

# *He That Is Void of Wisdom*

*Proverbs 11:12*

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*“He that is void of wisdom despises his neighbor: but a man of understanding holds his peace.”*

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It is interesting to see how very much the Bible, Old and New Testaments, has to say about the way in which we think about and interact with those around us, our “neighbors”. One of the ways that Solomon addresses this topic is by telling his listeners how a wise man addresses those around him, and the reverse of course. This is what we see here.

As we have already mentioned, chapter 10 and 11 are used by the King to make a contrast in life and conduct in various matters of living: namely work, diligence, ambition, speech, truth, stability, honesty, integrity, fidelity, guidance, graciousness, kindness, etc. He basically says that a man of understanding remains silent rather than spreading harmful information that he might know about his neighbor because of that neighbors’ living so close to him.

Just to try and set our thoughts in the right direction we want to note that verses 10–11 are an obvious pair in parallel, whereas vv. 9 & 12 are bound by the theme of the slanderous gossip of the wicked against the restrained silence of the righteous. The four proverbs together thus form what is called, in poetry, a chiasmus; namely a rhetorical or literary figure in which words, grammatical constructions, or concepts are repeated in reverse order, in the same or a modified form; e.g. ‘Poetry is the record of the **best and happiest** moments of the **happiest and best** minds.’.

In v. 9 the righteous escape verbal attacks unharmed by following the teachings of wisdom, and that, according to v. 12, without resorting to a counterattack in kind. But the wicked can only spread vicious gossip. In this context the joy of the city at the death of the wicked has concrete meaning: its people will finally be free of their wagging tongues.

Just to think about the process of this verse, Solomon has his readers think through the profound contrast between the two “ends” of what he puts forth for us here.

- First, he directs our attention to the obvious truth that all of us have in our lives - that is that we all have a “way” in which we conduct ourselves among those around us, friends, neighbors, acquaintances, etc.
- Second, with different folks, we need to take care that we are dealing with them in proper fashions.
- This “manner of dealing” is that which we choose deliberately and, indeed, ought to see to it that we choose rightly.

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The word “void” is an adjective that is only used some 17 times in the OT. The essence of its’ meaning is to be empty or to want something that it ought to have. Thus it can speak of lacking or failing to have that which it ought to have. There is the implication, in most uses, that they “item” (or quality) that is in view ought to have “more” than it, indeed does.

In this case, it speaks of one who does not have the “wisdom” that he ought to have. It could be that it is knowledge or the ability to interpret knowledge, or other matters of like idea. Let’s remember that we are not just talking about a subtle or slight lack, but the truth that the one in view is “void” or completely lacking!

It is interesting that the word that is, in many translations, given as “wisdom” is not the word most used for the English word wisdom. In fact, it only thus translated 7 times out of the 592 times the form of the Hebrew word appears. Most often the translators gave it as “heart” (508X). It was given as mind or understanding and as midst right around 30X all told. The idea has to do with a purposeful exercise of what the mind and understanding direct one to do. There are a very few other shades of meaning that we need not speak of here.

It is not the classic idea of “wisdom” or of being “wise” in the common manner of our Biblical thinking, but it does have to do with the idea of determining ones’ behavior according to the determination of the mind or understanding sees in needful or best. We could look at it is choosing conduct to come down right in the “midst” of a possible course or courses of action.

I know this isn’t the clearest explanation of the idea of wisdom as it is presented in God’s Word but it will be sufficient when we consider that, with regard to the way in which we deal with those around us we are often presented with quite a number of choices and possibilities. The meaning here is that, if we are to be wise in our choice and our treatment of those about us, we need not to go to one of the extremes, but to ponder and think the matter through and select a choice that lies not on the edge but somewhere from in the midst as THAT is where God wishes to go. This is not to say that “right” is never definite or particular, but rather, that the wise thing is most often NOT what everyone wants or thinks but is something we must choose to pursue.

The conclusion we arrive at is for us to never be “empty” of this quality. The one who allows himself to be lacking of the quality of seeing to it that we choose from the midst of what our hearts and minds tell us we ought to do.

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It is both interesting and disturbing that Solomon tells us that the result this “emptiness” is the possession of the effective quality of “despising” the neighbor. “Despise” is one of the lesser used words in the OT. It speaks of despite or holding in a state of disgust. There is an emphasis in the word of the idea that it is not merely disliking something but that of utterly despising it.

There is the idea that one's despise for a thing is so fervent or total that you can't help but show it! It is not simply a mental distaste but a real and fervent despising.

That brings us to consider just what the sense of this first phrase truly is. Wisdom is, Biblically, supposed to be the quality that colors and gives our actions, choices and even thinking the tenor that it is desired by God to have. However, if we lack the "wisdom" that we have spoken, if we are "empty" of that quality, with it be a learnable and adoptable quality for all of God's children. If the believer does not do what is needful to learn the essence of exercising wisdom in our relationships with those around us, namely our neighbors.

