse activities, degrading shows, and belly laughs is especially foolish. He

spends his time not only in activities that produce no benefit but that actually do harm to his life. His life stands still or falls backward into uselessness.

In the modern day, the wisdom or foolishness of a person's heart is most easily measured by the television channels he chooses as his favorites. Are

they Comedy Central, sports channels, stand-up entertainment, or maybe even pornography? Or are his favorite channels those that present genuine learning opportunities, beneficial advice, dependable news, or better still the gospel truth? The foolish heart chooses the easy way. The wise heart chooses the productive way.

- 5. *To hear rebuke from a wise one is better than for a man to hear a song from fools (7:5-6).***  
**a. *For the laughter of fools is like the crackling of thorns under a pot (7:6a).***  
**b. *This also is futility (7:6b).***

This proverb also is about two choices, one that is wise and the other that is foolish, but it still does not deal with the source of righteousness or the power to achieve it.

The choice this proverb deals with is taking heed to the rebuke of a wise friend or listening to the silly songs of the foolish. Solomon said the wise choice is willingness to listen to a loving rebuke or even to seek it out.

Inside every person is a desire to be right, even to be the best. A person feels disappointed and defeated when he make a mistake, especially when his mistake is exposed to someone else. To avoid such embarrassment, people love to go where there is singing and laughing and no one cares what they do. Sadly when they go there, they have no incentive to improve and no inclination to do better. The lighthearted laughter hides their weaknesses, but it leaves them unimproved.

From that point of view, the empty laughter of foolish men who only seek to celebrate and dance

sounds like the crackling of the branches of thorn bush burning under a pot. They make a lot of noise and sound good, but they do not make enough heat to warm the pot or cook its contents. Foolish laughter produces nothing good.

People who want to do what is right and to strengthen their lives prefer to spend time with those who tell them honestly about their mistakes and offer a suggestion of how to correct them. An enemy notices a person's mistakes and gossips about them. A friend notices a person's mistakes and helps him correct them. A person will be embarrassed when someone shows him what he was doing wrong, but in the long run his embarrassment will be much less if he acknowledges the mistake and corrects it. Then he will not have to be embarrassed again from repeating the mistake. Soon he will hear compliments instead of rebukes.

Listening to a person who tactfully shows a person how to correct an error is a far better and more profitable experience than the senseless chatter of a happy but meaningless song.

- 6. *Surely oppression makes the wise one foolish, and a bribe corrupts the heart (7:7).***

This proverb deals with two actions that are both foolish and wrong, but it does not deal with the right actions or how to practice them. The two actions it says are foolish are oppressing others and taking or giving a bribe.

A man is considered to be wise when his deeds are successful and produce results. However, because a person is wise in making investments or earning money does not guarantee he will be wise in all his dealings. Often his success in business

opens up opportunities for him to have influence and power over others. His authority may lead him to oppress or take advantage of others. If his oppression of others continues, it will lead eventually to his downfall.

Many a person is wise in his relationships with others until he becomes a supervisor. Then he becomes inconsiderate, makes unreasonable demands, denies adequate pay, never gives a compliment, and reprimands workers in the

presence of others. The result of that kind of management is that workers feel unappreciated, have little motive to do their best, and begin to neglect their work. The supervisor will likely become angry and give harsh reprimands until the workers begin to seek employment elsewhere. When one resigns to take another position, the supervisor may be heard to say, "He used to be such a good worker, I don't know what happened to him." The supervisor is foolish because he is not aware that he was the cause of the worker's discontent and departure. Sadly his wisdom turned into foolish actions and caused him great loss.

Oppressive actions or unfair criticisms of an employee, a student, or a neighbor are counterproductive and foolish. Oppressive laws or oppressive actions of a government official toward a citizen break down law and order and lead nations

into decline and fall. Oppressive demands or criticisms of a spouse or a child turn a happy home into a prison and lead to violence or divorce. A wise person will renounce oppression and replace it with encouragement.

Another way a wise man can be drawn into foolish actions is through yielding to the temptation of bribery. Whether a person seeks to gain by giving a bribe or by taking a bribe, he is foolish. It certainly will be discovered. Those who were cheated because of the bribe will resent him. The one who gained by the bribe will depend on the bribe for protection and will not be motivated to do a good job. Relationships will deteriorate, and both the person who took the bribe and the person who gave the bribe will have harmed everyone. The person who thinks he can gain by a dishonest deal is involved in true foolishness.

### **7. The end of a word is better than its beginning; the patient one in spirit is better than the haughty one in spirit (7:8).**

This proverb discusses two actions that are superior to two contrasting actions. They provide good advice, but they do not provide a way to become truly righteous.

The first contrast is between a promise made and a promise kept. When a promise is made, it sounds good and gives great hope; but if it is not kept, it leads to disappointment and distrust. The one who makes unfulfilled promises is not trusted any more, and the one who depended on promises that are not kept feels deserted and mistreated. Therefore, a word spoken gives hope, but a word fulfilled gives confidence and trust. Not what a person promises but how he fulfills his promises reveals his character.

