

20. He who has insight in the word will find good,  
And he who trusts Yahweh— Oh, the happiness of him!
21. The wise one of heart will be called understanding,  
And sweetness of lips will increase learning.
22. A fountain of life (is) the insight of its master,  
And the instruction of stupid ones is stupidity.
23. The heart of the wise one gives insight to his mouth,  
And on his lips will increase learning.
24. A honeycomb of honey (are) sayings of pleasantness,  
Sweetness to the soul and health to the bones.

## Introduction

Three ideas dominate in Proverbs 16:20–24, wisdom, speaking and sweetness. *Wisdom*, or one of its synonyms, appears in all five verses. Words related to speaking (*lips, mouth, word, sayings*) appear in every verse except 22, *sweetness* and *honey* in verses 21 and 24.

The verses form a little chiasm. Verses 20 and 24 use the synonyms *word* and *sayings*. In addition, verses 21 and 23, inside the chiasm, link to the bookends of the chiasm (vv. 24 and 21) by the words *sweetness* and *insight*. Verses 21 and 23 have five words in common: *wise, heart, lips, increase and learning*. All of these verses are synonymous parallelisms and all are positive, being about the benefits of wise speaking. Verse 22, at the center of the chiasm, is antithetical and the only verse in the group that has a negative element.

## The Center (v. 22)

We will start with verse 22 at the center and work our way outward.

The NKJV translation of the verse is a little weak. *Understanding is a wellspring of life to him who has it. Him who has it* is more literally *its master* or *its possessor* (*baal* in the Hebrew). The stronger language indicates that Solomon has in mind more than someone who simply has insight; he possesses it or is master of it. He has made it a goal of his life, has pursued it vigorously, and has achieved competence in it. He knows the word and fear of God well.

That kind of mastery of insight is a fountain of life both to himself and to others. As he nourishes his soul on the word of God, his life becomes stronger and more abundant, and as that insight finds its way from his heart to his mouth it nourishes also the life of others. Words governed by the Word of God are like fresh water to the thirsty.

There are similar statements in 10:11, 13:14 and 14:27. *The mouth of the righteous is a well of life. The law of the wise is a fountain of life; The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life; and To turn away from the snares of death.*

We can interpret the negative half of the verse in two ways. It may show the results of trying to teach someone who is stupid. Because he is stupid in the Biblical sense (dull of hearing and stubborn of heart), your teaching will not move him from his stupidity. He will remain exactly where he was before you began. Trying to instruct the stupid, those who have closed their eyes to the truth, is stupid. Do not cast your pearls before swine. Or it may show the character of a stupid person's teaching. When someone stupid teaches, he can only teach stupidity. He has no resources to go beyond what he is in himself. I prefer the latter because it is a more precise

antithesis to the first line. The words of the wise are a fountain of life; the words of the stupid end in nothing but stupidity. They have no power of life in them.

This is a strong incentive to us to use the word of God in our interactions with others. There is nothing in the wisdom (foolishness) of men that has the power of life, but God's word on the lips of the wise is the means he has ordained for the salvation of souls.

### The Next Layer (vv. 21 and 23)

Verses 21 and 23 develop further the idea of the fruitfulness of the wise.

Verse 21 teaches us that there should be a correspondence between the heart and the mouth and that such correspondence will bear fruit. The one who is wise in heart will speak wisdom and will be called understanding. His wisdom will show itself in his words and behavior, and others will recognize it and speak of him as an understanding person.

That's not the wise man's goal. He prefers that men glorify God rather than himself for his wisdom. But the wisdom of his heart makes his words sweet, acceptable and pleasant to others. Through that sweetness of lips, through truth wisely spoken, his own and others' learning will increase.

The sweetness of his lips is not his own but belongs to the word of God which he speaks. *How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! (Ps. 119:103). More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them Your servant is warned, And in keeping them there is great reward (Ps. 19:10-11).*

According to verse 23, the wise in heart is called prudent because his heart teaches his mouth what to say. There is a progression here from heart to mouth to lips. The wise heart teaches wisdom to the mouth, and the wisdom found in the mouth increases the learning of the lips. By implication, the learning of the lips is beneficial to others.

### The Bookends (vv. 20 and 24)

In the two verses that lie on the outer edges of the chiasm, Solomon describes the blessings of those who have wise hearts and faithful speech.

The KJV's translation of verse 20 is incorrect: "He that handleth a matter wisely shall find good." It is based on the idea that the Hebrew word used here can mean either word or matter, but in this case the word ought to be understood in the usual sense. Most other translations take it that way.

One who has insight in the word will find good. He *brings out of his treasure things new and old* (Matt. 13:52). He finds good for himself in the word, and he brings the treasure he has found out where others also may benefit from it.

By doing so he is practicing trust in the Lord, and his trust will make him blessed and happy. True and lasting happiness is found in the Lord and nowhere else.

In verse 20, therefore, we see the object of faith (God), the activity of faith (study and application of the word of God), and the reward of faith (happiness). But verse 24 is about the rewards of those who heed the wisdom of the wise.

Pleasant words and sweetness of lips do not mean eloquence and great rhetoric but truth spoken in love. Talking about the law of God, the fear of God, wisdom and righteousness is sweet. Speaking words of admonition, comfort and encouragement is pleasant to those who have ears to hear. Those are rich and good things that are honey and health to the inner man, the soul and the bones. Even when the word pierces to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, these are good results.

## Conclusion

Two prayers are appropriate in response to this searching word of God. *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart Be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer* (Ps. 19:14). And *Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me, and know my anxieties; And see if there is any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting* (Ps. 139:23–24).