

SIRACH 6:18 - 14:19

18My son, from your youth choose discipline, and so find wisdom with greying hair.

19Come to her like one who ploughs and sows, and wait for her good harvest. For when you cultivate her you will toil but little, and soon you will eat of her produce.

20She seems very harsh to the undisciplined; fools cannot abide her. 21She will be like a heavy stone to them, and they will not delay in casting her aside.

22For discipline is like her name; she is not readily perceived by many.

23Listen, my son, and accept my judgment; do not reject my counsel. 24Put your feet into her fetters, and your neck into her collar. 25Bend your shoulders and carry her, and do not fret under her bonds.

Ben Sira is telling his students that if they want to grow in wisdom as they age they must resolve from their youth to live disciplined lives [Greek: *paideia*, *παιδεία*; Hebrew: *מוֹסָר*, *mūsār*]. This encompasses teaching that is systematic, as well as correction and whatever is deemed necessary for a student to learn (see Sirach 1:27; 4:17; 4:24).

Wisdom is a gift from God, but we must work at it. There will be no harvest without ploughing and sowing (verse 19).

A ‘fool’ [Greek: *akardios*, *ἀκάρδιος*; Hebrew *אָוִיל*, *’awîl*] is a person who does not have the heart to work in a disciplined way, who resists education, who thinks he knows but takes no care to check, who won’t listen and won’t learn.

The fool despises wisdom and discipline.

– Proverbs 1:7

Ben Sira is using words of similar sound to make his point. *mūsār* (discipline), *maśśā’* (burden), *sūr* (cast aside).

In verses 24-25 he returns to the image of the plough. It is not easy to bear the yoke of the Torah, but from the hard work of ploughing comes the joy of the harvest. Ben Sira agrees with the author of the third lamentation:

It is good to bear the yoke from one’s youth.

– Lamentation 3:27

Jeremiah complains:

Long ago you broke your yoke and burst your bonds, and you said, “I will not serve!”

– Jeremiah 2:20

Jesus offers a yoke that is better than the Torah:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

– Matthew 11:28-29

Ben Sira speaks of ‘rest’ in verse 28.

‘Soul’ in verse 26 translates the Greek *psychē* (see page 52). Ben Sira is drawing on Deuteronomy:

You shall love YHWH your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

– Deuteronomy 6:5

Verse 27 echoes Jeremiah:

When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says YHWH.

– Jeremiah 29:13-14

Verses 29-31 use the traditional image of clothing to speak of the virtues that people see when they look upon a wise person. In the Newer Testament Paul is always telling us to clothe ourselves in Christ (see Colossians 3:12-14; Romans 13:14; Ephesians 4:24). Wisdom’s ‘bonds’ are the ‘purple cord’ that reminds his students that they are Jews, and that they must be faithful to the Torah, and not give in to the temptation to conform to the Hellenist world in which they live.

His students must first want wisdom. They must then apply themselves to the discipline that is necessary to acquire it (verses 32-33).

They can’t do this on their own. If they have the good fortune to encounter a wise person, they should do all they can to ‘attach themselves’ to him (verses 34-36).

Earlier he wrote:

If you desire wisdom, keep the commandments, and YHWH will lavish her upon you.

– Sirach 1:26

It is on this note that Ben Sira concludes this teaching about wisdom. We recall Psalm 1.

Happy are those whose delight is in the law of YHWH, and who meditate day and night on his law.

– Psalm 1:1-2

²⁶Draw close to her with all your soul, and keep her ways with all your might. ²⁷Search her out and discover her, seek her and you will find her; and when you get hold of her, do not let her go. ²⁸Then at last you will find the rest she gives, and she will be changed into joy for you.

²⁹Then her fetters will become for you a strong defence, and her collar a glorious robe. ³⁰Her yoke will be your golden ornament, and her bonds your purple cord. ³¹You will wear her like a glorious robe, and put her on like a splendid crown.

³²If you are willing, my son, you can be disciplined, and if you apply yourself you will become clever.

³³If you love to listen you will gain knowledge, and if you pay attention you will become wise.

³⁴Frequent the company of the elders. Who is wise? Attach yourself to such a one. ³⁵Be ready to listen to every godly discourse, and let no wise proverb escape you. ³⁶If you see an intelligent person, rise early to visit him; let your feet wear out his doorstep.

³⁷Reflect on the statutes of the Lord, and meditate at all times on his commandments. It is he who will give insight to your mind, and your desire for wisdom he will grant.

Conduct of the wise

¹Do no evil. Do not let evil overtake you.

²Stay away from wrong, and it will turn away from you.

³Do not sow in the furrows of injustice, lest you harvest it sevenfold.

⁴Do not seek office from God, or a place of honour from the king.

⁵Do not assert your righteousness before the Lord, or flaunt your wisdom before the king.

⁶Do not seek to become a judge, if you are not determined to root out crime; or you will be pressured into being partial to the powerful, and so mar your integrity.

⁷Do not commit an offence before the congregation, and do not disgrace yourself before the assembly.

⁸Do not repeat a sin; not even for one will you go unpunished.

⁹Do not say, "He will consider the great number of my gifts, and when I make an offering to the Most High God, he will accept it."

¹⁰Do not grow weary when you pray; do not neglect to give alms.

There are echoes of verse 1 in Paul:

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

– Romans 12:21

One of the perceived 'advantages' of Hellenization was the possibility of social advancement (verse 4).

Verse 5 is standard wisdom:

How can a human being be just before God?

– Job 9:2

Do not enter into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.

