

As a Man Thinks

Vincent Cheung

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PO Box 15662, Boston, MA 02215, USA
<http://www.vincentcheung.com>

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PROVERBS 22:29-23:8

Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men.

When you sit to dine with a ruler, note well what is before you, and put a knife to your throat if you are given to gluttony. Do not crave his delicacies, for that food is deceptive.

Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint. Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle.

Do not eat the food of a stingy man, do not crave his delicacies; for he is the kind of man who is always thinking about the cost. "Eat and drink," he says to you, but his heart is not with you. You will vomit up the little you have eaten and will have wasted your compliments.

Because the Book of Proverbs imparts wisdom through many short and pithy sayings, its statements are easily taken out of context and misapplied. And when that happens, few people notice. One good example is Proverbs 23:7, which says in the KJV, "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he." For the purpose of misuse, it is even more convenient to say, "For as *a man* thinks in his heart, so is he." Saying "as a man" instead of "as he" removes the verse further away from its context, for now no one would ask who the "he" is. The verse could then appear to stand on its own, and thus this is the way the verse is often cited.

Many New Age and "Christian" teachings on positive thinking have adopted this verse as their motto. To be precise, they have adopted the *first* part of the verse, since quoting the second part would be sufficient already to expose their abuse of the first. For them, the words, "As a man thinks, so is he," summarize their teaching that a person *is* what he thinks and that a person *becomes* what he thinks.

The Bible indeed teaches this in one sense, but not in the sense intended by the false teachings. In one sense, the Bible teaches that a person *is* what he thinks (even in Proverbs 23:7) and that he *becomes* what he thinks (but not in Proverbs 23:7). To illustrate the latter, a regenerated person increases in wisdom, holiness, and even success partly by thinking on biblical precepts and patterning his life after them.¹ In other words, by God's grace and power, the believer *grows into* the biblical precepts that he meditates about.

Thus in this sense the Bible does teach that a person *becomes* what he thinks. It warns about what we entertain in our minds, and offers specific guidelines as to what we should

¹ Among many others, see Psalm 1 and Psalm 119:97-105.

think about. As for the sense in which the Bible teaches that a person *is* what he thinks, we will discuss this later when we are ready to offer the correct interpretation on Proverbs 23:7.

It is important to note the differences. New Age teachings deviate from Scripture when it comes to the means of our transformation, and when it comes to the objects and the purposes of our thoughts. According to them, the *means* or the power for positive transformation is not God's power in regeneration and sanctification, but the latent power of the human mind. This power is often described as almost supernatural, and it is sometimes explicitly said to be so. Then, the proper *objects* of our thoughts are not necessarily biblical, but anything positive that would help us achieve the desired result. As for the *purposes*, they are never to give God glory or make man holy, but to achieve selfish and greedy goals, or at best to benefit humanity apart from God, and apart from repentance and submission to him.

These teachings suggest that a person *is* what he thinks and that a person *becomes* what he thinks in a very different sense than what the Bible teaches. The New Age teachings emphasize developing self-confidence and unleashing man's innate power, so that you will *become* the person that you want to be if you think that you *are* the person that you want to be – your mind will make it happen. If you think that you *are* rich, you will *become* rich; if you think that you *are* healthy, you will *become* healthy; if you think that you *are* successful, you will *become* successful. And if you think that you can do something, you can. If you cannot do something, think that you can, and you will be able to do it. For after all, as a man thinks in his heart, so is he.

Although the specific theories and techniques vary, it is teachings such as these that have hijacked Proverbs 23:7. Unfortunately, many professing Christians, especially some of those in Charismatic circles, have adopted similar teachings, and have abused our verse in a similar manner.

The verse has a context, which controls and limits its meaning. So to properly understand it, we should return it to its context, and see what the verse as well as the whole passage have to tell us. To do this, we will first go back to Proverbs 22:29 and start there.

We *could* start from 23:1, and the next several verses would give us enough context to grasp verse 7. But it helps to take a quick look at 22:29, since it suggests one way of how someone would get to a situation like the one described in 23:1 in the first place.

