

A Matter (Situation) of Life and Death



SABBATH—JANUARY 10

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Matthew 5:21–30; Proverbs 6:21; Proverbs 7:3; Proverbs 6:23; Proverbs 7:2; Proverbs 6:24; Proverbs 6:30, 31; Proverbs 7:26, 27.

MEMORY VERSE: “Your father’s commands are like a lamp. Your mother’s teaching is like a light. And the training that corrects you leads to life” (Proverbs 6:23, NIV).

TWO BROTHERS WERE AT HOME ALONE. Their mother gave them a strict warning not to eat the cake that she had just baked. To make sure that the boys would obey, she warned them that they would be punished if they ate the cake.

When the mother left, it took the boys only a few minutes to decide to eat the cake anyway. “This is not a matter [situation] of life and death,” they reasoned. “Our mother would never kill us; so, let’s [let us] eat!”

Unlike the boys’ story, the teacher (writer) in Proverbs does bring up matters (situations) that really are matters of life and death. His language is strong and very clear. Of course, Jesus used very strong language Himself when talking about matters of eternal life and death. (Read Matthew 5:21–30.) In the end, our future life depends on the choices that we make here and now. So, we should listen very carefully to what the teacher has to say.

THE LAW IN OUR LIFE (Proverbs 6:21)

Read Proverbs 6:21 and Proverbs 7:3. What do the word-pictures in these verses teach us about following God’s law?

In an earlier lesson, we saw that in Proverbs the heart is the center of emotions (strong feelings) and thoughts. The teacher tells us to keep the law close to our hearts (Proverbs 6:21). This means that we should always be in close connection with the law. Not once should we lose contact with the law. This is because the law shows what sin is (Romans 7:7). The teacher also argues that this law should even be written on the tablets of the heart (Proverbs 7:3). In the same way, the Ten Commandments were written by God on the stone tablets (Exodus 24:12).

To have the law written on the heart means that the law is not just a set of rules for us. Instead, the law reaches deep into our minds and has power to affect or change our deepest desires and plans. It also is a part of our deepest self. It is another example of Paul’s promise of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). The law should be a real part of our lives.

To tie the law around the *neck* also means that we should keep it close to our hearts. During Bible times, people tied the valuable (expensive) things they owned around their necks. The neck is the place through which air travels to the lungs. It permits people to have breath and life. The Hebrew word *nepesh* (“soul”) means “life.” And it comes from a word meaning “throat” and “breathing.”

To tie the law to one’s fingers means to bring the law into action. The teacher points to the fingers as a symbol (word-picture) of very sensitive and personal actions. The law should touch upon both the grand choices we make and the smaller ones too. (Read Luke 16:10.)

It is interesting to note that the Bible meant these examples only as symbols. But many of the symbols are used as real objects in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim worship. For example, the use of the Jewish *tefillin* (small boxes and straps) around the head and the fingers, the Christian crosses around the neck, and the Muslim (and Christian) rosaries (prayer beads) around the fingers.

Symbols can be helpful. But why must we be careful not to mistake the symbols for the real things?

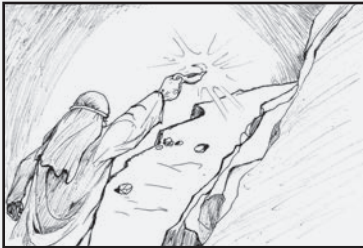


We must keep the law close to our hearts.

LIGHT AND LIFE (Proverbs 6:23)

Read Proverbs 6:23. How is the law shown to be like “light”?

In the Bible, the word of God or His law has been compared¹ to light: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105, NKJV). In the Hebrew mind there is a connection between the idea of “law” and of “light.” Just as the lamp lights the path where we walk, the law will help us stay on the path. For example, when we have to make choices between right and wrong, the law will help us to know what the right choice is. It helps us not to disobey, even when we are tempted to do wrong.



God’s Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

What examples can you find in the Bible of those who chose to follow God’s law, even when they had good reasons not to? What can we learn from their obedience? What if their choice to be faithful seemed to be the wrong one, according to human understanding?

Along with Proverbs 6:23, read Proverbs 7:2. Why is the law connected with “life”?