– Psalm 143:2

To be raised to the rank of administering justice carries enormous risks. Ben Sira warns his students not to aspire to such a position unless they are determined to resist the pressure of the rich and powerful, and to make just judgments whatever the cost.

Verse 7 covers giving false witness, accepting a bribe, favouring the powerful, failing to tell the whole truth. Ben Sira speaks of the 'congregation' (עֲדָתָא; the people of the covenant) and the 'assembly' (קְהֵלָא; those called together by God).

In verse 9 Ben Sira repeats the traditional teaching that sacrifices and offerings are no substitute for ethical behaviour (see Proverbs 21:27; Amos 5:21-24; Isaiah 1:10-16; Micah 6:6-8).

Prayer (verse 10) is central to our life. God is the source of our life and of all good. Prayer is turning towards God and opening ourselves to welcome God's gift.

On the giving of alms see 3:30-31, page 41.

Behind verse 11 is the assumption that it is God who determines the way people are (see commentary on pages 20-21).

‘Violence’ in verse 12 translates the Hebrew ḥāmās [חַמָּס]. This is the main sin that determined God to undo his creation and return everything to primeval chaos (see Genesis 6:13).

Lying (verse 13), especially (but not only) under oath, is frequently condemned in the Bible (see Hosea 4:2; Micah 6:12; Jeremiah 9:3; Isaiah 59:3; Leviticus 19:11). In the Newer Testament see Colossians 3:9 and James 3:14.

Qohelet, too, warns against babbling:

Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few.

– Ecclesiastes 5:2

In relation to prayer (verse 14) Jesus says:

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.

– Matthew 6:7

Work (verse 15) was conceived as part of God’s original plan in creation:

YHWH God took the human being and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

– Genesis 2:15

In context verse 16 may reflect the tendency of city people to look down on farmers and the virtues that went with the hard work of the agricultural community. On God’s ‘anger’ see 1:11-21 (pages 19-22).

Jesus reminds us:

If you exalt yourself you will be humbled; if you humble yourself you will be exalted.

– Luke 14:11

Pride is foolish since all will end up in the tomb where worms will devour our flesh (see Isaiah 14:11).

¹¹Do not ridicule a person who is embittered in spirit, for there is One who humbles and exalts.

¹²Do not devise violence against your brother, nor against your friend and companion.

¹³Refuse to utter a lie, for it is a habit that results in no good.

¹⁴Do not babble in the assembly of the elders, and do not repeat yourself when you pray.

¹⁵Do not hate hard labour; work was assigned by God.

¹⁶Do not think of yourself as better than others; remember his anger does not delay.

¹⁷Humble yourself to the utmost, for what awaits humans is worms.

Domestic responsibilities

¹⁸Do not exchange a friend for money, or a true brother for the gold of Ophir.

¹⁹Do not dismiss an understanding wife; her grace is worth more than precious stones.

²⁰Do not mistreat slaves who work faithfully, or hired labourers who devote themselves to their task. ²¹Love a sensible slave as your own self; refuse him not his freedom.

²²Do you have livestock? Look after them; if they are profitable to you, keep them on.

²³Do you have sons? Discipline them, and make them obedient from their youth.

²⁴Do you have daughters? Be concerned for their chastity, and do not show yourself too indulgent with them. ²⁵Give a daughter in marriage, and you complete a great task; but give her to a sensible man.

²⁶Do you have a wife? Don't treat her as someone who displeases you. If there is ill feeling between you, trust her not.

²⁷With all your heart honour your father, and do not forget the birth pangs of your mother. ²⁸Remember that it was of your parents you were born; how can you repay what they have given to you?

See 6:5-17 for earlier statements on friendship. Desire for wealth can destroy a friendship (verse 18).

Ben Sira warns his student not to exchange an understanding and graceful wife for another woman.

Slaves (verse 20), whether non-Jews or Jews enslaved to pay off a debt, are to be treated kindly (see Deuteronomy 15:12-18). Similarly for hired labour (see Deuteronomy 24:14). The law required that we love our neighbour as ourself (see Leviticus 19:18). This love is to be extended to a slave or a hired labourer. A Hebrew slave had to be freed after six years of service (see Deuteronomy 15:12-15).

Sons are to be disciplined while they are young (verse 23).

In verses 24-25 Ben Sira tells his students how they must care for their daughters.

They must treat their wife with respect. However, as legislated in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, if she displeases him he may, under certain conditions, divorce her.

The Torah required that we honour our parents (see Deuteronomy 5:16) – a topic already broached by Ben Sira (see 3:1-16, pages 32-34).

On fear of God see 1:8, 11-21 (pages 19-23). God is transcendent ('holy'). Priests were set aside for service in the temple. They shared, therefore, in God's holiness. In Ben Sira's time there was no king. The high priest was also the leader of the people. The law specified how the priests and ministers (Levites; see Deuteronomy 14:29) were to be supported (see Numbers 18:9-20; Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 18:1-8).

Concern for the poor goes to the heart of Judaism (see Leviticus 19:9-10, 13; 23:22).

YHWH your God ... executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

– Deuteronomy 10:17-19

I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land."

– Deuteronomy 15:11

The kindness shown towards the dead includes giving them an honourable burial, and caring for those left behind.

Jesus spoke of the special blessedness of 'those who mourn' (Matthew 5:4). And Paul encouraged us to 'weep with those who weep' (Romans 12:15).