In this usage, however, it should be thought of as more like the way in which we enter into our thinking, relating and dealing with our neighbor, namely those around us. Solomon is saying that, if we do not put the effort into thinking and pondering just how should be dealing with them so that we are doing so in the best way that God can lead us to, we are as much as "despising" them!! "Despising" is a word that is not used very often in the OT. It does not mean the one just doesn't "like" whoever is the person in view. It speak more of the actions that are the result of a profound dislike. It is active and "doing" that is the function of a virtual hatred on the doers part.

The point here is not that the one who is "devoid of wisdom" actually hates the neighbor, but that his resulting actions (or lack of them) is of the type that one who hated the neighbor would take. If we looked elsewhere in Proverbs, this would be the one who one who gossips, slanders, or destroys with words, and would be in contrast to what is portrayed, at the end of the verse, as the silence of the wise.

Note, at the end of this statement, that this is indeed contrasted to one who, having understanding, "holds his peace". This little phrase is actually contrasted with the common English saying "holding your piece" (or saying one's piece" which refers to speaking out what one has to say. I suspect that it was this saying that has arisen from what we see here in the text. So many people have something to say and to "contribute" to a matter or to an issue. They often just go ahead and say what it is that they have to say. They give their "piece", good or bad, profitable or damaging, building up or tearing down to the hearer and others around.

What Solomon is saying here is more than just refraining from blurting out whatever it is that you have to say. Solomon is concerned that nothing, absolutely nothing that could be considered our part in a matter be withheld. He tells us that it is a demonstration of "understanding" on our part if we simply remain "quiet" or at peace. "Understanding here speaks of knowledge and the ability to see what that which we have knowledge of applies to a matter and how we ought to apply or use that knowing to whatever it is that is in view. Solomon's implication is that the one in view will see to it that he knows what needs knowing concerning his neighbor and whatever regards the matter at

hand, and then act in accord with what knows ought to be done. Such a person does not allow circumstances or emotions to dictate actions or responses. They either act according to what their “wisdom” dictates they ought to do or they hold their “peace” and do little or nothing.

The summary here is that in our lives, as we relate to the “neighbors” around us (neighbors are those with whom we have close relationships and not just proximity), we MUST root and base our dealing with what, as believers, we know is that which God would desire for us to do; not merely preference and impulse. It ought to be either that, or we say and do nothing and we “hold our peace”. That is, by no means, always the easiest thing to do! Hence, Solomon’s warning/urging that it is the Godly thing to do.

To rehearse our interpretation here... we see that by a slight transposition the antithesis in this proverb is perhaps better expressed.

*“He that speaks contemptuously of his neighbor lacks wisdom.”*

*“A man of understanding is one who has too much self-knowledge to exalt himself above his neighbor as a judge.”*

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Silence, except from modest and prudent words, is the best self-defense. The folly and risk of contumelious words is here implied. We can look to the Scripture for some valuable illustrations to help our understanding:

- David and his eldest brother exhibit a contrast in this respect, the one provoking to wrath with his tongue, the other holding his peace (1 Sam. 17:28–30).
- Also, Shimei, with his injurious words, prepared a rod for his own back.
- The men of Ephraim, in like manner, put a scourge into the hands of the Gileadites when they reproached them so proudly (Judg. 12).
- On the other hand, how effectually did the calm, wise words of the Apostle Paul “preserve him” in scenes of tumult and under false accusation!
- We can also think of the cases of Job’s friends, of Hannah’s foes, and also of the Pharisees with Jesus, as instances in point.

By way of application - Here we have a rule which combines worldly wisdom with heavenly. Who that has any self-respect would not wince under the exposure of his own spite or folly? Well, then, this fear alone might restrain me from using derisive or scornful language towards my neighbor, from passing arrogant criticisms upon him. By doing this I have courted criticism myself, and have (and do) invite a severe judgment. The spirit of self-defense in the party attacked, of fair play in others on his behalf, is roused. I must expect to be called upon to prove my words or to “eat” them. Whatever ignorance, or inaccuracy, or want of logic I may have betrayed, will surely be mercilessly exposed, and my own faults and foibles dragged to light. This is only fair, and, though I may escape nine times, is sure to be my fate at the last. Besides which, I must needs

gain enemies and lose friends through such a habit, and be accounted a member of whatever group I am a part of.

Such considerations might of themselves have weight in favor of a modest reserve in speech over a boastful or indiscreet loquacity. But a higher motive for the Christian is our Savior's golden rule, as well as the example of Him who was meek and lowly. The more I know myself by comparison with Him, the less shall I be inclined to sit in judgment upon others and the more reserved I will be in the manner with I deal with my "neighbors". The less I trust to myself, the more sure I am that He will give me a mouth and wisdom in the day of trial.

*Then, O God, teach me to know mine own heart, that, judging myself aright, I may not be judged!*

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