

Covering Shame

Proverbs 12:16

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“A fool’s wrath is presently known: but a prudent man covers shame.”
- Proverbs 12:16 (Cp. 14:17, 29; 29:11).

Solomon often addresses the contrast between the actions of the fool and the actions of the wise (or in this context, the prudent) who face either merely or overtly difficult circumstances. He draws, again and again, the stark difference between how ungodly and godly people respond to negative circumstance. However, there are times when the specifics of the matter, the stimulus, are not made known. This verse is one of this kind of teaching. There is not specific matter put forth that faces both what Solomon calls the “fool” and the “prudent” man.

As always through the Book, the “fool”, from the Hebrew word “‘ēwîl” [pronounced ev-eel] which means to be perverse; and it has 26 occurrences in the OT. It is translated as “fool(s)” 20x, and “foolish (man)” 6 times.

There are number of varieties that depend on the numerous contexts in which it is found:

- Some places inn Scripture use it of one who despises wisdom.
- Others use it of one who mocks when guilty.
- Other use it of one who is quarrelsome.
- and still others use it of one who is licentious or promiscuous or who disregards accepted and given rules for conduct.

Here it is not certain just which of these Solomon has in mind; but we might view it as if Solomon really meant us to be very general, thinking of a non-specific supplication! It works no matter which one we are thinking of.

“A fool’s wrath is presently known: but a prudent man covers shame.”
- Proverbs 12:16 (Cp. 14:17, 29; 29:11).

“Wrath” is used in the OT to speak of the idea of emotional anger, vexation, annoyance and the like. Many times the idea of the word is that it is an emotional anger that is quickly expressed, perhaps without any thinking or attempt of restraint. This thought of quickness or lack of restraint or thought seems to what Solomon means here. We might also note that the wrath that is held forth here is not just felt privately but is made known to those around the angry one. We should ponder the idea that it is not JUST the fact that there is this emotional anger, intense as it is that is in view in Solomon’s mind, but rather it is the expression of that anger, the way it affects the one angry as well as the way it shows itself to those around him that Solomon is setting over against what he says in the second phrase.

We must note that this second phrase begins (as do many of Solomon comparative statements) with the word “But”. It is comparative conjunction. As opposed to one such as “and” - “But” sets what follows against what went before. In this case, it is the way the fool handles wrath that is set over against the way the “prudent man” deals with his.

“Prudence” in the OT is the Hebrew word “*ārûm*” [pronounce ‘aw room’]. It is an adjective that only occurs 11x in the entire OT. The KJV translates it as “prudent” 8 times, “crafty” 2x, and “subtle” 1x. The basic idea is that of subtlety, shrewdness, being crafty, sly, or perhaps sensible. In English, some of these basic idea are considered to be negative. In this context it is used positively, which is why it is given as prudent. It is not being sneaky or of doing whatever one does behind the backs of those around us. The idea is that we are concerned that we are doing things rightly and that those around us perceive the rightness and goodness of our action. In the matter of anger, Solomon’s concern is that we act rightly, with “prudence” to be perceived, perhaps as a testimony to godliness by those around us.

We should note that Solomon is NOT saying that we NOT ever be angry. He recognizes that anger is a normal part of the lives of all persons. The matter, in his mind, is that we “handle” that with, for various reasons, arises within us. The mindless giving vent to the emotional aspect or expression of wrath is what Solomon is warning against; what he says we ought to take care to see to it that we handle “prudently”.

Another interesting truth here is that Solomon is very clearly implying that it is VERY possible for godly people to control or handle anger when it arises for whatever cause. The goal we aim to develop, regarding anger (not to mention any other negative emotion) is to react (or act) prudently in order to give glory to God and demonstrate that we belong to Him as our Lord and Master. There is nothing saying that it is easy or will ever be. We MUST seek and strive to do so.

To rehearse our thinking and go through our interpretation again- It is one of the marks of “unwisdom” to make known (or fail to control) vexation or anger at once (BTW, some maintain that the word used can be given “on the same day”). Whereas, “a prudent man,” (in the greater context of Proverbs) “one who is rich in understanding,” is, as a result is “slow to anger,” and by restraining himself, avoids exposure both of the “shame” or the affront put upon him, and also of his own wounded feelings because of the experience. Also, he escapes putting himself to shame by unseemly word or act; whereas “he who is quick to anger works folly,” for passionate anger is an offence against our God, not to mention the view others have of us as well as our self-respect.

As always there are several illustrations that can give us a more clear understanding of what we are talking about:

- Both Saul and David present contrasts with themselves at different periods of their history. How wisely Saul controlled himself under disaffection and insult at the very outset of his reign (1 Sam. 10:27)!
- To what frenzies of wrath did the same man give way later on against his own son and David!
- Nor was the son of Jesse less painfully inconsistent with himself as towards Eliab (1 Sam. 17:29), and towards Nabal (1 Sam. 25:21, etc.).
- Naaman was very near playing the fool, through irritation of spirit, to his own great loss; and
- Jonah exalted (or enthroned) folly even before the Lord (4).
- Gideon, by a prudent answer, averted a quarrel (Judg. 8:1–4).
- But the “meek and lowly” Jesus is our great Example, who in all His provocations did “not strive nor cry.”

There are quite a number of applications we can think of for all of this: How hard it often is to restrain anger, and how many excuses rise up to justify its indulgence! The frequency of the temptation is attested by the many cautions against it in this one of the Biblical Books alone. Its vehemence is proved by the fact that so holy and meek a servant of God as Moses was overcome by it.

The world judges very differently from Scripture on this point, and commends as “proper spirit,” or extenuates as “indiscretion,” displays of temper as foolish as irreligious. But can we doubt to which guide I ought to commit myself? Surely I have at the least known of, if indeed I have not seen, many an example of the words above quoted,

- —offence taken suddenly,
- an outburst of indignant language, —
- exposure, shame, regret, apology, succeeding.

All which would have been saved by the exercise of self-control. Let me reflect that no greater triumph can be given an enemy than to know that he has wounded to the quick, and how he may do it again. It is important for us to remember that even bodily health suffers from violent perturbations of the spirit; how much more the mind and the soul! But higher motives must be brought in, which may go to the root of the evil. “*Looking unto Jesus*” is the only valid solution or application for us to take in hand for sinful anger. And

“...*anger is only sinless when it is a holy emotion directed against an unholy thing*” (Eph. 4:26).