Care for the sick was another duty incumbent on a faithful Jew. Jesus speaks of it in his parable about what ultimately matters:

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

– Matthew 25:35-36

To receive love we must learn to give love (verse 35). Our life will be judged by how we have loved (verse 36).

²⁹With all your soul fear God, and revere his priests. ³⁰With all your might love your Maker, and do not neglect his ministers. ³¹Give glory to God and respect the priest; give him his portion, as you have been commanded: the flesh of sacrifices, contributions, his portion of the sacrificial victims, a levy on holy offerings.

³²Stretch out your hand to the poor, so that your blessing may be complete.

³³Give graciously to all the living; do not withhold kindness even from the dead.

³⁴Do not avoid those who weep, but mourn with those who mourn.

³⁵Do not neglect to care for the sick, because for such deeds you will be loved.

³⁶In all you do, remember the end of your life, and then you will never sin.

¹Do not contend with the powerful, or you may fall into their hands.

²Do not quarrel with the rich, lest they can pay to bring about your downfall; for gold has ruined many, and has perverted the character of princes.

³Do not argue with loud mouthed individuals, and do not heap wood on their fire. ⁴Do not be too familiar one who is ill-bred, or your ancestors may be insulted.

⁵Do not reproach a repentant sinner; remember that we all deserve punishment.

⁶Do not disdain one who is old, for some of us will grow old. ⁷Do not rejoice over anyone's death; remember that we must all die.

⁸Do not slight the discourse of the sages, but busy yourself with their riddles; because from them you will learn discipline and how to stand in the presence of princes. ⁹Do not ignore the discourse of the aged, for they themselves learned from their parents; from them you learn how to understand and to give an answer when the need arises.

Ben Sira advises his students that they have no hope of winning against those in a more powerful position, so they had best avoid opposing them (verse 1).

In verse 2 he tells them that it is unwise to quarrel with the rich, for they are in a position to bribe those responsible for justice, and so achieve a judgment in their favour.

Don't argue with the loud-mouthed. They love an argument and your words simply add fuel to their fire (verse 3). Likewise they should avoid being familiar with fools. If they are seen in their company they will be seen as one of them, and this will bring their family into disrepute (verse 4).

When sinners repent we should accept them as they are. To remind them of their sin is foolish, since we are all sinners (verse 5). In the Newer Testament John puts this most clearly:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

– 1John 1:8

Respect for age, and for the dead is sensible. We may grow old one day, and we will certainly die (verse 6-7).

Verses 8-9 exhort us to learn from the wise and to respect tradition.

'Riddle'(verse 8) translates the Hebrew *ḥîdâh* [חִידָה]. We find it also in Proverbs 1:6. It seems to refer to a cryptic question which is intended to puzzle and to get us to think outside the square. In Proverbs it is linked with *māšāl* (a wise saying), *m^elîšâ* (a metaphor), and *dibrê ḥ^akāmîm* (words of the wise).

'Coals' (verse 10) symbolise the destructive power of sinful passion (see 9:8).

Scoffers (bullies) love a fight. If you contend with them and they get the better of you they will never leave you alone (verse 11).

The advice given in verses 12-19 needs no commentary.

Proverbs, too, speaks of the dangers of standing surety for another:

My son, if you have given your pledge to your neighbour, if you have bound yourself to another, you are snared by the utterance of your lips, caught by the words of your mouth. So do this, my son, and save yourself, for you have come into your neighbor's power: go, hurry, and plead with your neighbour. 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

Verses 17-19 draw on Proverbs:

A gossip reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a babblers.

– Proverbs 10:19

¹⁰Do not kindle the coals of sinners, or you may be consumed in their flaming fire. ¹¹Do not give ground before scoffers, or they will lie in ambush against you.

¹²Do not lend to one who is stronger than you; but if you do lend anything, count it as a loss. ¹³Do not give surety beyond your means; but if you give surety, be prepared to pay.

¹⁴Do not argue in the court with a judge; he will settle the case as he pleases.

¹⁵Do not go travelling with the reckless, lest they get you into trouble; for they will act as they please, and through their folly you will perish with them.

¹⁶Do not pick a fight with the quick-tempered, and do not journey with them through lonely country, because bloodshed means nothing to them, and where no help is at hand, they will strike you down.

¹⁷Do not consult with fools, for they cannot keep a secret. ¹⁸In the presence of strangers do nothing that is to be kept secret, for you do not know what they will divulge. ¹⁹Do not reveal your thoughts to just anybody, or you can say goodbye to happiness.

¹Do not be jealous of the wife of your bosom, or you will teach her an evil lesson to your own hurt.

²Do not give a woman power over you to trample on your dignity.

³Do not go near a loose woman, or you will fall into her snares. ⁴Do not dally with a singing girl, or you will be captivated by her charms. ⁵Do not look intently at a virgin, or you may stumble and incur penalties because of her. ⁶Do not give yourself to prostitutes, or you may lose your inheritance. ⁷Do not look around in the streets of a city, or wander about in its deserted sections. ⁸Turn away your eyes from a shapely woman, and do not gaze at beauty belonging to another; many have been seduced by a woman's beauty, and by it passion is kindled like a fire.

⁹Never dine with another man's wife, or revel with her at wine; or your heart may turn aside to her, and in blood you may be plunged into destruction.

In verse 1 Ben Sira appears to be warning his students not to keep a too tight rein on their wives. If they do their wives may give them good cause to regret it. Verse 2 warns them not to go to the other extreme by letting themselves become too dependent on their wives. Later he will accuse Solomon of this failure:

You brought in women to lie at your side, and through your body you were brought into subjection.