The verse refers to someone who is "*skilled* in his *work*." The word translated "skilled" denotes a readiness and quickness to accomplish one's tasks, as well as a good understanding about the nature of the work. It speaks of competence and efficiency.

Some translations construe the word as if it refers to external excellence, such as in craftsmanship. For example, the REB reads, "You see an artisan skillful at his craft: he will serve kings, not common men." Although the verse could include external skills, translating it this way obscures the primary emphasis, which is competence and

efficiency in intellectual tasks. Then, the GNT changes the verse altogether: "Show me someone who does a good job, and I will show you someone who is better than most and worthy of the company of kings."

The Jerusalem Bible says, "some man *sharp* at business," and the New Jerusalem Bible, "someone *alert* at his business." These are better since they capture at least one aspect of the excellence described by the verse. The God's Word translation – "a person who is *efficient* in his work" – seems to emphasize another aspect. The NKJ says, "a man who *excels* in his work," which is not bad.

Matthew Poole prefers "expeditious," saying that the verse refers to someone who is "speedy in executing what hath been *well* and *wisely* contrived."² Delitzsch notes that this "skilled" man must have an "intellectual mastery"³ of the task at hand. *Barnes* suggests that this refers to "the gift of a quick and ready intellect."⁴ The same word is used in Psalm 45:1, and there it is often translated "ready," as in "a *ready* writer," thus suggesting competence and efficiency in intellectual tasks. In any case, the type of person described is the *opposite* of stupid and slow.

The type of "work" here is probably that of a scribe or official. The verse does not seem to suggest a narrow restriction, although *Strong* mentions that the word refers to employment that is "never servile."

Kings, rulers, and high officials constantly seek out those who exhibit expertise and excellence in their work. People like this – smart, quick, and efficient – are often promoted to work with great men, instead of being held back with obscure people.

There are more than a few biblical examples to illustrate what the verse says. For our purpose, it is sufficient to quickly read through several of them without comment:

GENESIS 41:9-14, 33-43

Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, "Today I am reminded of my shortcomings. Pharaoh was once angry with his servants, and he imprisoned me and the chief baker in the house of the captain of the guard. Each of us had a dream the same night, and each dream had a meaning of its own. Now a young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. We told him our dreams, and he interpreted them for us, giving each man the interpretation of his dream. And things turned out exactly as he interpreted them to us: I was restored to my position, and the other man was hanged."

So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh....

² Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible, Vol. 2* (Hendrickson Publishers), p. 258.

³ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament, Vol. 6* (Hendrickson Publishers), p. 335.

⁴ *Barnes' Notes: Proverbs to Ezekiel* (Baker Books), p. 63.

"And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. They should collect all the food of these good years that are coming and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh, to be kept in the cities for food. This food should be held in reserve for the country, to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by the famine."

The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials. So Pharaoh asked them, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?"

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you."

So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt." Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and men shouted before him, "Make way!" Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt.

1 SAMUEL 16:14-23

Now the Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him.

Saul's attendants said to him, "See, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you. Let our lord command his servants here to search for someone who can play the harp. He will play when the evil spirit from God comes upon you, and you will feel better."

So Saul said to his attendants, "Find someone who plays well and bring him to me."

One of the servants answered, "I have seen a son of Jesse of Bethlehem who knows how to play the harp. He is a brave man and a warrior. He speaks well and is a fine-looking man. And the LORD is with him."

Then Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, "Send me your son David, who is with the sheep." So Jesse took a donkey loaded with bread, a

skin of wine and a young goat and sent them with his son David to Saul.

David came to Saul and entered his service. Saul liked him very much, and David became one of his armor-bearers. Then Saul sent word to Jesse, saying, "Allow David to remain in my service, for I am pleased with him."

Whenever the spirit from God came upon Saul, David would take his harp and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him.

DANIEL 1:17-20, 2:46-49, 5:11-12

To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

At the end of the time set by the king to bring them in, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom....

Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him. The king said to Daniel, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery."

Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men. Moreover, at Daniel's request the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego administrators over the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court....

"...There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. King Nebuchadnezzar your father – your father the king, I say – appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. This man Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams,

explain riddles and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means."

Someone once told me that when he wanted something done at work, he would often state the same instructions to an employee three times and make the person repeat them back to him. Even then, sometimes the person would *still* fail to do what he was told. The person who said this to me was a partner in a major accounting firm, which as one would expect, hired only the best people. But if the best are this disappointing, then no wonder the competent and efficient are ushered into the presence of kings.

One ministry lamented that they had to implement in their hiring policy a three-month probation period for every new employee. This was because many people expected very lenient treatment from a Christian organization, and so they showed up late and left early, and daydreamed in between. But Christians ought to exhibit excellence in what they do, and if they lack skill or talent in a particular area, they should at least demonstrate sincere effort.

The temptation here is for me to rant about the incompetence and the poor work ethic of even many who call themselves Christians. But since we have set our sight on 23:7, we must save this topic for another time and move on.

Kidner suggests that in 23:1-8 the "perspiring social climber is gently chaffed."⁵ Whether or not the person is already "perspiring" or merely warned in advanced, verses 1-3 indeed picture him as having climbed quite a distance on the social ladder. Now as he dines before a "ruler," Wisdom urges caution and offers advice.

People who occupy high positions are very busy – they have many ambitious agendas and face pressures from all sides, and if they have time for it at all, they must also consider the needs of their people. Their every move is political and calculated, and everything that they do must contribute to their overall agenda.

This is not always as sinister as it sounds. It is indeed possible for a high-ranking official, a king, or a president to serve with the intent to glorify God and edify people. But for such a rare individual to survive and succeed in his position, he must be all the more clever, discerning the intentions of men and the effects of his actions. All people of high positions in any realm of society must be "shrewd as snakes," but believers must also be "innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16).

Nevertheless, it remains that people in high positions are political and calculating. Most of them are unbelievers, and their intentions are far from godly. At the least, one should realize that their every move contributes to a political purpose other than the one that it apparently serves.

They help the poor not necessarily – and never *only* – because they want to help the poor. For good or for evil, it is a calculated move. They support harsh measures against

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Proverbs* (InterVarsity Press), p. 151.

criminals not just because they want to ensure your protection, but they certainly wish you would think that. And when they turn to advocate the rights of these same criminals, they are not just interested in upholding justice for all, but they certainly wish you would think that, too.

Every move is calculated; every action has a purpose. The relevance to our passage is that this also applies to whom they invite to dinner. The passage teaches that when one who is in a high position invites you to dine with him, or to be his guest at a party or special function, it is probably not out of pure hospitality. He probably wants something from you, or maybe he thinks that you can contribute in some way to his agenda.

At the least, the way you behave will be watched and noted. Thus you must realize the significance of the occasion, and consider who and what are before you. You must be extra cautious in what you say and what you do. Our passage notes that this includes how much you eat. It says that this is especially important if you are easily tempted to overindulge.

If we could generalize, when entering a situation like the one described here, it would be wise to become aware of one's embarrassing habits and weaknesses, and exercise extra self-restraint in those areas. One must avoid offending the host with foolish talk and unrefined behavior, or to say or do anything that would imply that one is unsuitable for important assignments and positions.

Depending on the intention of the host, the feast before you might be outright "deceptive," or it might be a sincere gesture of hospitality. Either way, the wise man watches his guests – the wise guest knows it, and watches him right back:

LUKE 7:36-50

Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is-- that she is a sinner."

Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."

"Tell me, teacher," he said.

"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to

pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."

Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Again, although verses 1-3 teach us what is especially important when dealing with someone in high position, and someone with the authority to make or break a person, the general principle is applicable not only in such a potentially dangerous and "deceptive" situation, but even when we interact with a lesser individual.