The Hebrews used the word "word" in a variety of ways. They often used it to refer to a person's actions or work. So this proverb can be accurately translated, "The end of a deed is better than its beginning." When translated in that manner, it teaches the same truth. How a person finishes a job tells much more about the kind of workman he is than how he begins a job. A person can begin with care and skill but finish with carelessness and sloppiness, or he can begin with caution and end

with accuracy. Whether the task is cooking a meal, cleaning a room, building a fence, constructing a house, keeping a set of books, driving a truck, or pastoring a church, the test of a person's work is not how enthusiastically he begins but how accurately he finishes a job. Dependability and consistency are the marks of a good worker.

The second half of this proverb relates to attitudes a person can have toward his work. Some work with patience and humility. Others work with pride, selfishness, and disdain for others. The former makes a good worker. The latter makes for an isolated and resented worker. Patient and considerate workers build a team that accomplishes far more than the sum of the workers individually. Everyone is benefited. Haughty and selfish workers build resentment and competition. Workers begin to undermine each other, and the result is decreased productivity and increased dissatisfaction. Everyone is harmed. That principal applies in a school, a home, a business, a ball team, or a governmental bureau. In every kind of relationship, a person benefits himself when he is considerate of others, but he hurts himself when he is disdainful of others.

**8. *Do not be quick to be angry in your spirit, for anger rests in the chest of fools (7:9).***

This proverb is the first among those Solomon listed that is a direct warning against a particular sin, but it makes no mention of a positive righteous quality that might replace it.

The proverb does contain wise counsel, because it warns that anger is a foolish activity. It gives two kernels of advice about anger. Do not get angry quickly, and do not hold on to anger. Slow to anger and quick to forgive are twin attitudes that avoid magnifying a problem and contribute to a solution.

How well a person handles anger is a good test of his character. Nowhere does God instruct people to never be angry. At times anger is appropriate, and in some circumstances it would be heartless not to be angry. A person is right to be angry when he sees a child abused or when he learns that an elderly neighbor has been tricked out of a large sum of money or when he reads that a young woman was raped and robbed or when he is told that a politician used his position to enrich himself illegally. God Himself becomes angry, even wrathful, over such actions; and it is entirely right for God's children to be angered by that which angers God.

While anger is a legitimate function on some occasions, runaway anger is extremely dangerous. It can cause a person to make rash decisions and heartless actions. It can arouse lasting resentments. It can result in unnecessary injury. Therefore, anger, like every other powerful tool, must be kept under careful control. God does not release His anger until He has exhausted His mercy. When a person is following God's example, he will not allow himself to become angry only as a last resort.

Anger should not be released until the person is sure he has the correct information about the situation that disturbed him. Anger should be expressed only for serious offenses and not for

trivial accidents. Scars from unjust anger do not heal easily, so before releasing the fires of anger, a person should be sure the object of his anger truly deserves it. He should never be quick to be angry.

If a person releases flashes of anger at the slightest offense, people will tend to avoid him. Soon he will have few friends. If he explodes in tirades of anger in response to only an imagined offense, he may stir up a fight for no good reason. Injuries may occur, and he may end up with long term regrets over a momentary incident. The wise person deals with an offense calmly and seeks an amicable solution. The person who harbors anger just beneath his skin, ready for it to flash at any moment finds no solutions to problems and soon has no admirers. He is a master of foolishness.

Holding onto anger and allowing it to fester within is equally foolish. Solomon spoke of anger resting in a person's chest. He meant allowing anger to lie down and be at home within a person. Allowing anger to rest in a person's chest means harboring it in his heart. When a person retains anger within, it grows and becomes magnified. It grows and becomes stronger. It gathers to itself other reasons to be angry and eventually turns into lifelong bitterness that poisons the person's whole system. Whatever aroused a person's anger, he should never give it a bed to lie down on inside his heart.

Wisdom gets rid of anger quickly, even when the anger was justified. The way to get rid of anger is, not to forget about the problem that aroused the anger, but to seek reconciliation and forgiveness. Forgiveness stops brooding over one's injury. Reconciliation turns bitterness into sweetness and enemies into friends.



**9. *Do not say, “Why is it that the former days were better than these,” for it is not out of wisdom that you ask that (7:10).***

This proverb contains good and practical advice, but it has little to do with righteousness. It is a warning against reminiscing over the past and longing for it to return. Such expectations are not wise, because it is impossible to bring back the past. In addition, those reminiscences are based on an unrealistic view of both the past and the present.

In every generation, longing for the “good old days” becomes an obsession with some people. The longing is almost always based on a false nostalgia, by which the person dwells on pleasant memories and overlooks other serious problems of those former days. This proverb says that people who ask why the former days were better do not ask such questions out of wisdom. They are not basing their question on accurate information, but on idealized memories. If they could go back to the former days, they likely would be greatly surprised by the reality of what they would find, and they would be bitterly disappointed.

**10. *Wisdom is as good as an inheritance and a preference to those who see the sun (7:11-12).***

This proverb compares two values and says that each is of equal value in its own realm, but one is to be preferred to the other when it is considered that one deals with intangible values and the other deals with tangible values. It shows that values in both realms are good and needed, but intangible values are preferable. That insight is extremely important, but it still does not deal with how to have either value. The proverb is good but limited, like most of the other proverbs of Israel’s wise men. It does not tell a person how to have either one. As good as the advice is, it refers to righteousness obtained by a person’s own effort. That kind of righteousness is inadequate and leads to vanity.