– Sirach 47:19

Proverbs has a lot to say about the dangers of intercourse with a 'loose woman':

He follows her, and goes like an ox to the slaughter, or bounds like a stag toward the trap until an arrow pierces its entrails. He is like a bird rushing into a snare, not knowing that it will cost him his life.

– Proverbs 7:22-23

If a man seduced a virgin (verse 5) he had to pay her father one hundred silver shekels (see Deuteronomy 22:19).

Ben Sira is a man of his time when he blames the woman for arousing the lust of the man (verse 8).

The Torah demanded the death penalty for those convicted of adultery (see Deuteronomy 22:22; Leviticus 20:10).

Ben Sira has already spoken of friendship (see 6:5-17).

Verses 11-12 echo the following:

Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb.

– Psalm 37:1-2

Psalm 73 develops the idea.

In Egypt and in Syria the kings had complete power over life and death, as did military commanders in the army, and provincial governors in the region under their control.

In verse 15 Ben Sira identifies Wisdom with the ‘law of the Most High’ (tôrâ ‘elyôn; תּוֹרַת הַעֲלִיּוֹן).

On the ‘fear of God’ (verse 16) see 1:8 and the commentary on pages 19-23.

Skill is something we prize in the work of an artisan. It is the same when a leader exhibits wisdom.

When a person lashes out with his tongue (verse 18), people in the city experience fear. No one chooses a person whose speech is reckless. This is the second time Ben Sira has used the word ‘hate’ (see 7:15) It translates the Hebrew šānē [שָׁנֵה], To ‘love’ is to choose. To ‘hate’ is to not choose. The focus is on choice, not feeling.

¹⁰Do not abandon old friends, for new ones cannot equal them. A new friend is like new wine; when it has aged, you can drink it with pleasure.

¹¹Do not envy the success of sinners, for you do not know what their end will be like.

¹²Do not delight in what pleases the ungodly; remember that they will not be held guiltless all their lives.

¹³Keep far from those who have power to kill, and you will not be haunted by the fear of death. But if you approach them, make no misstep, or they may rob you of your life. Know that you are stepping among snares, and that you are walking over a net.

¹⁴As much as you can, aim to know your neighbours, and consult with the wise.

¹⁵Let your conversation be with knowledgeable people, and let all your discussion be about the law of the Most High.

¹⁶Let the righteous be your dinner companions, and let your glory be in the fear of God.

¹⁷A work is praised for the skill of the artisan; so a people’s leader is proved wise by his words.

¹⁸The loud of mouth are feared in their city, and the one who is reckless in speech is hated.

Concerning rulers

¹A wise magistrate lays a good foundation for his people, and the rule of an intelligent person is well ordered. ²As the people's judge is, so are his officials; as the ruler of the city is, so are all its inhabitants.

³An undisciplined king destroys his people, but a city becomes fit to live in through the understanding of its rulers.

⁴The government of the earth is in the hand of God, and over it he will raise up the right leader for the time. ⁵Overall sovereignty is in the hand of God, who imparts his majesty to the ruler.

'Lays a good foundation' in verse 1 translates the Greek *paideuō* [Hebrew: *yāsad*; *יָסַד*]. Proverbs 8:15-16 makes the point that it is wisdom that enables kings and rulers to govern well, and magistrates to establish justice:

By me kings reign, and rulers decree
what is just; by me rulers rule, and
nobles, all who govern rightly.

If the one responsible for governing and dispensing justice is himself 'undisciplined' [*apaideutos*; *ἀπαίδευτος*], he undermines the foundations of a healthy community.

Verses 4-5 express an assumption that is consistent throughout the Older Testament; namely, that whatever happens in this world is ultimately determined by God. We examined this assumption on pages 8-9, and again on pages 20-21 in reflecting on the concept of divine anger (Sirach 1:21).

We find this idea expressed again and again in the Book of Daniel, composed shortly after Sirach.

God changes times and seasons, deposes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding.

– Daniel 2:21

The court shall sit in judgment, and his dominion shall be taken away, to be consumed and totally destroyed. The kingship and dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them.

– Daniel 7:26-27

See also Wisdom 6:1-11

Verse 6 sets a high standard of behaviour. It draws on the following:

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am YHWH.

– Leviticus 19:18

The finest expression of this ideal is found on the lips of Jesus (see Matthew 5:43-48), where, as in Leviticus, the motivation is based on the nature of God.

Causing harm to one's neighbour is described as being arrogant (verse 6), and introduces the rest of this passage.

In reading verse 8 we should remember that Ben Sira was teaching in Jerusalem when Judea was wrested from the control of Egypt by the Seleucid king, Antiochus III, at the battle of Panias in 198BC.

Verses 9-11 may refer to the sudden death of Ptolemy IV of Egypt in 203BC.

In verses 12-18 Ben Sira does not offer maxims. Rather, he produces an essay on the origin of pride, its fruits, and the punishment received from God.

That God punishes those who withdraw from him and obstinately refuse to do his will is constantly asserted throughout the Older Testament.

Verses 14-15 are echoed in a hymn from the early Jewish-Christian community:

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.

– Luke 1:52

Before belief in an after-life, to die with a bad name and not to be remembered (verses 16-17) were seen as just retribution from God against the proud.

Human beings were created to acknowledge their creaturely dependence, not to indulge in pride or express their anger in violence.

⁶No matter what the wrong, do your neighbour no harm, and do not walk the path of arrogance. ⁷Arrogance is hateful to the Lord and to humans, and injustice is outrageous to both.

