

SIRACH 4:11 – 6:17

¹¹Wisdom lifts up her children and embraces those who seek her.

¹²Whoever loves her loves life, and those who seek her from early morning are filled with joy. ¹³Whoever holds her fast inherits glory, and the Lord blesses the place she enters.

¹⁴Those who serve her minister to the Holy One; the Lord loves those who love her.

¹⁵Those who obey her will judge the nations, and all who listen to her will live secure.

¹⁶If they remain faithful, they will inherit her; their descendants will also obtain her.

Wisdom is personified as a woman who is deeply concerned for us, her children. She wants to lift us up and hold us to her bosom, and will do so if we are genuinely desirous of living wisely.

If we love [Greek: *agapān*; ἀγαπᾶν] life, we must love wisdom; that is to say, we must choose wisdom and be faithful in our commitment to live accordingly. If we begin each day, ready to embrace and be embraced by wisdom we will know a profound joy (verse 12). We will also know the glory of YHWH, and experience his blessing (verse 13).

The word translated ‘serve’ in verse 14 is *latreuō* [λατρεύω]. We must see wisdom as divine, and minister [Greek: *leitourgein*; λειτουργεῖν; from which ‘liturgy’ is derived] to the Holy One; that is to say our lives will be consecrated to the Transcendent One who is present and acting everywhere and in everything.

We are assured that YHWH loves [once again ἀγαπᾶν] those who love wisdom. John draws on this when he has Jesus (the human revelation of God’s Wisdom) say:

If you love me, you will keep my word, and my Father will love you, and we will come to you and make our home in you.

– John 14:23

Those who live according to the dictates of wisdom reveal to the nations what really matters, and how God judges human behaviour. This idea is picked up by Jesus (see Matthew 19:28) and by Paul (see 1Corinthians 6:12). The wise will live securely for they will live in the tent that God has pitched among us: the tent of Wisdom (compare John 1:14, ‘God’s Word pitched his tent among us’).

God wants us ‘to live and to live to the full’ (see John 10:10). If we listen to Wisdom, and are faithful, we will enjoy the inheritance that God wills for us, and we will have it to hand on to our children in their turn.

In 2:1 Ben Sira wrote:

My child, when you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for testing.

He accepts traditional wisdom that claims that good is rewarded and evil punished. However, he is also aware of the fact that this is not always obvious. A person can be doing all that has just been said in verses 11-16 and still experience suffering. Ben Sira offers the traditional explanation: God is testing us to see that our obedience in genuine and persevering.

We think of the way God is portrayed as testing Abraham (see Genesis 22:1). The wandering of the people in the wilderness is also understood in this way:

Remember the long way that YHWH your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments.

– Deuteronomy 8:2

Confident that he will pass the test, the Psalmist prays:

Prove me, YHWH, and try me; test my heart and mind.

– Psalm 26:2

For Ben Sira ‘discipline’(verse 17) is an essential element in education (see 1:27).

We are to trust, not our own innocence, but the promise of God expressed in the Torah and in the covenant. When we have passed the test, our hearts will experience the promised joy. The experience of suffering enables us to penetrate to the inner depths of Wisdom, where her ‘secrets’(see 3:22) are revealed [apokaluptō; ἀποκαλύπτων; whence ‘apocalypse’](verse 18; see 1:8,30). Ben Sira knows that the acquiring of wisdom is not easy or automatic, and being faithful to it demands a radical commitment.

If we turn our back on wisdom and stray from the wise path, we are heading for certain ruin

¹⁷For at first she will walk with them on tortuous paths; she will bring fear and dread upon them, and will torment them by her discipline until she trusts them, and she will test them with her ordinances.

¹⁸Then she will come straight back to them again and gladden them, and will reveal her secrets to them.

¹⁹If they go astray she will forsake them, and hand them over to their ruin.

Fight to the death for truth

²⁰Watch for the opportune time, keep free of what is wrong, and do not be ashamed of who you are. ²¹For there is a shame laden with guilt, and there is a shame that merits honour and respect. ²²Do not favour what is to your own discredit, and let no one intimidate you, to bring about your downfall. ²³Do not refrain from speaking at the proper moment, and do not hide your wisdom. ²⁴For wisdom becomes known through speech, and instruction through the tongue's rejoinder. ²⁵Never speak against the truth, but be ashamed of your ignorance.

²⁶Do not be ashamed to confess your sins, but do not try to struggle against the raging of a torrent.

²⁷Do not abase yourself before a fool, or show partiality to a ruler.

²⁸Fight to the death for truth, and YHWH will fight for you.

Ben Sira appears to be encouraging his students to avoid the attractions of Hellenism and never to be ashamed of being Jews. Feelings of shame are not always bad, but they are when people are ashamed of being a Jew. Being ashamed of one's sins 'merits honour and respect' (verse 21).