The two values are wisdom, which is an intangible value, and an inheritance, which is a tangible value. Each is two values that the mentions is good in its own realm, because people live in two realms. People need what is good in the physical realm, and they need just as much what is good in the intangible realm. After acknowledging that reality, the takes another step and declares that

Longing for an idealized past is usually based on a refusal to face reality in the present. The person probably not only has a distorted view of the past but also a distorted view of the present. The problem he faces almost always overshadows any good events that also are occurring in his life at the same time. Instead of bravely facing his problems, he tries to escape them by fantasizing on some wishful utopia. A realistic view of a person’s life acknowledges the problems that are present but also rejoices over the good events that are present. That approach enables a person to tackle the problems in a reasonable manner, and it makes good results possible.

For sure, no one can escape into the past, and longing to do so is vanity. Dealing with the present offers a person an opportunity to improve his situation. Facing one’s problems head-on instead of longing to run away from them is both practical and wise.

actually the intangible value is the better of the two. It emphasizes that point by stating that the intangible value is the more important value for everyone who sees the sun, which means everyone in the whole world. The proverb is striking because it says that the intangible value is the preference of those who live in the tangible world under the sun. Those who live in bodies in the physical world are not satisfied by physical wealth and possessions only. They find contentment only when they also give attention to the values that cannot be touched or seen.

The intangible value to which the proverb refers is wisdom. It declares that wisdom is more valuable than an inheritance of money or land. The person who receives an inheritance without the wisdom to know how to handle it soon loses the inheritance and has neither wisdom nor the inheritance. The person who has wisdom to know how to manage his inheritance is able to keep it and even grow it into more. He has both wisdom and his inheritance. In fact, a wise person usually can earn his own money

and possessions and is able to prosper without an inheritance. He even may have some to pass on to the next generation as an inheritance.

One may question whether this proverb about wisdom belongs in a list of s about righteousness. Doing so was perfectly logical to Solomon, because Israel's wise men considered wisdom and righteousness to be inseparable. Wise men in the pagan nations sought after power through magic, contact with spirits, interpretation of dreams, and pronouncement of curses and blessings. Israel's wise men rejected that concept of wisdom and sought after clean, honest, right living. They taught many practices that helped people improve their way of living. Therefore, when Solomon quoted this about wisdom, he strongly implied that he was applying it to right living. He was teaching that righteousness is as valuable as an inheritance. Rather, it was better than an inheritance.

- 11. For [being] in the shade of wisdom [is] like [being] in the shade of money (7:12),**  
**a. But the advantage of knowledge is that (7:12b)**  
**b. Wisdom preserves the life of its owner (7:12c).**

This proverb compares the value of wisdom and money, by saying that both provide shade for the person who has them but wisdom does even more and preserves the life of the one who has it. The advice is valuable, but it does not tell a person how to gain either wisdom or money.

The word translated "shade" means "shadow." Some versions translate it in this verse as "shelter." Others translate it as "protection." KJV translates it as "defense." None of those translations stick to the literal Hebrew words, which are "in the shade of wisdom" and "in the shade of money." The proverb teaches that the two positions are similar, because both provide shelter from uncomfortable situations.

The proverb compares having money and wisdom to being in the shadow of a cloud that shelters an area from the blistering sun. Money is similar to being in the shadow of a cloud because it provides shelter from want, need, hunger, and privation. Everyone needs that shelter. In a similar way, wisdom provides shelter from uncomfortable

By quoting the proverb, Solomon showed that, when he said that seeking righteousness through one's own efforts was vanity, he did not mean that striving to be righteous was undesirable or invaluable. He meant that, in spite its genuine value, one's own effort fails to enable a person to be truly good or to live a fully meaningful life. Nonetheless, the proverb says that being wise enough to live a good life is more valuable than receiving a large inheritance. An inheritance does not give a person the answer to all his questions or the solution to all his problems, but it certainly is welcome and helpful. Righteous actions through one's own effort should be welcomed and honored in the same way. They are valuable and helpful, but a person should not expect that kind of righteousness to be the final answer to all of his questions either. He should recognize that it does have practical value for everyone who sees the sun rise and set each day, which means, everyone who is alive, but it takes something more to have true righteousness.

situations in life. It shelters people from temptation, dangerous conditions, even hostile attacks. It shelters people from those dangers by showing them how to avoid them or how to deal with them calmly and effectively when they arise. That kind of shelter is also badly needed.

The truth in this proverb is especially applicable to wisdom that teaches people the importance of living righteous lives. Doing right preserves a person from resentment, retaliation, natural consequences, and God's anger. Being in the shade of right living provides the most vital protection of all.

The proverb presses the comparison further by saying that the wisdom of being righteous provides more than just protection from uncomfortable situations. It also preserves the life of the one who has it. The dangers that come from foolishness and sin shorten a person's life and sometimes end it suddenly. Wisdom and righteousness, on the other hand, help a person avoid a life-threatening

situation and shows a person how to escape from danger when it arises. As a result, the wise person

will tend to live longer than the foolish sinner who acts on impulse instead of understanding.