⁸Sovereignty passes from nation to nation on account of the violence of the arrogant.

⁹How can dust and ashes be proud? Even in life the human body decays. ¹⁰A slight illness baffles the physician; the king of today will die tomorrow. ¹¹For when one is dead he inherits corruption: worms and vermin and maggots.

¹²The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord; the heart has withdrawn from its Maker.

¹³For the beginning of pride is sin, and the one who clings to it pours out abominations.

Therefore God brings upon them unheard-of calamities, and destroys them completely. ¹⁴God overthrows the thrones of the arrogant, and enthrones the lowly in their place.

¹⁵God plucks up the roots of the proud, and plants the humble in their place. ¹⁶The last traces of the proud God sweeps away, and digs out their roots from the earth. ¹⁷He removes them and destroys them, and erases the memory of them from the earth.

¹⁸Pride was not assigned for human beings, or violent anger for those born of women.

¹⁹Whose offspring do we honour? Human offspring. Whose offspring are worthy of honour? Those who fear YHWH. Whose offspring do we not honour? Human offspring. Whose offspring are unworthy of honour? Those who break the commandments.

²⁰Among family members their leader is considered worthy of honour, but in God's eyes it is those who fear him who are worthy of honour.

²²Whether one be a resident alien, a stranger, a foreigner or a pauper, one's glory is the fear of God.

²³It is not right to despise one who is insightful but poor, and it is not proper to honour the violent.

²⁴The prince and the judge and the ruler are honoured, but none of them is greater than the one who fears God.

²⁵Free citizens will serve a wise servant, and an intelligent person will not complain.

²⁶Do not make a display of your wisdom when you do your work, and do not boast when you are in need.

²⁷Better is the worker who has goods in plenty than the boaster who lacks bread.

²⁸My son, honour yourself with humility, and give yourself the esteem you deserve. ²⁹Who will acquit those who condemn themselves? And who will honour those who dishonour themselves?

³⁰The poor are honoured for their insight, while the rich are honored for their wealth.

³¹One who is honoured in poverty, how much more in wealth! And one dishonoured in wealth, how much more in poverty!

Scholars find the poetry of this unit (10:19 - 11:6) to be especially skilful.

The point of verse 19 is found also in Ecclesiastes

Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone

– Ecclesiastes 12:13

If human beings want to be honoured they must 'fear YHWH' (see 1:8, 11-21, pages 19-23). If they break the commandments, they are unworthy of honour.

Verse 21 is an expansion of the text, referring back to the previous discussion on pride.

Fear of God is not something expected only of a member of the Israelite faith. It is central also to the lives of those mentioned in verse 22.

The poor who want to learn and are willing to work should gain our respect (verse 23), not the violent oppressors [ḥāmās]. The poor know their need and rely on God.

We tend to give honour to those in positions of leadership. None of them merit it more than the one who fears God (verse 24). Social or economic status is of secondary importance, as verse 25 demonstrates.

Verses 26-27 warn against boasting (compare Proverbs 12:9).

It is humble gentleness [πραΰτης; נְיָוָה] that is the measure of a person's worth (verse 28). Ben Sira is telling his students to do themselves a favour by recognising their lowly state and living accordingly. This is not achieved by having a low self esteem or by putting oneself down (verse 29). The rich have only their wealth to boast of. The poor who are wise are much better off (verse 30). If the rich become poor they have nothing. If the poor who are wise become prosperous they have double honour (verse 31).

Wisdom frees the lowly from being confined within the limitations of their economic condition.

YHWH our God raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with the princes of his people.

– Psalm 113:7-8

External appearances do not indicate wisdom, and they should not evoke praise or disdain (verse 2). Wisdom is what really matters.

Slaves wore a loincloth (verse 4).

Anyone can have a bitter day. All is under the control of God, but we cannot comprehend the workings of providence, so we should not judge.

My thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says
YHWH. For as the heavens are higher
than the earth, so are my ways higher
than your ways and my thoughts than
your thoughts.

– Isaiah 55:8-9

We can never know when a king will be reduced to poverty, or a poor person raised to the throne (verse 5). Many rulers, whose position brought them honour, 'have been utterly disgraced', even falling into the power of their enemies (verse 6).

¹The wisdom of the lowly lifts their heads high, and seats them among the great.

²Do not praise individuals for their good looks, or loathe anyone because of their appearance.

³The bee is small among flying creatures, but what it produces is the best of sweet things.

⁴Do not mock a person clothed only with a loincloth, and do not scoff at a person whose day is bitter; for the works of the Lord are beyond our understanding, and his works are concealed from humankind.

⁵Many kings have had to sit on the ground, but one who was never thought of has worn a crown.

⁶Many rulers have been utterly disgraced, and the honoured have been handed over to their enemies.

⁷Do not find fault before you investigate; examine first, and then criticize. ⁸Do not answer before you listen, and do not interrupt when another is speaking. ⁹Do not argue about a matter that does not concern you, and do not get involved in a quarrel among the arrogant.

¹⁰My son, do not busy yourself with many matters; if you strive after wealth, you will not be held blameless. If you pursue it, you will never have enough, and if you decide to cut and run, you won't escape.

¹¹There are those who work and struggle and drive themselves, but they fall short all the same.

¹²There are others who are drifters, who lack energy and have no strength; yet the eyes of the Lord look kindly upon them; he lifts them out of their lowly condition

¹³and raises up their heads to the amazement of the many.

¹⁴Good things and bad, life and death, poverty and wealth, come from YHWH.

verses 15-16 are expansions on the text.

