

## **Prudence**

Prudence commands action and response by reason rather than whimsical passion.

Prudence is not to be confused with timidity or fear, nor with duplicity or dissimulation; to the contrary, it is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it.

**Its value.** The antithetical parallelism frequent in Prov. 10-15 reinforces this in literary terms. Among distinctive expressions of the value of prudence in Prov. 10-29 are juxtapositions of default human thinking with divine wisdom: "There is a way that seems right to a person, / but its end is the way to death" (14:12); "The human mind may devise many plans, / but it is the purpose of the LORD that will be established" (19:21); "Do you see persons wise in their own eyes? / There is more hope for fools than for them" (26:12). Hence, "like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without good sense" (11:22). Prudence confers social status: "One is commended for good sense, but a perverse mind is despised" (12:8); "Wisdom is too high for fools; in the gate they do not open their mouths" (24:7). This can even overturn social structures: "A slave who deals wisely will rule over a child who acts shamefully, and will share the inheritance as one of the family" (17:2). After all, parents delight in wise children (23:15-16, 24-25; 27:11; 29:3).

Likewise prudence confers power (21:22; 24:5-6) and wealth. The latter is true negatively in terms of avoiding poverty and positively in terms of enjoying abundance: "The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to want" (21:5). Thus precious items serve as points of comparison for heightening the value of prudence: "How much better to get wisdom than gold! To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver" (16:16); "There is gold, and abundance of costly stones; / but the lips informed by knowledge are a precious jewel" (20:15). Prudence is also sweet as honey (24:13-14) and refreshing as snow (25:11-13).

**Illustrations.** Moving from the value of prudence to its nature, planning ahead is a key illustration: "A child who gathers in summer is prudent, / but a child who sleeps in harvest brings shame" (10:5; see also 27:23-27). Put the other way, one should avoid being hasty (19:2; 20:25; 21:5; 25:8-10): "Do you see someone who is hasty in speech? There is more hope for a fool than for anyone like that" (29:20). Here the theme of thinking ahead and avoiding haste merges with speech being a vital domain for prudence. This is true in terms of timing—"A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver" (25:11)—and listening, a related form of avoiding haste: "If one gives an answer before hearing, it is folly and shame" (18:13; also 18:15; 23:6-8 [on paying attention to nuance]; and 23:22-23). Another common illustration of spoken wisdom's situation-sensitive character is this: "Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself. Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes" (26:4-5). Most of all, prudence demands restraining the amount of one's speech: "When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but the prudent are restrained in speech" (10:19); "Even fools who keep silent are considered wise; when they close their lips, they are deemed intelligent" (17:28). Additional verses further contrast mind and mouth: "The mind of one who has understanding seeks knowledge, / but the mouths of fools feed on folly" (15:14); "The mind of the righteous ponders how to answer, / but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil" (15:28; also 16:21).

Prudence entails planning, outside the realm of speech: "Where there are no oxen, there is no grain; / abundant crops come by the strength of the ox" (14:4). Many of the general truisms in Proverbs promote such assessment of opportunities and resources. However, what one avoids is just as important as what one plans, if not more so: giving surety for a neighbor (11:15; 17:18; 20:16; 22:7, 26-27; 27:13); being drunk or gluttonous (20:1; 23:6-8, 17-21; 28:7); committing sexual sin (23:26-28; 29:3; possibly 27:13); and relying on a fool (26:6-11) are all foolish. In short, prudence lies in listening to parents and other

wise people so that one fosters greater development in wisdom, along with various forms of self-control rather than foolish self-reliance.

**Its acquisition.** The acquisition of prudence, as we should expect given the prominence of fearing the Lord in 1:7, involves various dimensions of fearing God (e.g., 28:5). It requires not just avoiding the fool (14:7) but opportunities for evil as well: "The wise are cautious and turn away from evil, / but the fool throws off restraint and is careless" (14:16; also 22:3, 5; 26:17; 27:12). Prudence includes keeping God's law, as we learn from a famous verse that is rarely quoted in this proper context: "Where there is no prophecy, the people cast off restraint, / but happy are those who keep the law" (29:18; also 28:7). The vision usually promoted on this basis—"without vision the people perish"—focuses on human leadership, but actually the verse calls for nearly the opposite: restraint based on divine law. It is interesting that here we have a proverb (part of the wisdom literature) that refers to the prophets (who received revelation) and to keeping God's law.

Such restraint frequently incorporates the mediation of human reproof: "A fool despises a parent's instruction, / but the one who heeds admonition is prudent" (15:5); "Those who ignore instruction despise themselves, but those who heed admonition gain understanding" (15:32); "A rebuke strikes deeper into a discerning person than a hundred blows into a fool" (17:10; also 19:25, 27; 22:15; 26:3; 29:15). As in 27:22, several verses acknowledge that fools can thwart the effectiveness of correction. Yet, according to 21:11, people can even learn from awareness of others being corrected: "When a scoffer is punished, the simple become wiser; when the wise are instructed, they increase in knowledge." Prudence is gained not only from reproof addressing lawless behavior, but also from advice enabling good decisions: "Without counsel, plans go wrong, but with many advisers they succeed" (15:22; also 19:20; 20:18; 24:5-6).

The prior two paragraphs sketch the contours of a cardinal virtue: on the one hand, virtue is defined and fully realized only in the fear of God; on the other hand, virtue incorporates various means and proximate ends. To the degree that the resulting

practices—such as planning, listening, restraining speech, accepting correction, and the like—are possible for all humans as God's creatures, and unfortunately neglected at times by Christian believers, these virtues cannot be defined with sole reference to the fear of the Lord. Of course Proverbs offers no explicit, systematic theory of cardinal virtues, but that theological framework makes the best sense of what the book says about practical wisdom. The fear of the Lord is its proper beginning and the constant orientation of the way to life. Since Proverbs scarcely could have imagined modern forms of atheism or secularity, we could not expect the book to dwell on those alternative paths. Yet its aphoristic treatment of numerous means and proximate ends, as illustrated above, and its recognition that wisdom admits of various stages and degrees and kinds, all support the possibility that some virtues are cardinal rather than solely theological. Thus humans without the fear of YHWH can partially, with different degrees and kinds of attainment, acquire virtue in certain aspects of life—thanks to God's common grace undergirding the cultures of creation. To the extent that cardinal virtues are possible, such people must acquire an element of prudence to regulate them, even if by definition their full integration is impossible without the ultimate orientation of fearing God.

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. From the reading, how do you think the virtue of prudence and God are related?
  - a. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom.
  - b. Prudence confers power and wealth, which are blessings of God.
2. What are some of the ways in which we can practice or cultivate prudence?
  - a. We listen to those who are wise. "A fool despises a parent's instruction, / but the one who heeds admonition is prudent" (15:5)
  - b. We plan carefully with others. "Without counsel, plans go wrong, but with many advisers they succeed" (15:22; also 19:20; 20:18; 24:5-6).
3. (Current affairs) How does exercising prudence help you in dealing with fake news and scams? Which particular proverb is a timely reminder to you?