To illustrate, several years ago someone asked if he could work for me as a volunteer.⁶ As we had already known each other for a while, there was no need for formal introductions and references. The problem was that based on our previous interactions, I was aware of some of his flaws that would have rendered him an ineffective resource, if not an embarrassment, to the ministry.

He had several serious problems that disqualified him, but I will mention only the comparatively minor ones here, since these are precisely the things that we are concerned about at this time, even things like how much a person eats when he is dining with one in authority.

I told him that I would give him the opportunity to demonstrate that he had become an organized and responsible person. As his minister, although I had repeatedly confronted him over major issues before, I had overlooked many minor ones, since we were still mere acquaintances. However, now that he had asked to work for me, albeit just as a volunteer, I told him that I would begin holding him to the strict standards of this ministry.

⁶ To protect the person's identity, I have altered several details that are non-essential to the illustration.

Again, here I do not have in mind obvious things that would disqualify a person like drugs and violence. I told him to send a document to me with the original on top, the copy on the bottom, and the carbon paper in between. I explicitly told him not to retain the copy for himself but to send it to me as well. He did not listen – he sent me the original and not the copy, but at least he included the carbon paper!

I told him to obtain some information for me from the Boston City Hall. He procrastinated until I had to ask again. Here is a hint: when you work for someone, once he asked for something, he should not have to ask again. Unless there is some special problem or previous arrangement, the next time the subject is brought up, it should be when you deliver what he had asked, and right on time. Anyway, I asked again, and then he went and found me the wrong information.

Then, punctuality is always an important issue with me. It is not just a matter of respecting the other person's time, although this is certainly a part of it, but when you tell a person that you are going to meet him at a certain time, you are giving him your word.⁷ And if your word is no good, then you are no good. If you say that you are going to do something, then make it happen.

With this person, it used to be that he would agree to meet me at a certain time, and then when he arrived late, he would give all sorts of excuses. But all the problems he mentioned could have been avoided if he had planned to arrive *early*, as I always do with any appointment, instead of just planning to arrive on time, if even that. As I recall, after some admonition, he corrected this, and that was commendable.

Moving on to even smaller details, I noted the manner in which he placed the stamps on the envelopes that he would send me. They were crooked and all over the place. The envelopes would usually be somewhat wrinkled, and sometimes I would find coffee stains on them. Now, unless he respected other people much more than he did me, I could only imagine how he would treat those who would correspond with this ministry.

I told him not to use all small letters when he sent me emails – he did not listen. I told him to neatly divide his messages to me into sensible paragraphs – he jammed everything together into one huge block of text. I told him that I disliked abbreviations – he used them freely.

I told him to speak clearly, conveying complete thoughts with complete sentences: "State the subject and the object, and relate the two properly, so that I will know who is doing what to whom!" It is amazing that even many college graduates cannot do this. But with their mumbling lips and shifting eyes, they will test your patience to its limit. To get a coherent message out of them, you have to be a modern-day Socrates, asking probing questions to guide their answers and to extract the needed information out of them.

⁷ The very fact that some people do not think of punctuality this way is telling enough. They consider only formal promises as binding, and not their ordinary speech. Their words are cheap. See Vincent Cheung, *The Sermon on the Mount*.

Details like these piled up so that I wondered, "Does he really care about the work? Is he nearly competent enough to perform even the simplest tasks? Is this how he will represent this ministry if I allow him to work with me?" Needless to say, I did not accept him as a volunteer. And if I must be this strict with a volunteer (although I think my demands were reasonable), I would certainly never pay someone like this to work with me in the ministry. Still less should a person like this, who lacked a most basic level of competence and discipline, be allowed to teach spiritual things.

Everyone should be taught and trained in these things as a child – that is, to speak clearly, present oneself neatly, always arrive early, follow instructions, and so on. These should be ingrained habits by the time a person reaches his teenage years, if not much earlier. Once in a while there might be a mad genius that is unrefined and disorganized, but mad geniuses are rare, and the rest are without excuse.