Since the Fall, our hope for eternal life cannot be found in the law, but only through faith in Christ. But obedience to the law continues to be a very important part of the life of faith. (Read Matthew 19:17; Revelation 14:12.) We obey because, as the Lord said to Israel thousands of years ago, “I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 18:4). The law of God is tied to “life,” because God is the Creator of life. This principle (important rule) teaches true spiritual life: we trust God and His promises for our present life, just as we trust His promises for eternal life.

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life” (John 8:12, NKJV). How have you experienced this wonderful promise in your walk with the Lord?

DEFINITIONS

1. compared—to show how two or more things are the same or different.

FIGHTING TEMPTATION (Proverbs 6:24)

As we have just seen, the author (writer) of Proverbs 6:23, with the Holy Spirit's leading, directly connects light and life with God's law. In the next verse he gives a strong example of how the law, as light and life, can give us powerful spiritual protection.

What are we being warned about in Proverbs 6:24? The main thing we are being warned about is clear. But what other "hidden" warning is given here?

When a religious person is tempted, the greatest temptation is to find a religious reason to make an excuse for sin. Using God to make an excuse for bad behavior is a terrible form of blasphemy.² It is also very deceiving. If someone who is doing something wrong thinks that "God is with me," then how can you tell that person that he or she is wrong? This can happen often in cases of adultery.³ "God has shown me that this [man or woman] is the one I should be with." If that is what they believe, who or what can argue against what "God" has shown them?

Notice, too, it is not just the woman's beauty that traps him. She uses language, flattering words, to draw the victim into her trap. Often men and women have been led into wrongful situations by clever and tempting words. Sometimes these words even come covered in religious language. The author of the book of Proverbs tries to warn us against this trap.

The law is the perfect medicine against the "flattering words of a temptress." Only the law and obedience to it will help us be wise to her tempting words, which can sound so true and beautiful. Really, the temptress will find you not only handsome but also wise and smart. She may even bring up her spiritual needs. Then she will dangerously use "the love of God" as an excuse for sin.

Just think how easily we can be led, even under the "cover" of faith, to make excuses for wrong actions such as adultery. Why is full faithfulness to the law of God our only real protection against even our own minds and the tricks that they can play on us?

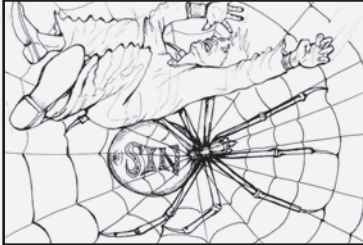


The temptress uses flattering words to draw her victim into her trap.

DEFINITIONS

2. blasphemy—great disrespect shown to God or to something holy.

3. adultery—sex between a married person and someone who is not that person's wife or husband.

“YOU SHALL NOT STEAL” (Proverbs 6:30, 31)

A life that seems noble, but in which one sin is cherished, is a life that has fallen into the trap of sin.

Right after his warning about adultery (Proverbs 6:24–29), the author starts talking about another sin: stealing (verses 30, 31). The connection between the two commandments (stealing and adultery) shows how disobedience to one commandment can influence our obedience to the others. Picking and choosing which parts of God’s law to obey is a more dangerous compromise. It could be even more dangerous than complete disobedience to the law. “The strongest example of vice [sin] in our world is not the sinful life of a terrible sinner or a law-breaker. It is that life which seems to be pure, honorable, and noble, but in which one sin is held dear. . . . He, who seems to be truthful and honorable but still breaks one part of God’s holy law, has misused his noble gifts and fallen into a trap of sin.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Education*, page 150.

Read Proverbs 6:30, 31. What must even a poor man do when he is caught stealing?

Being poor and needy does not excuse stealing. The thief is guilty even if “he is starving” (verse 30, NKJV). The starving thief is not to be hated. But he must still restore (give back) seven times what he has stolen. This shows that even his hardship does not excuse his sin. But the Bible does warn us that it is our duty to meet the needs of the poor. In this way they do not feel they have to steal in order to have food (Deuteronomy 15:7, 8).