- 12. Consider the work of God, for who is able to make straight what He has made crooked (7:13-14)?**
- a. In a day of prosperity, be in prosperity (7:14a),**
  - b. And in a day of adversity, consider that God has made this one parallel to that one so that man will not discover anything [that comes] after him (7:14b).**

This proverb asks people to consider how God works, not so they can understand Him, but so they can recognize that they are not able to understand what He is doing. Not understanding God's works should lead a person to humility toward himself and faith toward God. It comes closer to explaining true righteousness than any proverb Solomon quoted up to this point.

understand and cannot control. Therefore, a person's task is to do the best he can with the circumstances God places before him. In the end, he will find that even the crooked road God prepared for him had a good purpose. By accepting the crooks in the road and making the best of them, he learns his weakness and comes to trust in God's strength.

The proverb says that God placed both prosperity and adversity in the world and made them exist side by side for a purpose. His purpose was to keep people from understanding what lies ahead for them. Not being able to understand makes people know they cannot change what God does. When they come to that recognition, they are willing to adjust to what God does without having to understand. As a result, they are able to trust Him to work for their good, and they have far less frustration and worry.

On the other hand, if a person lives in a day of prosperity, he should use the opportunity it gives him to do something profitable and good. Prosperity was not given to him to make him lazy or idle, but to provide for him an opportunity to do good and to help others. He should recognize that his prosperity may not last always, so he should use it to full advantage and make something useful out of it while he has it.

The advises people to enjoy the day when all is going well. On the other hand it advises them to believe that God knows what He is doing and leave the outcome to him when everything is going badly.

Through varied circumstances that people cannot control, God hides what He is intending to accomplish so that people will trust in Him. A person's responsibility is to live each day in whatever circumstance God sends and find a way to use it for good. If a person trusts God and obeys His commands, God will take care of what comes after him. What God does will be good, and it will be much better than anything a person can do for himself.

If God makes the road before a person crooked, he are not able to make it straight. He should learn to navigate the crooked road and know that it has a good purpose. Such advice recognizes that humans are not completely in charge of their own lives. They face many circumstances they do not

- 13. I have seen everything in my days of breathing (7:15).**
- a. There was a righteous one perishing in his righteousness (7:15b).**
  - b. And there was a wicked one prolonging [his days] in his wickedness (7:15c).**

This proverb contains an astute observation of the reality of life in a sinful world. Often good people suffer and evil people prosper. It seems to present those situations as realities a person needs to

adjust to without blaming themselves for it. Yet it does not explain why such injustices happen, and it proposes nothing to correct it. The only conclusion a person should draw from those realities is that he

should trust in God because he cannot find justice in the world of men. In so doing, he comes close to describing what real righteousness is, but he does not state it clearly. If a person has righteousness through faith, it is a helpful observation, but it does not tell him how to gain that true righteousness.

The originator of this proverb spoke of “in my days of breathing.” The word “breath” or “breathing” was used by Solomon throughout Ecclesiastes to refer to something that vanishes away as quickly as a person’s breath or that is as unstable as the wind. Therefore, throughout Ecclesiastes it is regularly translated as “vanity.” Because Solomon spoke so much about vanity in the Book of Ecclesiastes, all major English versions translate the word in this verse in its symbolic meaning that is so often used elsewhere in the book. Thus, they render the word in this verse as “vanity,” “vain,” “futile,” “meaningless,” or “pointless,” referring to the writer’s life. However, Solomon most likely was quoting this parable, not originating it. It is likely that whoever originated it was not using the word in the same way that Solomon did in this book. He probably intended for it to have its more literal meaning, which is “breath” or “breathing.” Therefore, “in my days of breathing” means “during my lifetime.”

The writer said that in his lifetime he had seen just about every situation that can occur. Some of the situations he had seen seemed to have no explanation. Two situations he had seen were especially puzzling to him. He had seen a righteous person dying with no apparent reason for him to be punished with death. He had also seen a wicked person living a long and comfortable life when it seemed he should have been punished for his many

**14. *You must not be super-righteous (7:16),***

- a. And you must not cause yourself to be overly wise (7:16b).***
- b. Why should you destroy yourself (7:16c)?***

This proverb seems to give strange advice, especially when compared with the next proverb, which counsels not to be overly evil; but when applied to self-righteousness it makes good sense. It advises a person not to take pride in either his goodness or his sin. As good as that advice is, it provides no guidance as how to do either.

sins. Seeing those circumstances, one person could say there is no justice in this world, and the way a person lives makes no difference. Another person could say there is a higher justice in life that people are not able to understand or explain. Therefore, it is best not to try to understand but just to live the best life possible and leave the outcome to God. Trusting God provides more strength in life than trying to understand the unexplainable.

This proverb recognizes that this world is full of injustices. It does not try to explain why injustice exists, and it does not propose a solution for it. It simply recognizes that injustice is a reality of life. A person is in a much better position to cope with life’s uncertainties if he can recognize that injustice will come to him for which he is not to blame but which he cannot avoid. When a person recognizes that reality, he is in a much better position to make the best of whatever situation comes to him. He will not blame himself or try to fix blame on anyone else. He will not persecute himself or seek vengeance or retaliation on someone else. Instead, he will recognize he will be judged, not for what was done to him, but for what he does in return. He will do his best to do right, regardless of what others have done. He will recognize that he is responsible for his own actions and for being as just and honest as he can be in the midst of the injustices around him.

Life is puzzling, and many of its mysteries are beyond human understanding. Sometimes it is best not to try to understand what is beyond human explanation. In such a case, a person should do what he knows is right and leave the outcome to God. Human wisdom does not provide us a satisfactory answer, but trusting God does.

Together the two proverbs are understood by many to encourage people not to go to extremes in any direction. They say the proverb advises people to be just moderately good and just a little evil. They say it suggests that the best course to take in life is to be moderate in all things.

That kind of thinking is appealing to many people, and it is often suggested as the wisest way to go through life. People who accept that philosophy want to be comfortable in every crowd, just as long as they don't go overboard. They want to please everybody by not being radical on any subject. Examples of their way of living are: drink moderately; use only the milder drugs just to be congenial; curse only when needed to make a strong point; gamble to a specific limit and quit; cheat as long as it doesn't do serious harm; commit adultery only with a consenting adult; and lie only to help someone out of trouble. That relaxed way of life seems to many to be a sensible middle way that enables a person to have fun and not do any real harm. Unfortunately that kind of advice seems starkly out of place in a Bible that makes such serious demands as: "***Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*** (Matt. 5:46, HCSB); "***No one can be a slave to two masters, since either he will hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other***" (Matt. 5:24a, HCSB); "***No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God***" (Luke 9:6, HCSB); or "***For whoever keeps the entire law, yet fails in one point, is guilty of breaking it all***" (James 2:10, HCSB). Some other teaching must lie in this besides moderation in all things.

The proper understanding of this is to see it as a warning against having a "show-off" righteousness. It is the same plea that Jesus gave when he challenged his disciples to avoid the kind of righteousness practiced by the Pharisees (Matt 5:10; 16:5-12). The Pharisees made a great display of their righteousness, making long prayers on the city streets (Matt. 6:5-8; 23:14), darkening their eyes

15. ***You must not be excessively wicked (7:17),***
  - a. ***And you must not be a fool (7:17b).***
  - b. ***Why should you die before your time (7:17c)?***

This proverb forms a striking contrast to the previous proverb. It counsels against taking pride in one's sinfulness, but like other proverbs Solomon quoted it provides no advice about how to avoid that obnoxious attitude.

and drawing lines on their faces when they fasted (Matt. 6:16-18), loudly throwing bags of coins in the collection barrel (Luke 21:1), bragging about their goodness even in their prayers (Luke 18:10-19), wearing elaborate garments and seeking prominent seats in meetings to demonstrate their religious importance (Matt. 23:5-7), loving lofty titles (Matt. 23:5-7), making a show of tithing even the spices from their vegetable gardens (Matt. 23:23-24i), and building monuments to prophets without obeying what the prophets taught (Matt. 23:29-32). Jesus strongly condemned the Pharisees for those religious excesses because they were empty of true spirituality. The Solomon quoted in this verse warned against that kind of super righteousness or overly flamboyant wisdom. It is a warning against being a "holier than thou" person. That kind of righteousness is only pretense. It is all noise and no substance. It is only a performance and a show. True righteousness is not pompous and proud. It is humble and modest.

The proverb says, "***Why should you destroy yourself?***" That question contains the same warning as the proverb that says, "***Pride goes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall***" (Prov. 16:18, HCSB). Pretended spirituality and religious pride are dangerous deceptions. They rob the person of true spirituality and drive him to oppress others in order to maintain his pompous position. They cause people to lose faith in him and turn against him. Eventually God is moved to humble him and punish him. Such a person destroys himself by his excessive religiosity. This is a warning against self-made righteousness. It comes close to the emphasis Solomon was making in this section of his book, that self-righteousness is not true righteousness and is vanity.

While some people love to show off their religiosity, others love to show off their meanness. They brag about how they harassed a neighbor they did not like until he sold his house and moved away. They laugh about cursing in front of the preacher. They tell about how many people they

beat up for displeasing them. They are boastful of how much liquor they can drink without seeming to be drunk. Sometimes such people turn into a pussy cat when someone dares to challenge them, but they try to maintain the aura of meanness to show how strong they are and how no one should mess with them.

This proverb says that such actions are foolishness. They drive away friendships. They make people lose respect for the proud “toughy.” Instead of causing people to admire their strength, they make people afraid of them. They become isolated and lonely, which only makes them put on

a front of even greater toughness to hide their feelings of isolation. Trying to show off one’s meanness is a foolish and unproductive way to live.

The proverb says, “*Why should you die before your time?*” The person who tries to show off his meanness sooner or later irritates someone who is truly mean and who will fight back at him. He will become injured, which will weaken him and lead to an early death; or it might cause him to be killed instantly. If being a “show-off” in righteousness leads to destruction, being a “show-off” in meanness is the pathway to death. What a foolish way to throw a life away!

**16. It is good that you take hold of this one (7:18);**

- a. And from that one you should not hold back your hand (7:18b),**
- b. For the one fearing God will go forth with both (7:18c).**

This proverb obviously goes together with the previous two. All three are intended to explain and complement each other; however, this proverb does not explain how to maintain the balance it recommends. It contains good counsel, but it is incapable of producing true righteousness. It tells how a person should act but does not tell how a person can get the strength to act that way. It tells how to act righteously but not how to be righteous.