When he started as a young man, that successful partner at the large accounting firm, whom I mentioned earlier, had his lessons to learn also. He practiced very well, almost to perfection, all those things that I have mentioned so far. But born into a poor family, he did not know the ways of high society. As a new hire, he was invited to a cocktail party organized by the company. He was excited, but also quite nervous, since he had seldom been in situations like this one. So he was more than a little embarrassed when one who was a partner of the firm at the time came across the room and scolded him for wearing white socks with his black shoes to the function. He told me that the partner was right – he did him a favor by telling him this. If he was going to circulate among those people, then this was something that he needed to learn.

As a child, my father would harshly rebuke me whenever I yawned or looked away while he was dictating to me some serious instructions. Now, was he being too strict, or was I supposed to learn it later by offending a person of high position and losing favor with him? Then, my mother saw to it that I always chewed with my mouth closed. They took me to dine at expensive hotels – to teach me things like which silverware to use for different dishes, and why it took three hours to eat a French meal that left me more hungry than before I started – so that I would become thoroughly accustomed to such things and not embarrass myself later in life.

Later, they sent me to a school that daily enforced in its students the habits of gentlemen. For example, a formal dress code (jacket, tie, trousers, dress shoes) was imposed for classes, meals, and chapel. And when it was too hot, we were required to ask the teacher in charge and acknowledge the female students before removing our jackets. The girls had to wear jackets, long dresses, and dress shoes. Unlike some places, the costumes of whores were frowned upon.

It is true that all of this training addressed relatively superficial things, and it was not until God sovereignly changed me by his grace that I started to know truth and mercy in my heart. You can place a tuxedo on a pile of wet horse dung, and this is what I think of the non-Christian elite. You cannot hide the overwhelming stench from a spiritual man,

and still less from God. Nevertheless, Scripture (especially in Proverbs) gives a place to these things as the lessons to learn for one to excel in human society, and they indeed befit the true gentleman who does all things in the fear of God and for his glory.

You are mistaken if you think that we have strayed far from Proverbs 23:1-3. Besides telling them to control their appetites on sensitive occasions and in front of important people, we have been considering some of the other related things that parents should teach their children while they are still young. Of course, most adults need to review some of these lessons as well, that is, if they are not learning them for the very first time. Our passage refers to acting with discretion in a potentially deceptive and dangerous situation (because of the powerful personage involved), whereas we have also considered several other areas by applying the general principle, that we should act with discretion because our actions are often watched by people, and from what they notice they make inferences about our background, character, and competence.

One purpose of Proverbs is "To give subtilty to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion" (1:4, KJV). The opposite of materialism is not barbarism. Just because we as Christians are supposed to be "spiritual" does not mean that we must also be bums and slobs. If anything, we must learn to function on all levels of society – not too refined to embrace the poor and despised, and not too crude to impress the rich and mighty. David was one who obtained the trust of outcasts (1 Samuel 22:2), but also gained the favor of royalties (1 Samuel 18:1-5).

Nevertheless, as the next two verses from Proverbs tell us (23:4-5), no matter how hard you try, and how much care and discretion you exhibit in your work, wealth, status, and favor can fly away at any moment. There are countless ways that this can happen. You might offend someone who could cause you trouble. Maybe those on whom you depend for your wealth and status no longer have any use for you. Or, maybe some natural disaster destroys all that you have accumulated. Sometimes it will be because you have made a mistake, or it might not be your fault at all. In fact, wealth, status, and the favor of men can sometimes disappear precisely because you insist on doing right.

Consider Joseph. He perfectly illustrates Proverbs 22:29-23:1-3. He was competent and efficient in his work, and he exercised great discretion, so that he was promoted to manage Potiphar's entire household and all of his possessions (Genesis 39:1-6). But when he resisted the seduction of his master's wife, he was falsely accused of assaulting her and was thrown into prison (v. 7-20). Even more quickly than he was promoted, he lost his status, his favor, his comfortable environment, and even more important than these, his good name. Thus he also illustrates Proverbs 23:4-5: "Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone."