How interesting that after going from adultery to stealing, the verse now returns to adultery (Proverbs 6:32–35). The two sins are almost the same. In both cases someone is taking something that belongs to someone else. An important difference between stealing and adultery is that the former sin deals with only the loss of a thing. But the second deals with something much greater. One can make up for stealing an object. But in adultery, especially when children are involved, the damage can be much more serious than stealing.

“‘Thou shalt not commit [do] adultery.’ This commandment does not allow impure sexual acts or thoughts and desires, or any practice that will excite them. . . . Christ, who taught the deep meaning of the law of God, said the evil thought or look is as truly sinful as is the unlawful action.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs [Leaders and Forefathers] and Prophets [Special Messengers]*, page 308.

THE THREAT OF DEATH (Proverbs 7:22, 23)

Most people do not think of death when they sin. They have other things on their minds, usually the present satisfaction and pleasure that they get from their sin. It does not help that popular culture often encourages adultery and other sins. But the book of Proverbs gives us the right understanding of sin. Paul had the same opinion: “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

Read Proverbs 7:22, 23 (NKJV). Why is the adulterer in danger? What does this person not realize?

The one who goes “after her” is described as someone who has lost his personality and will. He is no longer thinking. He is compared to an ox who is sent to the butcher to be killed for meat. He is a fool who goes to “the correction of the stocks,”⁴ and to a bird who “hastens [hurries] to the snare [trap].” None of them realize that their life is threatened.

Read Proverbs 7:26, 27. What makes the impure woman very dangerous?

It is possible that the woman here is meant to be more than just an adulterer. The woman shows values opposite to wisdom. Solomon uses this symbol to warn his student against *any* form of evil. The risk is huge because this woman does not just wound; she kills. She has enough power to kill even the strongest of men. In other words, others before you, stronger than you, have not been able to escape her hands. The language of these verses clearly suggests that the author is speaking about most people. (The Hebrew word *sheol* in the verses has nothing to do with “hell,” as commonly thought. It just shows the place where the dead now are: the grave.)

In the end, the point is that all kinds of sin lead to destruction and death. Death is the opposite of the eternal life that God wants us all to have through Jesus Christ.

As we said in Sabbath’s introduction, the language is strong. We *are* dealing with matters of life and death.

Think of some “strong” people who have fallen in a big way. Why should this make you tremble for yourself? What is your only protection?

DEFINITIONS

4. stocks—a wooden frame with holes in it for a person’s feet, hands, or head that was used in the past as a form of punishment.

ADDITIONAL STUDY: “Satan offers to men the kingdoms of the world if they will give him control over their lives. Many do this and sacrifice heaven. It is better to die than to sin. It also is better to want than to steal. It is better to go hungry than to lie.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*⁵ for the Church, volume 4, page 495.

“Choose poorness, verbal abuse, separation from friends, or any suffering rather than to stain the soul with sin. Death before dishonor or the breaking of God’s law should be in the heart of every Christian. We are Christians who claim to be reformers, so we should treasure and protect the most solemn, purifying truths of God’s word [the Bible]. In this way we must uplift the standard far higher than it is at the present time.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, volume 5, page 147.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① How can we take seriously the dangers of sin without falling into the trap of going too far in our concern? At the same time, how can we be obedient to the law of God without falling into legalism?⁶
- ② Read Exodus 20:1–17. How are all the Ten Commandments connected with one another? If we openly break one commandment, why will we break other commandments too? (Read James 2:11.) What examples can you find that breaking one commandment has led to the breaking of others?
- ③ Think deeply about the idea of how people might use religion in order to excuse wrong actions. It is not that hard to do when people hold up “love” as the best standard of right and wrong. Think about all the bad things done under the cover of “love.” How does the law continue to act as protection against being led into sin?
- ④ Look again at the question at the end of Sunday’s study. This daily lesson study deals with mistaking symbols for the real things they stand for. How might we be in danger of making this very mistake? For example, how might idol worship be one way of doing this? What customs, which are symbols of spiritual truths, could be mistaken for those truths themselves?

DEFINITIONS

5. *Testimonies*—the writings of Ellen G. White.

6. legalism—believing that your own good works will save you. Keeping the law holy because you believe your good works will save you.