

Business and Possessions

“Wealth dishonestly obtained shall waste away. . . .” (Proverbs 13:11; SPRL).

Solomon gave various kinds of advice about business and endeavor.

I. ABOUT SUNDRY MATTERS

Make careful preparation before being committed to a project, he said. Do not wait until disaster strikes before seeking protection for one’s goods and one’s job.

First put all in order out of doors and make everything ready on the land. Then establish your house and home (Proverbs 24:27; NEB).

If the serpent bite before it is charmed, then there is no advantage in the charmer (Ecclesiastes 10:11; ASV).

Solomon also advised care in maintaining all possessions. In this imperfect world everything tends to continual degeneration, and neglect will ruin as much as active destruction (see Proverbs 29:21).

Know well the condition of your flocks, and give attention to your herd; for riches do not last for ever; and does a crown endure to all generations? When the grass is gone, and the new growth appears, and the herbage of the mountains is gathered, the lambs will provide your clothing, and the goats the price of a field; there will be enough goats’ milk for your food, for the food of your household and maintenance for your maidens (Proverbs 27:23-27; RSV).

Good tools and a good head make one’s efforts more successful.

If for want of sharpening the axe is blunt, you have to strike very hard, but the reward given by wisdom is success (Ecclesiastes 10:10; JB).

Every occupation in life carries some hazards with it. We should be prepared to suffer injury from time to time (see Ecclesiastes 10:8, 9).

Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein: and he that rolleth a stone, it will return upon him (Proverbs 26:27; KJV).

Adversity tests our strength.

If thou faint in the day of adversity, thy strength is small (Proverbs 24:10; KJV).

Solomon advised against being afraid to take some risks. That is an excuse of the lazy. However, he also advised against committing everything on a single venture. A cardinal rule of good finance is to diversify (see Ecclesiastes 11:4).

In the morning sow your seed betimes, and do not stop work until evening, for you do not know whether this or that sowing will be successful, or whether both alike will do well (Ecclesiastes 11:6; NEB).

In trade dealings with people, remember that frankness and objectivity are rare. We should not naively trust all that a trader says.

It is bad, it is bad, saith the buyer; but when he is gone his way, then he boasteth (Proverbs 20:14; ASV).

Solomon advised against being hasty to borrow. Debt puts one in a kind of bind. And when one does become indebted to another, whether from borrowing or wages, it is prudent to pay promptly (see Proverbs 22:7).

Withhold not good from them to whom it is due, when it is in the power of thy hand to do it. Say not unto thy neighbor, Go and come again, and tomorrow I will give; when thou hast it by thee (Proverbs 3:27, 28; KJV).

Solomon strongly warned about the danger of becoming surety—making a financial commitment for another. It is a highly risky thing, usually leading to loss. He said that only fools practice it (see Proverbs 17:18; 22:26, 27).

My son, if you have become surety for your neighbor, have given your pledge for a stranger; if you are snared in the utterance of your lips, caught in the words of your mouth. Then do this, my son, and save yourself, for you have come into your neighbor's power: go, hasten and importune your neighbor. Give your eyes no sleep, and your eyelids no slumber; save yourself like a gazelle from the hunter, like a bird from the hand of the fowler (Proverbs 6:1-5; RSV).

It is especially wise to shun financial dealings with recent acquaintances. Police files bulge with pathetic cases of people taken in by confidence men and "bunco" artists who prey on the gullible. The swindler's deal may look like a sure thing; that is because he has worked hard to make it appear that way. He relies on people's naivety and/or greed to entice them, and whoever goes along with him deserves to lose it all (see Proverbs 20:16; 27:13).

He who makes himself responsible for a strange man will undergo much loss; but the hater of such undertakings will be safe (Proverbs 11:15; BAS).

II. ABOUT MONEY

No one needs to be told that money is good to have. It not only protects, but, as a universal medium of exchange, it can also bring one almost anything.

For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money. . . . (Ecclesiastes 7:12; RSV).

A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh merry; but money answereth all things (Ecclesiastes 10:19; KJV).

But the protection of money is limited, Solomon said. Whoever puts all of his trust in money will eventually be betrayed. Moreover, money is useless when disaster strikes—although it may be able to help some of the survivors (see Proverbs 11:28).

Riches profit not in the day of wrath. . . . (Proverbs 11:4; KJV).

Both Solomon and Agur advised against even trying to become rich. Money is an unreliable, slippery commodity (see Proverbs 30:7-9).

Do not toil to acquire wealth; be wise enough to desist. When your eyes light upon it, it is gone; for suddenly it takes to itself wings, flying like an eagle toward heaven (Proverbs 23:4, 5; RSV).

Moreover, accumulating wealth will not bring satisfaction. Someone may own twenty cars, but he can only drive one at a time (besides, it usually takes time and effort to learn to enjoy any one thing). He will also need many employees to care for them, and they likely will enjoy them all as much, perhaps even more so than he does.

