

CONTRADICTIONARY PROVERBS

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Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

Much of the following information is adapted from Dave Bland, Proverbs and the Formation of Character (Cascade Books, 2015), especially pages 78-79, 97-98, 116-117.

The Challenge of Dueling Proverbs

Proverbs 26:4 — Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.

vs.

Proverbs 26:5 — Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.

At first glance, some proverbs seem to contradict each other. Is the Bible contradicting itself? Or is there some sense in which both proverbs are true, when used appropriately?

SOME DUELING PROVERBS FROM OUR OWN CULTURE

“The early bird gets the _____.”

“The second mouse gets the _____.”

“Out of sight, out of _____.”

vs.

“Absence makes the heart grow _____.”

“Birds of a feather _____.”

“Opposites _____.”

“You’re never too _____ to learn.”

“You can’t teach an _____ dog new tricks.”

“A few years ago I heard a man talk about his family gathering together for Thanksgiving dinner. Everyone crowded in the kitchen and busily prepared the meal, bumping elbows and bodies. Suddenly his grandmother hollered out, ‘Too many cooks spoil the broth.’ Everyone scattered, leaving her to prepare the meal in a more orderly manner. Then after the Thanksgiving dinner, as she walked into the kitchen with a load of dirty dishes, she announced, ‘Many hands make light work.’ All came running to help clean up. Dueling proverbs!” *Dave Bland, Proverbs and the Formation of Character, page 117*

- What is the secret to resolving the tension between dueling or seemingly-contradictory proverbs?
- Why are dueling proverbs needed?

Examples of Dueling Proverbs

These proverbs stand in tension with one another. What is God trying to teach us through these dueling proverb pairs?

Should we get involved in other people's business?

26:17 — Whoever meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears.

24:11-12 — Rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter. If you say, "Behold, we did not know this," does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it, and will he not repay man according to his work

Should we give bribes?

17:23 — The wicked accepts a bribe in secret to pervert the ways of justice.

21:14 — A gift in secret averts anger, and a concealed bribe, strong wrath.

What makes plans succeed?

15:22 — Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed.

19:21 — Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.

Should a person drink wine (drink alcohol, use intoxicants)?

20:1 — Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.

23:31-32 — Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. In the end it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder.

31:6-7 — Give strong drink to the one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress; let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more.

Where does poverty come from?

10:4 — A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.

13:23 — The fallow ground of the poor would yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice.

13:25 — The righteous has enough to satisfy his appetite, but the belly of the wicked suffers want.

14:23 — In all toil there is profit, but mere talk tends only to poverty.

18:23 — The poor use entreaties, but the rich answer roughly. (NIV: "The poor plead for mercy, but the rich answer harshly.")

21:5 — The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty.

23:19-21 — Hear, my son, and be wise, and direct your heart in the way. Be not among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters of meat, for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and slumber will clothe them with rags.

How dependable is wealth?

10:15 — A rich man's wealth is his strong city; the poverty of the poor is their ruin.

18:11 — A rich man's wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall in his imagination.

23:4-5 — Do not toil to acquire wealth; be discerning enough to desist. When your eyes light on it, it is gone, for suddenly it sprouts wings, flying like an eagle toward heaven.

How close a relationship should you build with your neighbors?

25:16-17 — If you have found honey, eat only enough for you, lest you have your fill of it and vomit it. Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house, lest he have his fill of you and hate you.

27:10 — Do not forsake your friend and your father's friend, and do not go to your brother's house in the day of your calamity. Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother who is far away.

27:14 — Whoever blesses his neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing.