

PROVERBS

The Man of Violence: A Vanishing Act

Proverbs 20:29 records a time-worn and proven truth: “The glory of young men is their strength, but the splendor of old men is their gray hair.” Any one of you may find yourself on a spectrum between these chapters of life (chances are that those around you will have a more accurate opinion about your place on that spectrum). There is no inherent evil in possessing the strength of a young man, nor is there inherent good in possessing the characteristics of old age. The glory in each is that they are from God and are developed in service of Him.

There is something strangely enchanting about strength. Bookshelves and TV channels are filled with larger-than-life stories of superheroes that leap buildings in single bounds and mighty warriors who can muster an army of few to victory over thousands. Unfortunately, God’s gift of strength so exaggerated and extolled in these stories is often used for evil. Proverbs 3:31 speaks of the “oppressor”, a man of violence who has taken the gift of strength and used it wrongfully as a means to his own ends. The wise fatherly counsel is against envy and emulation. “Do not envy the oppressor, and choose none of his ways (3:31).”

The glorification of violent strength did not begin with gangster rap or gunfighter ballads. In Genesis 4:23-24, we find Lamech’s poetic boasting of his own extravagant violence: “Then Lamech said to his wives: ‘Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; wives of Lamech, listen to my speech! For I have killed a man for wounding me, even a young man for hurting me. If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-seven fold.’” Sin aims to please self; strong

men often turn to violence to seek their own selfish gain and can look impressively successful in doing so.

Solomon has lived long enough by the writing of this collection of proverbs that he has witnessed what sort of end comes to the oppressor. As the king of a nation, he has seen the story of the man of violence unfold and has no doubt been involved in bringing more than a few such men to justice. He knows the law of the Lord, and he knows that God’s promises for the righteous and against the wicked never go unfulfilled. In fact, Solomon’s own family had become entangled in the messy results of strength used for purposes other than the Lord’s glory. His own father penned an excellent psalm that tells of the blessedness of trusting God and not worrying so much about the wicked man. David writes, “I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a native green tree. Yet he passed away, and behold, he was no more; indeed I sought him, but he could not be found (Psalm 37:35-36).” The man of violence is a vanishing act; now you see him prosper – then you see him no more.

The problem that faces the young man is that he sees the wicked “spreading himself like a native green tree.” ‘Bling’ and limousines steal his attention. The older man has seen the rise and fall of oppressors and knows that “The curse of the LORD is on the house of the wicked, but He blesses the home of the just (3:33).” It is the responsibility of the father to instruct the youth in this regard. The youth must know that “The wise shall inherit glory, but shame shall be the legacy of fools (3:35).”



LOOK CLOSELY

observation

Proverbs 3:27–35

27 Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, When it is in the power of your hand to do so. **28** Do not say to your neighbor, “Go, and come back, And tomorrow I will give it,” When you have it with you. **29** Do not devise evil against your neighbor, For he dwells by you for safety’s sake. **30** Do not strive with a man without cause, If he has done you no harm. **31** Do not envy the oppressor, And choose none of his ways; **32** For the perverse person is an abomination to the LORD, But His secret counsel is with the upright. **33** The curse of the LORD is on the house of the wicked, But He blesses the home of the just. **34** Surely He scorns the scornful, But gives grace to the humble. **35** The wise shall inherit glory, But shame shall be the legacy of fools.

This section can be divided into 3 parts—vv 27&28, 29&30, 31-35. The first two contain a prohibition followed by a second prohibition that serves to further illustrate the point. The third section gives a prohibition followed by four reasons for the prohibition that are in the form of contrasts.

Underline the prohibitions in vv 27 & 29 in one color and the illustrations in vv 28 & 30 in another color.

Mark the prohibition in v. 31 in one color and the four reasons in vv 32-35 in another.

Circle the word “but” each time it is used in vv 32-35.

Identification Key

Develop your own key for identifying the various words and phrases in the text provided. Use different colored pencils, circles, boxes, underlining, etc., but be consistent from week-to-week.



THINK CAREFULLY

interpretation

The idea behind the word **devise** “is that of cutting through some material (dirt or metal) or, in the case of thinking, through the mental fog that must be cleared away. When the word concerns thinking, it normally refers to the devising of evil plans.” (Peter A. Stevenson, *A Commentary on Proverbs*, BJU Press, 53).

“The word **strive** most often refers to physical conflict, combat between two men or groups. ... Most likely, in view of the setting of this verse, the thought here is of quarreling, verbal reproof of your neighbor when he is innocent of wrongdoing, v 30.” (Peter A. Stevenson, *A Commentary on Proverbs*, BJU Press, 53).

An **oppressor** is literally ‘a man of violence’ someone who uses force or power to hurt others while benefitting himself.

The Hebrew word behind the word translated **shame** here “occurs seventeen times, eight of them in Proverbs. In most cases, the term is general, denoting some form of public degradation, the loss of social esteem. ... This is the portion of one who rejects godly ways.” (Peter A. Stevenson, *A Commentary on Proverbs*, BJU Press, 56).

To whom is good rightfully “due”?

How does the use of “neighbor” in v 28 expand the meaning of the prohibition in v 27?

State these verses as a principle.

What attitudes of the heart are at work in someone who would devise evil against a neighbor or strive with someone who hasn’t harmed them?

What about an oppressor (a man of violence) could we be tempted to envy?

From vv 32-35 make a list of the character descriptions of the oppressor and a separate list for the descriptions of the righteous.

From vv 32-35 make a list that describes God’s view of or God’s actions toward the oppressor. Make a separate list of God’s actions toward the righteous.

State these verses in the form of a principle.



RESPOND WISELY

application

Recall some occasions when you have had the opportunity to be generous. How was the other person blessed?
How were you blessed in turn?

How can we protect ourselves from the heart attitudes at work in vv 29-30?

How can God's view of the oppressor be used to combat envy?

How can God's promise to the righteous be used to combat envy?

Turn these principles into prayers for yourself, your family, and others.