He who loves money will not be satisfied with money; nor he who loves wealth with gain: this also is vanity. When goods increase, they increase who eat them; and what gain has their owner but to see them with his eyes (Ecclesiastes 5:10, 11; RSV).

Remember Solomon's description of certain kinds of rich people:

There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy upon men: a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them; this is vanity; it is a sore affliction. If a man begets a hundred children, and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but he does not enjoy life's good things, and also has no burial, I say that an untimely birth is better off than he. For it comes into vanity and goes into darkness, and in darkness its name is covered; moreover it has not seen the sun or known anything; yet it finds rest rather than he. Even though he should live a thousand years twice told, yet enjoy no good—do not all go to the one place? (Ecclesiastes 6:1-6; RSV).

A person may inherit some wealth, but there are serious risks in the sudden acquisition of money unless he is well prepared for how to use it (see Proverbs 19:14).

An inheritance may be gotten hastily at the beginning; but the end thereof shall not be blessed (Proverbs 20:21; KJV).

III. ABOUT GREED

Excessive appetite for riches is called avarice, greed, or covetousness. As earlier stated, this lust is another common vice, a type of gluttony for money involving the lust of the eye. Its dynamics are similar to all the others; its pleasures are deceptive and ultimately unsatisfying. Moreover, greed provokes one to illegalities. It tempts people to commit dishonesty and fraud. But, Solomon said, these kinds of profits are short-lived (see Proverbs 15:27; 21:6; 28:20, 22).

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Greed is another moral disease of the will, and, like all the others, it is in plague proportions today. My intuition tells me that the frantic increasing of prices and wages of our recent “overheated” economy was the result of “overheated” greed in the hearts of too many people. And now it seems that we are fighting greed with greed. Solomon disapproved of profiteering by interest and overcharge regardless of who does it:

He who increases his wealth by interest and overcharge gathers it for him who is kind to the poor (Proverbs 28:8; NAB).

Paul said that greed fuels all manner of evils:

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil
(1 Timothy 6:10; NIV).

Solomon mentions a few of these evils. He referred to theft when he warned about adultery:

Men do not despise a thief, if he steal to satisfy his soul when he is hungry; but if he be found, he shall restore sevenfold; he shall give all the substance of his house (Proverbs 6:30, 31; KJV).

Effective and just penalties for theft include full compensation for the victim paid by the thief out of his own pocket, compensation being much more (“sevenfold”) than simply returning in good condition what was taken. Moses’ law (a model for any government) contains many guidelines for the application of justice in both criminal cases and civil disputes. Solomon also warned about cooperating with thieves, even when it involves simply not informing about them.

The partner of a thief hates his own life; he hears the curse, but discloses nothing (Proverbs 29:24; RSV).

Fraud and bribery are the other evils Solomon mentions. He spoke of two kinds of fraud: altering measuring scales and changing property boundaries. The list of possible ways to commit fraud is mammoth and is growing. These two were apparently common examples during Solomon’s time (see Proverbs 16:11; 20:10, 23; 22:28; 23:10, 11).

A false balance is abomination to the Lord: but a just weight is his delight (Proverbs 11:1; KJV).

Bribery involves an unjust exchange where both parties seek more than they deserve. It is a corruption of justice and is condemned by the Lord. Nevertheless, a bribe can have power—almost magical power. It can solve a man’s problems when nothing else can. Therefore, it is another widespread moral disease (see Proverbs 17:8, 23; 18:16; 28:21; Ecclesiastes 7:7).

He that is greedy of gain troubleth his own house; but he that hateth bribes shall live (Proverbs 15:27; ASV).

CONCLUSION

A man’s business and possessions can bring blessings or misery. Happiness is found in a wise approach to business and a wise use of our possessions.

THOUGHTS ON WISDOM

“Wisdom is not finally tested in the schools, Wisdom cannot be passed from one having it to another not having it, Wisdom is of the soul, is not susceptible of proof, is its own proof.”

Walt Whitman, *Song of the Open Road*

“To have a low opinion of our merits and to think highly of others is an evidence of wisdom.”

Thomas à Kempis

“Wisdom precedes, religion follows: for the knowledge of God comes first, His worship is the result of knowledge.”

Lacantius, *Divine Institutes*

“The good Lord set definite limits on man’s wisdom, but set no limits on his stupidity—and that’s just not fair!”

Konrad Adenauer, *The Churchman*

“He who provides for this life, but takes no care for eternity, is wise for a moment, but a fool forever.”

John Tillotson

“Nine-tenths of wisdom is being wise in time.”

Theodore Roosevelt,
Speech delivered in 1917

“The greatest good is wisdom.”

St. Augustine, *Soliloquies*, I