Daniel "was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent" (6:4), so that "the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom" (v. 3), but his enemies set a trap for him. One moment, he was at the height of his power (v. 1-3), but the next moment, he was thrown into the lions' den (v. 16). In this instance, he was vindicated and restored, but this serves only to illustrate again the unstable nature of material prosperity. In his story, only

God's grace and Daniel's faith were constant. Also consider Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel 3). God was faithful to his elect even during their exile, but wealth, status, and favor come and go.

This is true not only when we are talking about business and politics, but the same applies when it comes to the ministry. In the ministry, people's loyalty and financial support can come and go, sometimes due to no fault of your own, and often because you insist on doing the right thing.

A woman became an ardent supporter of my ministry several years ago upon hearing my recorded lectures.⁸ She was not only excited about the teachings she was receiving and recommended them to others, but she also began to make regular donations. These donations were large enough to affect my operation. In addition, because she owned a retail business, she was able to donate a number of useful items from her company.

Her support and enthusiasm never relented, but even increased over time. But then she started listening to the teachings of a certain prominent televangelist. Some of his doctrines were outright heretical. When I learned about this, I gently warned her about him, and showed her numerous examples of how this person's teachings departed from central biblical doctrines, and how he constantly abused Scripture by making false inferences from it.

She was shocked and outraged, not at the televangelist's heresies, but at the fact that I would speak against him. It did not matter to her whether I was right or wrong about his doctrines, but that I warned her against him at all was enough to indicate that I was at fault. She declared that she would no longer support my ministry. I offered to refund her a fairly large donation that she had just sent in, and she took it. I never heard from her again.

Thus in one day – within several minutes, in fact – I lost a zealous supporter and a significant source of income. I knew this was a possibility when I decided to warn her, since I understood the very thing that I am illustrating here. So her reaction did not surprise me, but it was still disappointing. She never received any solid biblical teaching before she discovered my ministry, so perhaps there was not enough time for her to develop discernment. Or, perhaps her heart was never truly converted to the truth. Whatever the reason, I would have done the same thing even if I knew that this was how she would have reacted. I am a shepherd, not a hireling. If I could not do my job, then I would have no right to her support and her money in the first place.

Another incident occurred when I was a college student. A woman heard my radio program on Boston's WROL and gave me a call. She was the choir director at her church, and she said that she could probably get me an invitation to preach there. Everything was going well until she told me with great resentment that she left her previous church because the pastor cancelled an animal rescue program that the church did not have the money to maintain. When I agreed with her pastor and said that she seemed to be

⁸ To protect the person's identity, I have altered several details that are non-essential to the illustration.

harboring much bitterness in her heart, she screamed at me, cursed my radio program, and hung up the phone.

Reactions like these never surprise me, and if you have not already guessed, I will give you the biblical reason for this in just a minute; nevertheless, they are always disappointing to experience. Neither of these women rejected my ministry because of my doctrine or character. In fact, both of them approved of my doctrine and enjoyed my teaching style. They turned against me because I crossed some of their strongly held preferences and opinions.

Of course, not everyone loses wealth and favor because he insists on doing right, but many people lose everything because they behave in a foolish and sinful manner. The point is that wealth, status, and favor can easily come and go whether or not you are righteous or unrighteous, and whether you are dealing with believers or unbelievers.

There is an intriguing comment attached to the end of John 2, that is, after Jesus turned water into wine: "Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man" (John 2:23-25). I read this when I was very young, and I have never forgotten it. Jesus did not commit himself even to those who believed in him. Why? Because "he knew what was in a man."

Since the word "believe" is used in both instances, the verse could be translated, "They *believed* in him, but Jesus did not *believe* in them." It is true that at least some of them were probably false believers, claiming to follow Christ when they had no genuine faith. But this only reinforces the point. Jesus was not swept up by his popularity. He knew that, although the fame and favor would increase even more for a while, very soon many would no longer follow him (John 6:66). As for those who remained, "It is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered'" (Mark 14:27). And that was what happened.