Taken together, the three s in verses 16-18 say, “Don’t be a “show off” about how good you are or how mean you are, but hold goodness in one hand and toughness in the other hand and balance them in your life. Does that bit of advice mean it is all right to be only mildly good and that it is acceptable to be a little bit worldly? Surely not! The Bible is too emphatic that believers should be totally committed to God and to His way of life. Jesus challenged His followers to take the narrow road, not to walk in the middle of the road. So what does the proverb mean when it says the man who fears God will take hold of righteousness with one hand and toughness with the other hand?

One who fears God has no difficulty understanding that he should take hold of righteousness. Fearing God makes people strive to be like God in order to please Him, and God is altogether righteous. The one who fears God does not have to make a display of his righteousness.

Righteousness does not have to be a banner for him to carry in his arms or a pin to wear on his chest. However, genuine righteousness will be the goal of his living. True righteousness is humble and shows itself in quiet deeds of kindness and quiet words of purity. The truly righteous person does not have to scold every person he sees doing something wrong or hears speaking a hurtful word. A better way is for him just to be kind and to speak in respectful ways himself. The man who has been flaunting his profanity will recognize the difference quickly. In the presence of such a person, he will usually start to temper his speech or actions. Such men have been seen to bend their shoulders and confess they are not living like they should. Sometimes they have even left promising to make some changes in their lives. A little bit of genuine goodness is all it takes to make a tremendous impact on others. That kind of humble goodness is a value that a person who loves God should hold tightly in his hand.

It is not as easy to understand why the proverb says a person who fears God should take hold of toughness with the other hand. Probably the meaning is that the person who fears God needs a measure of toughness to be able to bear the mistreatment and ridicule he inevitably will have to face as he goes through life. The person who lives a righteous life eventually is going to be scorned, maybe even persecuted. He does not need to fight back in the same way that others are treating him.

A better way is for him to be tough enough to take the mistreatment without anger or fear and to return to his critic a deed of kindness or a word of compliment. The offender usually will be so taken aback that he will not know how to respond. After a while, he may even mumble a poorly worded apology. When he does, receive it graciously. He is not accustomed to apologizing, and he does not

know how to do it well; but he is trying. So encourage him with good words. That kind of response shows more toughness than angry reprimands or lecturing words ever could. That kind of toughness is a gift from God that a man who fears God should hold tightly in his hand.

***17. Wisdom gives strength to the wise one, more than ten rulers who are in the city (7:19).***

This proverb declares that a person's inner wisdom gives him more strength to overcome an enemy attack than instructions from ten commanders. It contains good advice about the advisability of using one's own inner wisdom, but it does not tell how to gain that inner wisdom. It is another proverb that gives good counsel but no information about how to obtain the power to follow that counsel.

The proverb does not mean that a good commander or leader is bad or unnecessary. It simply states that one's own wisdom is an even better defense. A good leader is a strong weapon against an enemy attack. His skill in preparing defenses, his way of deploying his troops, and his knowledge of when to wait and when to strike all contribute more to victory than how many catapults or canons he has or how many foot soldiers or cavalymen or archers are under his command. Many a general has lost a city because of a poor battle plan. Many a general has conquered an army much larger than his own because of a wise plan of attack. So a good leader is a vital necessity when an army goes forth to war. If one good leader is a powerful force, ten good leaders working together provide an almost impregnable wall of defense. Even so, a soldier's own good sense provides him

with greater strength than all ten commanders of his army.

That same principle holds true in fighting the battle for righteousness in everyday life. A person's own wisdom provides more strength for living righteousness in an evil world than ten teachers. When a wise person is attacked or criticized in a cruel way, he does not have time to consult his teacher or pastor about how to respond. He must call on his own good sense to know what to do. His own wise response will provide a powerful defense, whereas waiting for instructions from his teacher would cause him to wait so long he already would be defeated before the instructions could arrive. When a person who fears God and uses his own wisdom to reply to attacks with goodness or kindness, he uses a weapon his critics do not know how to counter. He wins a victory without a fight.

This proverb provides the same advice that Jesus gave when he taught his followers to return good for evil. This proverb is based on the understanding that wisdom and righteousness are intimately related. A wise person is a person who has learned how to be righteous, and his righteousness is a better defense than ten teachers.

***B. SURELY A RIGHTEOUS MAN WHO DOES GOOD AND NEVER SINS DOES NOT EXIST ON THE EARTH (7:20).***

After quoting seventeen insightful proverbs about righteousness, Solomon burst forth with a conclusion that had been building in him to the point of explosion. He declared: No one can follow all of that advice! No one can keep so many good suggestions. No one on earth is good enough to do it. It is impossible! If good advice is all that wisdom provides, it is vanity because it tells how a person should live, but it does not tell how to do it. Working to follow all that advice is self-righteousness, and self-righteousness does not exist!

Solomon was exactly right in that declaration. A righteous person by his own effort is non-existent. Good advice about how to act righteously is good only if a person first is righteous. When a person becomes righteous, only then can he benefit from the advice of the proverbs, because only then does he have the power to begin to practice righteousness. The proverbs of Israel's wise men lead to the same conclusion that Israel's prophets, priests, elders, and kings also all declared. It is also the basis of the gospel. No person is completely good. All people are sinners. All people are lost and condemned. The only hope for humans lies not in human understanding or human efforts, but in God.