Verse 22 reinforces his warning against being pressured into conforming to the prevailing Hellenism. They should not be backward in arguing the benefits of the wisdom of their Jewish heritage. In this way they will demonstrate to their opponents the values of their tradition. They must remember, however, that there is a 'right time' [Greek: *kairos*; *καιρος*] for everything (compare Ecclesiastes 3).

The 'truth' [*alētheia*; *ἀληθεία*] is the truth about God as revealed in the Torah. If they are going to be ashamed it should not be of their Judaism, but of their failure to know the glory that is theirs. Jesus' disciples saw him as the revelation of the truth (see John 14:6), and experienced the freedom that came when they believed him ('the truth will set you free', John 8:32).

When we fail we should be ready to admit it and change our ways. However, we must be aware of our own weakness and know when to speak out and when to be silent. There is no merit in trying to battle against a raging river.

In context 'a fool' probably refers to a Jew who has abandoned his faith for the apparent advantages of Hellenism. Ben Sira exhorts his students to stand up to such people. If they find their leaders advising compromise, they should stand up to them as well.

The word translated 'fight' in verse 28 is the Greek *agōnizomai* [*ἀγωνίζομαι*; from which derives our word 'agony']. We can be sure that if we put our life on the line in our fight for truth, we will not be alone. YHWH, our God, will be at our side (see Exodus 14:14). As Jesus once said: 'I am with you always, till the end of time' (Matthew 28:20).

Verse 29 is perhaps well expressed in the English saying: 'actions speak louder than words.' Ben Sira wants his students to match big words with big deeds. Saint Paul makes a similar statement:

The kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power.

– 1Corinthians 4:20

Verse 30 warns against bad ways of running a home.

²⁹Do not be haughty in your speech, and sluggish and remiss in your deeds.

³⁰Do not be like a lion in your home, or suspicious of your servants.

In verse 31 Ben Sira is drawing on Deuteronomy:

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that YHWH your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbour. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be.

– Deuteronomy 15:7-8

³¹Do not let your hand be stretched out to receive and closed when it is time to give.

As Paul said in his farewell speech to the elders at Miletus:

In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

– Acts 20:35

He is drawing on Jesus' words:

Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again ... do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return ... give

– Luke 6:30, 35, 38

Whatever we give, it is a true gift only to the extent that we give ourselves in giving it. Jesus is the supreme example of this. To quote Paul again:

The life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me.

– Galatians 2:20

¹Do not rely on your wealth. Do not say, "I have the power to do it."

²Do not count on your mind and strength in pursuing the desires of your heart.

³Do not say, "Who can prevail against me?" for the Lord will surely punish you.

⁴Do not say, "I sinned, yet what has happened to me?" The Lord is slow to anger.

⁵Do not be so confident of forgiveness that you add sin to sin. ⁶Do not say, "His mercy is great, he will forgive the multitude of my sins," for both mercy and wrath are with him, and his anger will rest on sinners.

⁷Do not delay to turn back to the Lord, and do not postpone it from day to day; for suddenly the wrath of the Lord will come upon you, and at the time of punishment you will perish.

⁸Do not depend on dishonest wealth, for it will not benefit you on the day of calamity.

We recall the words of Jesus:

Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

– Luke 12:15

The Psalmist reminds us that 'power belongs to God' (Psalm 62:11).

Paul picks up Ben Sira's idea when he writes:

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

– 1 Timothy 6:17

In verses 2-3 Ben Sira warns against relying on our own intellectual or physical strength when 'pursuing the desires of your heart'. The author of Ecclesiastes stresses the importance of 'following the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes', so long as we remember that it matters what we do, and 'for all these things God will bring you into judgment' (Ecclesiastes 11:9).

On verses 4-7 compare:

Because sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the human heart is fully set to do evil ... It will not be well with the wicked, neither will they prolong their days like a shadow, because they do not stand in fear before God.

– Ecclesiastes 8:11-13

If punishment for sin is not apparent, it is because 'YHWH is slow to anger' (see Exodus 34:6). On God's 'anger' see the commentary on 1:11-21, pages 19-22). God is giving the sinner time to repent.

It is true that God is continually offering us forgiveness, for God wants us to live in communion with him. Sin does not stop God's offering. However, it does block our capacity to welcome the love that God is offering us. We can harden our heart against grace. 'Mercy' (verse 6) is the word we use to speak of God's faithful love for us sinners. 'Wrath' (verse 6) is the word we use to speak of the effects of our failure to welcome this love (see Isaiah 1:19-20).

In verse 9 Ben Sira quotes two proverbs, which he applies in verse 10 to the temptation to take the path of least resistance by adapting to whatever point of view is acceptable to one's present companions. He wants his students to stand by what they know (from the Torah and from their tradition), and not to go along with those who would persuade them to choose another path.