In one place, Paul wrote, "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me" (2 Timothy 4:16). Those were not unbelievers who deserted him, for they were never with him in the first place. No, *Christians* deserted him. Those were *Christians* who left him to fend for himself. Perhaps some of them were false converts, but this possibility carries only limited practical relevance. As long as there are false believers and weak Christians in our midst – it is not always easy to tell them apart, and even those that appear to be strong are often revealed to be weak under pressure – it is also possible that they will desert us at our greatest time of need.

Some Christians follow mobs. They are intimidated and influenced by them. So when a minister is widely criticized, some Christians would back away from him, even if they used to support him. I have experienced some of this, too. Often, both the mobs and the deserters are Christians. And when the wave of criticisms pass, or when the person

regains favor, then some of the deserters might return. But this kind of support is deceptive and worthless.

Have you read the story of Samson (Judges 15)?⁹ Three thousand cowards from Judah came to betray him, their own anointed deliverer, to the enemies of God. As always, Samson was fearless, but he made the people promise him that they would not kill him themselves before handing him over to the Philistines. That he even had to ask this accentuates his courage and their cowardice.

So even the people of God can be fickle and spineless. But this is why most of them are going to be followers all their lives, and this is why they need strong shepherds to direct and teach them, lest they be scattered.

If you are satisfied to be an echo in ministry, repeating the popular opinions of others, never contradicting cherished traditions, then you can just be part of the mob. But if you are going to be a strong leader, and do great things for the kingdom of God, then you will have to come to terms with this reality, that you cannot put your trust in people, not even Christians.

In fact, several Christian businessmen have told me that one must be twice as cautious when dealing with those who claim to be Christians. They are usually the first ones to sell you out, stab you in the back, and disappear with your money. But long before they told me about their experiences, and even since I was a teenager, this is what I had been telling people who started new jobs and business ventures. I learned from the Bible that you cannot trust people.

Come to think of it, I have never heard even one businessman tell me that all people are basically good and trustworthy, and that the path to business success is to trust other people. I assume that there are people who think this way, but I just have not encountered any of them so far. Perhaps most of them are already out of business?

No matter how pathetic, grotesque, extreme, or gruesome, every instance of human depravity is merely another illustration of what Scripture consistently teaches about the sinful nature of man. Thus, although we could feel disappointed and even outraged over some of the things that people do, we should never be surprised by the weakness and wickedness of men, even as exhibited by those who claim to follow Christ. To be surprised means that either we have not read the Bible, or that we do not believe it.

Whether in business or politics, but especially in the ministry, a leader must accept the fact that people are weak without becoming bitter about it. There will always be cowards and weaklings. There will always be traitors and deserters. Thus Paul wrote, "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me," but added, "May it not be held against them" (2 Timothy 4:16). This is just the way they are, even those who claim to be Christians, and if it makes us think any better of them, many deserters are just spineless, not malicious.

⁹ See Vincent Cheung, *Samson and His Faith*.

But Paul expected better things from Timothy: "So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, *or ashamed of me* his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God" (2 Timothy 1:8). By the power of the Word and the Spirit, some will grow to become strong and reliable individuals, capable of leading others to maturity. However, this is not common.

This bleak view of human loyalty may be depressing to some people, but it is what Scripture reveals about people. Christians should and could be better than this, but they are often not, or at least not yet.

Popular opinion urges us to trust in people, for only then can we have healthy relationships and achieve success. Unfortunately, even many believers have accepted this, and assume that it is the biblical attitude. However, Scripture teaches the opposite, admonishing us to place no confidence in man.

This is what the LORD says: "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD. He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives.

"But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit."

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? "I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve." (Jeremiah 17:5-10)

It is on the basis of this admonition, that we should have no confidence in man, that Scripture also instructs us concerning the only proper alternative. Returning to Jesus and Paul, the former did not only say, "But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone," but he also added, "Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me" (John 16:32). And after saying, "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me," Paul wrote, "But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength" (2 Timothy 4:16-17). This is why we do not despair at the fact that people are unreliable, because God is always reliable, and we place our trust in him alone.