¹⁷YHWH's gift remains with the devout, and his favour brings lasting success.

¹⁸One becomes rich through miserly hoarding and self-denial, and the reward allotted to him is this: ¹⁹when he says, "I have found rest, and now I shall feast on my goods!" he does not know how long it will be until he leaves them to others and dies.

Who does not need to be reminded of the wise advice offered by Ben Sira in verses 7-9?

Verses 10-13 are a reflection on the futility of anxiously striving after material possessions.

The faithful will abound with blessings, but one who is in a hurry to be rich will not go unpunished.

– Proverbs 28:20

Don't lose yourself in an anxious striving after possessions. If YHWH wants you to have them he will arrange it. This is a key element in the philosophy of Qohelet:

This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil—this is the gift of God.

– Ecclesiastes 5:18-19

Verse 14 is a basic assumption behind everything Ben Sira writes. He shares this assumption with all the writers of the Older Testament (see pages 8-9 and 20-21; compare Isaiah 45:7; Job 1:21; 2:10).

Jesus' parable in Luke 12:16-21 picks up some of the points of verse 19.

The Septuagint interprets ‘commitments’ as ‘covenant’ [Greek *diathēkē*; *διαθήκη*].

In verse 21 Ben Sira admonishes his students to put their faith in YHWH. ‘Put faith in’ translates the Greek *pisteuō* [*πίστευω*].

The Hebrew text has *’mn* [*אֱמֵן*], which speaks on God’s faithfulness, which is the ground of our trust. God will enlighten them concerning the steps they are to take in order to be open to God’s blessing.

A contrasting attitude is demonstrated by those who rely, not on YHWH, but on themselves (verses 23-24).

YHWH can bring about a change in one’s circumstances at any time.. What is the meaning of one’s past wealth and glory if one dies in disgrace and anxiety; and what does a life of affliction and poverty mean when one dies content and at peace?

For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.

– Ecclesiastes 12:14

²⁰**My son, stand by your commitments and attend to them, and grow old at your task.**

²¹**Do not marvel at the life led by sinners, but put your faith in YHWH and wait for his light; for from the Lord’s perspective it is easy to make the poor rich suddenly, in an instant.**

²²**The blessing of the Lord is the reward of the pious, and at the right time God causes his blessing to flourish.**

²³**Do not say, “What do I need, and what further benefit can be mine?”**

²⁴**Do not say, “I am self-sufficient, what harm can come to me now?”**

²⁵**In the day of prosperity, adversity is forgotten, and in the day of adversity, prosperity is not remembered.**

²⁶**For it is easy for YHWH on the day of death to reward individuals according to their conduct. ²⁷An hour’s misery makes one forget past delights, and at the close of one’s life one’s deeds are revealed.**

²⁸**Call no one happy before his death; by how he ends, a person is known.**

Care needed in offering hospitality

²⁹Do not invite everyone into your home, for much hurt can be caused by a slanderer.

³⁰Like a decoy partridge in a cage, so is the mind of the scoundrel, and like spies they observe your weaknesses; ³¹for they lie in wait, turning good into evil, and to worthy actions they attach blame.

³²From a spark many coals are kindled, and a ne'er-do-well lies in wait to shed blood.

³³Beware of scoundrels, for they devise evil, and they may ruin your reputation forever.

³⁴Receive strangers into your home and they will stir up trouble for you, and will make you a stranger to your own family.

Jeremiah warns against the kind of person described here by Ben Sira:

Scoundrels are found among my people; they take over the goods of others. Like fowlers they set a trap; they catch human beings. Like a cage full of birds, their houses are full of treachery; therefore they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness.

– Jeremiah 5:26-28

Proverbs warns against slanderers. People are keen to hear the gossip spread by them:

A perverse person spreads strife, and a slanderer separates close friends.

– Proverbs 16:28

The words of a slanderer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.

– Proverbs 18:8

For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no slanderer, quarrelling ceases.

– Proverbs 26:20

It is likely that Ben Sira has in mind those who have given up Judaism in order to find advancement in the Hellenized culture. It is a risky business befriending them. No good can come of it.

‘The just’ in verse 2 translates the Hebrew *šādīq* [שׂדִּיק], meaning those who do the will of God. The Greek is *eusebēs* [εὐσεβής], the equivalent of what we would call ‘a religious person’ (see verses 4 and 7 where we have translated it ‘a devout person’). The opposite is the ‘ungodly’ (*asebēs* ; ἀσεβής ; see verses 5 and 6).

How different is the ‘wisdom’ of Ben Sira from that of Jesus! When the lawyer challenged Jesus by asking him ‘Who is my neighbour?’ (see Luke 10:29), he would have been thinking in terms similar to those of Ben Sira: my neighbour is a devout and observant Jew.

In his reply Jesus spoke the parable we have come to call the parable of the ‘Good Samaritan’ (see Luke 10:30-37): our neighbour is anyone in need, just because they are in need.

Underlying this contrast is the difference in the way God is conceived by Ben Sira and Jesus. Ben Sira thinks that ‘God hates sinners’ (verse 6). It follows that we must do the same. This is a standout example where we have to listen to Jesus as he says: ‘It was said to you of old, but I say to you’.

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous alike. If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

– Matthew 5:43-48

Jesus challenges us to love (not hate) our enemies, and he says this because that is what God does. The kind of perfection to which we are to aspire is the kind of perfection we see in God ‘who makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.’

¹If you do good, know to whom you are doing it, and your good deeds will achieve their desired effect.