For that very reason, God revealed the covenant to Israel, first to Abraham and then to the whole nation at Sinai. The covenant had two requirements, as expressed in Exodus 19:5-6: "***hearken to My voice***" (faith) and "***keep My covenant***" (obedience). The Israelites promised to keep the covenant, but they could not do it. They immediately fell back into their former ways and sought to worship through an idol in the form of a Golden Calf. Man's inability to be righteous and to

overcome sin was dramatically revealed to the Israelites after they committed that grave sin. Moses tried all kinds of means to restore Israel to God, and all his efforts failed. Then He asked for God's way, and God told him the way was grace: "***Jehovah, Jehovah is a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and abundant in grace and truth, keeping grace for thousands [of generations], forgiving iniquity and rebellion and sin; but He absolutely will not excuse [the sinner], visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons and upon the grandsons, upon the third and the fourth [generations]***" (Ex. 34:6-7).

The proverbs of Israel's wise men did not have to end in a cry of despair. The proverbs were a fence that guided them to the glorious grace and salvation God had revealed to Moses on Sinai. The knowledge of God's grace was Israel's greatest treasure, and their purpose was to share that treasure with all mankind. So the end result of the s was a cry of triumph and joy. However, before anyone could arrive at that point of victory, he first had to arrive at the conclusion Solomon explained in this verse. Human wisdom about righteousness is a failure. Self-righteousness does not exist. The teachings of wise men are full of true and good advice, but they are powerless to make people good. As a means of obtaining goodness and righteousness, they are vanity, like everything else people do. Recognizing that truth is a necessity because a person must recognize his sinfulness before he can accept the covenant of grace.

Solomon cited four observations to support his declaration that a righteous person does not exist on the earth.

1. ***Also you must not take to heart everything that others say (7:21-22)***
  - a. ***So that you will not hear your slave cursing you (7:21b),***
  - b. ***For also many times your heart knows that you also have cursed others (7:22).***

**Solomon's first observation was that, if a person will listen, he will hear others cursing him for wrongs he has done and then he will be aware he has done the same to others.**

**Solomon's point was not that people were cursing others unjustly but they were cursing others for what they had done that was wrong, and they in turn were cursing others for the**



**same reason.** Solomon expressed that reality by advising others not to listen to what people were saying about them. If they did, they would surely hear them saying how evil he was. A master would even hear his own slaves cursing him for wrongs he did to them. When someone hears another person's complaint against him, if he is wise he will recognize when the criticism is justified. He did wrong to that other person, and he should rectify it. As unpleasant as that truth might be, it will help him recognize the truth that he is a sinner. It will help him to be patient toward the sin of others, but even more importantly it will help him face up to his own failures. It is never easy for a person to hear about his faults, but doing so will help him

**2. *I tested all this with wisdom (7:23-29).***

**a. *I said, "I shall be wise" (7:23-24).***

**(1) *But it was far from me (7:23b).***

**(1) *That which is far off and deep, deep, who finds it (7:24)?***

**b. *So I, even I, turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek (7:25)***

**(1) *Wisdom and accountability (7:25b)***

**(2) *And to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness of craziness (7:25c).***

**Solomon's second observation that supported his statement that a righteous person does not exist in the world is that he had sought for wisdom and righteousness sincerely and earnestly and had failed to find them.** Solomon said he had tested out the truthfulness of all of the seventeen s he had quoted. He said he tested them "with wisdom." He meant he had studied their meaning carefully and had sought to apply them to his life, but wisdom and righteousness still were far from him. Righteousness was so deep that no one had ever been able to define it, and certainly none had been able to live it.

Solomon wanted to emphasize that his search had not been superficial. He used three verbs to describe the depth of his search: "to know," "to search out," and "to seek." Without doubt, Solomon implied that he had studied many more s than the seventeen he quoted as examples. Since 1 Kings 4:32 says he spoke 3,000 proverbs of his own, his study of the proverbs of Israel's wise men must have included the study of hundreds of scrolls. His study of Israel's wisdom literature was not only intensive but also exhaustive. Then he further showed that extent of his study by referring to its

recognize that all his wise sayings and good advice did not make him good. Being stung by that reality enables a person to quit trying to make himself good and trust God instead.

The point Solomon was making was that all people, from slaves to masters, were justly resented for wrongs they had committed against others. That reality was proof that a totally righteous person did not exist in the world. That reality is as true today as it was in Solomon's day. It takes more than wise sayings and much more than a human effort to deal with a person's sins. Only God can provide him a way out of his sinfulness.

breadth. He said it had extended in two directions. He had studied both wisdom and folly, both intelligent living and foolish living. He needed to know both, so he could practice righteousness and avoid unrighteousness.

If Solomon was going to be a good king, he needed to know how to recognize wise actions and how to perform them, so he dug into that subject in earnest. He said that, when he studied wisdom, he included accountability in his study. The word translated "accountability" is a rare word. It refers to an accountant's records, but Solomon used it to refer to a person's being accountable for his actions. In other words, his study included practical righteousness as well as intellectual righteousness.