In verses 11-14, Ben Sira develops his point concerning the importance of being consistent in what one says. In the Newer Testament James highlights the harm caused by the tongue:

Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder whenever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

– James 3:2-8

If we do not heed the advice of verse 15, we will end up making enemies, and getting a bad reputation (6:1). Similarly, if our speech is not consistent. As Jesus said: 'the mouth speaks from what is in the heart' (Matthew 12:34). A pure heart speaks with a consistent clarity.

**⁹Do not winnow in every wind.
Do not follow every path.**

**¹⁰Stand firm for what you know, and
let your speech be consistent.**

**¹¹Be quick to hear, but deliberate in
answering. ¹²If you know what to
say, answer your neighbour; but if
not, put your hand over your mouth.
¹³Honour and dishonour come from
speaking, and the tongue of mor-
tals may be their downfall. ¹⁴Do
not be called double-tongued and
do not lay traps with your tongue;
for shame comes to the thief, and
severe condemnation to the double-
tongued.**

**¹⁵In great and small matters cause no
harm.**

**^{6:1}Do not become an enemy instead
of a friend; for a bad name incurs
shame and reproach; so it is with the
double-tongued sinner.**

²Do not fall into the grip of passion, lest like fire it consume you. ³Your leaves will be devoured and your fruit destroyed, and you will be left like a withered tree.

⁴Evil passion destroys those who have it, and makes them the laughingstock of their enemies.

‘Passion’ in verse 2 translates the Greek *psychē* [ψυχή], a word which is repeated at the end of the sentence (and is translated here simply as ‘you’). The Hebrew is *nepeš* [נֶפֶשׁ], which refers to a person’s ‘life force’ or ‘vital energy’. It is frequently used as the equivalent of our ‘person’ or of the personal pronoun, especially in relation to desiring what we need to be alive. We need breath. We need food. Ultimately we need God, the source of our vital energy.

nepeš occurs 144 times in the psalms often referring to our longing for God, the only one who can breathe into us our life force:

With all my being I thirst for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?

– Psalm 42:3 (see Psalm 63:1)

On the day I called, you answered me, you increased
my strength of soul.

– Psalm 138:3

Return, O my soul, to your rest, for YHWH has dealt
bountifully with you.

– Psalm 116:7

Whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from
YHWH; but those sin who violate my soul; all who
hate me love death.

– Proverbs 8:35-36

In the ancient creation myth we read:

YHWH God formed humankind from the dust of
the ground, and breathed into the human nostrils
the breath of life; and so humankind became a
living being [*nepeš*].

– Genesis 2:7

Obviously not all our longings lead to life. Ben Sira is referring to desires that are out of keeping with our nature: desires which, if followed, devour the fruit and cause the tree to wither – what he calls in verse 4 ‘evil passion’ (compare Job 31:9-12; see also the contrast in Psalm 1).

Ben Sira is advising his students on the subject of friendship. He will return to the topic in 7:18; 11:29–12:18; 22:19-26; 37:1-6.

Proverbs 16:21 reminds us that ‘pleasant speech increases persuasiveness’ (see verse 5). On verse 8 see Proverbs 18:24, which warns against ‘friends who play at friendship’.

An example of verse 12 is found in Job:

All my intimate friends abhor me,
and those whom I loved have turned
against me.

– Job 19:19

In verses 14-16 Ben Sira describes a reliable friend.

In verses 16-17 he speaks of ‘those who fear YHWH’ (see the comment on 1:8, 11-21, pages 19-23). Real friendship is possible only to a person who has a profound sense of the sacred, and who is obedient to the Torah. How can we truly love someone if we do not see them as made in the image of God, who is the source of their life and who sustains them in love? If we do not see that, we do not see the person as they really are; our relationship is not built on a sure foundation.

⁵Pleasant speech multiplies friends, and a gracious tongue prompts a courteous response. ⁶Let your acquaintances be many, but confide in one in a thousand.

⁷When you gain friends, gain them through testing, and do not be too ready to trust them. ⁸For there are friends who are such when it suits them, but they will not stand by you in time of trouble. ⁹And there are friends who change into enemies, and tell of the quarrel to your disgrace.

¹⁰And there are friends who sit at your table, but they will not be with you when trouble comes.

¹¹When you are prosperous, they become your second self, and lord it over your servants; ¹²but if you are brought low, they turn against you, and hide themselves from you.

¹³Keep away from your enemies, and be on guard with your friends.

¹⁴Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter: whoever finds one has found a treasure. ¹⁵Faithful friends are beyond price; no sum can balance their worth. ¹⁶Faithful friends are life-saving medicine; and those who fear the Lord will find them.

¹⁷Those who fear the Lord direct their friendship aright, for as they are, so are their neighbours also.