²Do good to the just, and you will be repaid – if not by them, certainly by YHWH.

³No good comes to one who gives to the person who persists in evil, nor is doing so an act of mercy.

⁴Give to the devout person, but do not help the sinner.

⁵Do good to the lowly, but do not give to the ungodly; hold back their bread, and do not give it to them, for by means of it they might overpower you; then you will receive twice as much evil for all the good you have done to them.

⁶For God himself hates sinners and will inflict punishment on the ungodly.

⁷Give to the devout person, but do not help the sinner.

Care in choosing friends

⁸A friend is not known in prosperity, an enemy will not remain hidden in adversity. ⁹One's enemies are friendly when one prospers, but in adversity even one's friend disappears.

¹⁰Never trust your enemy, for like corrosion in bronze, so is his wickedness. ¹¹Even if he behaves in a deferential manner and is peaceable towards you, take care to be on your guard against him. Treat him as one who breaches a confidence, and know that in the end he will still be envious. ¹²Do not put him next to you, or he may overthrow you and take your place. Do not let him sit at your right hand, or else he may try to take your own seat, and at last you will realize the truth of my words, and be stung by what I have said.

¹³Who pities a snake charmer when he is bitten, or someone who goes close to a wild animal? ¹⁴So no one pities a person who associates with a sinner and becomes involved in another person's sins.

¹⁵While you hold your ground, he doesn't make a move; but if you falter, he will not hold back. ¹⁶An enemy speaks sweetly with his lips, but in his heart he plans to throw you into a pit. An enemy may have tears in his eyes, but if he finds an opportunity he will never have enough of your blood. ¹⁷If evil comes upon you, you will find him there ahead of you; pretending to help, he will trip you up. ¹⁸Then he will shake his head, and clap his hands with much hissing, and show his true face.

Verses 8-9 have a parallel in Proverbs:

Wealth brings many friends, but the poor are left friendless.

– Proverbs 19:4

In verses 11-12 Ben Sira offers examples of what false friends are capable of. If his students do not heed his advice they will live to regret it.

A person who gets close to an enemy is like a snake charmer or someone who dares to approach a wild animal. No one will pity them when things go wrong. It is their own fault for acting foolishly. In verses 15-18 Ben Sira continues to describe the behaviour of good-weather 'friends'. As soon as you falter they show their true colours.

This is the third time Ben Sira has referred to a 'scoffer' [לֵעָס; עָלָה; see 3:28; 8:11]. Scoffers feature in the first psalm:

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers.

– Psalm 1:1

If you are poor you will only be hurt if you try to associate with the rich (verses 2-8). They will use you to their own advantage, and when they have got what they want, they will dump you.

In verse 9 Ben Sira turns to a certain class of the rich: those in a position of preeminence in the community. One must remember one's place and not be too forward or too backward. If they engage you in lengthy conversation, you should be suspicious. They are testing you out for some reason related to their advantage.

¹Whoever touches pitch gets dirty, and whoever associates with a scoffer becomes like him.

²Do not lift a weight too heavy for you, or associate with one mightier and richer than you. How can the clay pot associate with the iron cauldron? The pot will strike against it and be smashed.

³A rich person does wrong, and boasts of it; a poor person suffers wrong, and must add apologies. ⁴A rich person will exploit you if you can be of use to him, but if you are in need he will abandon you. ⁵If you own something, he will live with you; he will drain your resources without a qualm.

⁶When he needs you he will deceive you, and will smile at you and win your confidence; he will speak to you kindly and say, "What do you need?" ⁷He will embarrass you with his delicacies, until he has drained you two or three times, and finally he will laugh at you. Should he see you afterwards, he will pass you by and shake his head at you. ⁸Take care not to be led astray and humiliated when you are enjoying yourself.

⁹When an influential person invites you, be reserved, and he will invite you more insistently. ¹⁰Do not be forward, or you may be rebuffed; do not stand aloof, or you will be forgotten. ¹¹Do not try to treat him as an equal, or trust his lengthy conversations; for he will test you by prolonged talk, and while he smiles he will be examining you.

The poor and the rich

¹²Cruel are those who do not keep your secrets; they will not spare you harm or imprisonment. ¹³Be on your guard and take care never to be in the company of those prone to violence.

¹⁵Every creature loves its own kind, and every person a human being like himself.

¹⁶All living beings associate with their own kind, and people stick close to those like themselves. ¹⁷What does a wolf have in common with a lamb? No more has a sinner with the devout. ¹⁸What peace is there between a hyena and a dog? And what peace between the rich and the poor? ¹⁹Wild asses in the wilderness are the prey of lions; just so the poor are feeding grounds for the rich.

²⁰Humility is an abomination to the proud; just so the poor are an abomination to the rich.

²¹When the rich person stumbles, he is supported by friends, but when the humble falls, he is pushed away even by friends.

²²If the rich person slips, many come to the rescue; he speaks unseemly words, but they justify him. If the humble person slips, they criticize him; he talks sense, but is not given a hearing.

²³The rich person speaks and all are silent; they extol to the clouds what he says. The poor person speaks and they say, "Who is this fellow?" And should he stumble, they even push him down.

²⁴Riches are good if they are free from sin; poverty is evil in the opinion of the ungodly.

²⁵The heart changes the countenance, either for good or for evil. ²⁶The sign of a happy heart is a cheerful face; withdrawn and perplexed is the toiling schemer.

Another warning to be careful whom you confide in (verse 12), and to avoid the company of violent people (verse 13).

Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace. I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war.

– Psalm 120:6-7

In verses 15-19 Ben Sira quotes a number of proverbs and applies them to the folly of a poor person associating with the rich and sinful.

The unjust are an abomination to the righteous, and the upright are an abomination to the wicked.

– Proverbs 29:27

The poor have only God to rely on:

My enemy will say, "I have prevailed"; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken. But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

– Psalm 13:5

Wisdom is better than might; yet the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heeded.

– Ecclesiastes 9:16

Wealth is not necessarily evil, and poverty is not necessarily virtuous. Poverty can be the result of laziness, idle talk or pursuits, or foolish pleasure-seeking (themes developed in Proverbs).

Our interior disposition shows on the face (verses 25-26).

These are the first beatitudes found in Sirach. ‘Happy’ translates the Greek makarios [μακάριος], and the Hebrew ’ašrē [אַשְׁרֵי]. It is found in liturgical texts from the period of the second temple. It occurs 26 times in the psalms. It is to be distinguished from the more ancient ‘blessed’ (Hebrew barūk, בָּרֹךְ) in that the focus of ‘blessed’ is on what God does, whereas the focus of ‘happy’ is on what we are to do (or are doing) to receive God’s blessing by being faithful to the covenant (see the beatitudes, Matthew 5:3-11). To declare someone ‘happy’ is to rejoice with them that they are behaving in such a way as to be in a state of communion with God. Verse 1 speaks of the lips and the heart. We recall the words of Jesus:

Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.
– Matthew 12:34

Verse 2 speaks of the ‘inner being’ [Hebrew nepēš ; נַפְשׁ] - see commentary page 52], and hope [Greek elipizō, ἔλπίζω; Hebrew tōḥelet, תּוֹחֵלֶת, from yāḥal, ‘to await’].

YHWH, what do I wait for? My hope is in you.

– Psalm 39:7

tōḥelet is relatively rare in the Wisdom literature (besides Psalm 39:7 it is found only in Job 41:9; Proverbs 10:28; 11:7; 13:12 and Lamentations 3:18).

Three other Hebrew words are sometimes translated ‘hope’. They express, not expectation, but trust that confidently leaves the future in God’s hands.

1. qwh [קָוָה] (which appears 14 times in the psalms), and the associated noun tiqwâ [תִּקְוָה] (which occurs 3 times). The Septuagint picks up the meaning accurately, translating it by menein (to await).

2. bāṭah [בָּטַח] (which appears 48 times in the psalms). Though the Septuagint frequently translates this by elpizein, it means ‘trust’ rather than ‘hope’.

3. yāḥal [יָחַל] (which occurs 19 times in the psalms). For the most part the Septuagint varies between hupomonein and elpizein. Like qwh, it focuses primarily on waiting on YHWH in trust.

¹Happy are those who do not blunder with their lips, and whose heart brings them no remorse.

²Happy are those whose inner being does not condemn them, and who have not given up their hope.

Be generous with what you have

³Riches are out of place in a small-hearted person; and of what use is wealth to a miser? ⁴What he denies himself he collects for others; and others will live in luxury on his goods. ⁵If one is mean to himself and does not enjoy what is his own, to whom will he be generous? ⁶No one is worse than one who is grudging to himself; this is his punishment for his meanness. ⁷If ever he does good, it is by mistake; and in the end he reveals his meanness. ⁸The miser is an evil person; he refuses his neighbour and neglects himself. ⁹The eye of the greedy person is not satisfied with his share; greedy injustice withers the soul. ¹⁰A miser begrudges bread, and it is lacking at his table.

¹¹My son, treat yourself well, according to your means, and enjoy it as best you can. ¹²Remember that death does not tarry, and the decree of Hades has not been shown to you. ¹³Do good to friends before you die, and reach out and give to them as much as you can. ¹⁴Do not deprive yourself of a day's enjoyment; do not let your share of desired good pass by you. ¹⁵Will you not leave the fruit of your labours to another, and what you acquired by toil to be divided by lot? ¹⁶Give, and take, and indulge yourself, because in Hades one cannot look for luxury. ¹⁷All living beings become old like a garment, for the decree from of old is, "You must die!" ¹⁸Like abundant leaves on a spreading tree that sheds some and puts forth others, so are the generations of flesh and blood: one dies and another is born. ¹⁹Every work decays and ceases to exist, and the one who made it will pass away with it.

Ben Sira shares with his contemporaries the notion that life ends with death (see Ecclesiastes 9:4). The dead go down into the shadowy and lifeless existence of š'ol (the Jewish equivalent of the Hades of Greek mythology; see verses 12, 16).

In verses 3-10 he underlines the folly of the mean-spirited, small-hearted, miser, whose lack of generosity springs from his failure to enjoy the pleasures of life, which he so zealously acquires and hoards.

Ben Sira is echoing the teaching of Qohelet who, more than any other writer in the Older Testament, demonstrates the absurdity of placing our reliance on anything under the sun. The one thing Qohelet rescues from his critique is the importance of the present moment, and of accepting any pleasure that God (who alone in not 'under the sun') deigns to give us.

There is nothing better for human beings than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This, I saw, is from the hand of God.

– Ecclesiastes 2:24

I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

– Ecclesiastes 3:12-13

I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them?

– Ecclesiastes 3:22

Ben Sira is advising his students to be large-hearted. They should enjoy what providence provides for them, and be generous in sharing it with others, for 'every work decays and ceases to exist, and the one who made it will pass away with it'(verse 19).