If Solomon was going to be a good king, he also needed to know how to recognize unwise actions and how to avoid them. So he studied foolish ways of living as well as wise ways of living. When he studied folly, his study included two kinds of foolishness. He studied evil actions that come from stupidity and also meaningless actions that come from being comical. He dug into the difference between being dull and incapable of understanding

and being comical by making fun, playing tricks, telling jokes, and acting crazily. He needed to treat each form of folly differently, so he investigated both with great diligence.

Solomon was emphatic that his search for righteousness was both deep and wide, yet he had failed to find true righteousness. The reason he had not found it was not that he had not searched hard

**3. *And I find bitterer than death the woman who is a trap, and her heart nets, her hands chains (7:26).***

- 1. *The one who is good before God's face escapes from her (7:26b),***
- 2. *But the sinner is captured by her (7:26c).***

**Solomon's third observation that supported his statement that a righteous person does not exist in the world was that men are easily trapped by an evil woman.** He did not define what he meant by an evil woman. It seems natural to assume he was referring to an immoral woman, but he may have had a broader definition of an evil woman in mind. Solomon had a lot of experience with women, since he had 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3). He may have been referring to a scheming woman in his harem, plotting to gain more advantages than other wives, or he may have been referring to an immoral woman seeking to catch a man in her web by using the forbidden allurements of her body. He may well have been referring to either or both or to still additional ways that a woman can entrap a man.

Whatever exactly Solomon meant by an evil woman, he compared her to a trap to catch animals, her heart to a snare net to catch fish, and her hands to chains to bind prisoners. In just a few words, he gave three vivid descriptions of the power of an evil woman to damage men. He obviously felt strongly about the power of such women, because he said he found their schemes to be bitterer than death. The strength of his feelings about them shows he definitely had had his struggles with them. He left no doubt that he had been personally ensnared by such a woman or perhaps by many of them, and he was bitter about the embarrassment it had brought to him. It would be interesting to know if he recognized that marrying so many women was one

enough. He had looked and studied as far and wide as it was possible to go, but still he had failed to understand righteousness or how to practice it. His failure to fathom the meaning of true righteousness was another observation that supported his conclusion that no one in all the world was truly righteous.

of those snares. It probably is being too nosy to wish we knew more details about his struggles with evil women, but at least it is obvious that he knew much about the danger inherent in being involved with one.

Solomon said someone who is good before God's face escapes being entrapped by an evil woman. By "good before God's face" he meant someone whom God considered to be good. That man trusts God and obeys his commands. He escapes because God protects him. Solomon did not say that being wise enables a man to escape from such a woman's trap. Men are too vulnerable to the schemes of evil women to escape through their own wisdom and strength. It takes God to protect and deliver them, but God will protect them if they trust and obey Him.

By contrast, Solomon said a sinner has no way to escape an evil woman's grasp. By a sinner he meant someone who was not good in God's sight, in other words a man who is not trusting in God. It is not a foolish man who is entrapped by her but any man who is not trusting and obeying God. Only the man whom God is watching and protecting escapes her snares.

Men's weakness to evil women was another proof that a truly righteous person does not exist on the earth.

4. *Behold, I found this, the Proclaimer says (7:27-29),*
  - a. *I added one to one to find the total that my soul sought (7:27b-28a),*
  - b. *But I did not find [it] (7:28b).*
    - (1) *I found one man out of a thousand (7:28c).*
    - (2) *And I did not find one woman among all these (7:28d).*
  - c. *Behold, I only found this (7:29),*
    - (1) *That God made man straight (7:29b),*
    - (2) *But they have sought after many deviations (7:29c).*

**Solomon's fourth observation that supported his statement that a righteous person does not exist was that he had searched everywhere for a person who was clean and straight and his search had been in vain.** Solomon's second observation was that he had searched to understand what righteous is and how to live it and had failed to find it for himself. This fourth observation was that he had searched for someone else who understood and lived righteous, and he had found only one man in a thousand and no women at all who had managed to be righteous. Not only did he fail to find a way to be truly righteous himself, he also had found no one else who had been able to do it either.

Solomon first said he had made a thorough search for something, but he did not specifically state what he was looking for. Only in his last sentence did he clearly state what he had been looking for. First, he insisted that his search had been methodical. He had gathered statistics and added up the results to draw his conclusion. Out of all of the data he had gathered and evaluated, he did not find what he was looking for

Then Solomon declared his conclusion, which was that God made men straight but that they had sought after many deviations. He meant that God had made people good and right, but people had found many ways to depart from God's plan for

them. Humanity's problem was not that God had been wrong in the way He made them. Their problem was that they had departed from the way God made them. His conclusion revealed what he had been looking for, which was one righteous person. He did not find one.

Solomon first said he did not find what he was looking for. Then he said he found one man among a thousand and no woman at all. His statement that he found one man among a thousand must not have meant that he actually found none, because he had already said he did not find what he was looking for. His statement about finding only one man in a thousand was just a colorful way of describing the futility of his search.

Did Solomon state his conclusion as he did in order to disparage women? If so, he certainly did not rank men more than one notch in a thousand above them. His real point was that no matter how earnestly people studied the question of righteousness, none were able to achieve it.

Solomon did not say what measurement he used to determine if a person was righteous. The point was that however he measured it, everybody failed. Every person's effort to be righteous was a failure. Righteousness through one's own effort could not be attained. Self-righteousness was and is just one more vanity.