You may ask, if people are unreliable in general, and if no one is perfectly trustworthy, then is it still possible for us to maintain healthy and meaningful relationships? How can we function in society at all? In reply, we need to reinforce rather than relax the biblical

teaching on human depravity, but then also make a proper application of it, so that we do not deny the kind of relationships that Scripture encourages.

What we are saying here is not founded on a cynicism generated by experience, but it is the Scripture that teaches us about the wickedness and the deceitfulness of men. It teaches us to be "shrewd as snakes" (Matthew 10:16), and to "be on your guard against men" (v. 17). Although these particular expressions appear within a definite context, and we would not want to illegitimately universalize them, they also aptly represent what other parts of Scripture tell us about dealing with people.

Some relationships do not require total trust in the first place. For example, total trust in a business transaction is unnecessary, and given the reality of sin, outright foolish. Even if you trust the other person completely, he certainly does not trust you completely, that is, unless he is as foolish as you.

Rather, business transactions are driven to completion mostly by financial and practical motives, and prevented from failure by legal contracts, self-preservation, long-term selfish interests, and so forth. Of course, Christians should not make these their primary motives for conducting business, but the reality is that these are the reasons that sustain the market, and the transactions would continue even if there is almost total distrust.

But what about relationships that are meant to be more intimate and enduring, such as relationships within the family and the church? Must we be constantly suspicious? Should we doubt everything that is said to us? Is it necessary to expect the worst from everyone, even our family members and fellow believers?

No, because these relationships are different from business relationships. The immediate purpose in business is to make a profit, and avoiding deception and disappointment is paramount. Only a fool would continue a business relationship in which he is repeatedly deceived and disappointed, *even if* he chooses to maintain personal relationships with those who have deceived and disappointed him.

The purpose and expectation for maintaining relationships in the family and the church are different. In these more intimate relationships, sacrificial love ought to dominate, and we should not concentrate on how to profit from other people. We do not constantly bargain or negotiate, and we do not regulate these relationships with contracts, or enforce them in the court. In fact, if we were to treat these intimate relationships as we would business relationships, we would destroy them.

Instead, those who understand human nature acknowledge the reality of sin even in their intimate relationships, and they *expect* to be occasionally deceived and disappointed even by family members and fellow believers – sometimes due to their inability, and sometimes even due to malice. And when sin surfaces in these relationships, we do not deal with them as we would in business.

As Scripture says, "The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?" (1 Corinthians 6:7). Thus, when asked how we can maintain healthy relationships with people when they are so sinful, and when we are going to be deceived and disappointed by them, we answer, "You enter into these relationships with the intention to love, to give, and to build up, and *expect* to be occasionally scorned, betrayed, cheated, and otherwise disappointed."

Of course, we may take certain measures to protect ourselves, and to minimize unnecessary damages and losses. For example, it may be a bad idea to lend money to a certain relative known for his drug addiction, and it would be unwise to conduct business with a professing Christian known for his unethical practices. But still the primary motivation would not be profit or self-preservation, but fellowship and edification.

As eager as we are for deep fellowship and community, we must not build our relationships on a view of man that contradicts biblical teaching. Rather, we must always acknowledge the depravity of man, and for believers, also the progressive nature of sanctification. Now, then, the key to having healthy relationships and at the same time acknowledging the reality of sin is to place our trust in God instead of man.

If Christ is the bond and love is the motive, then intimate and meaningful relationships are possible even though we realize that no mere man can legitimately deserve our total trust. If this is the foundation for our relationships, then we will also have a firm basis on which to forgive those who sin against us.

Our trust would be in Christ alone, and the friendship that we extend to others come from the motive of love, and not profit or self-preservation. Such a motive cannot easily turn into fear, anger, or cynicism, since it is not counting on the other person to be perfect, and it does not require the other person to be the source of our strength and happiness, for we have already obtained these things from Christ.

To trust in God alone means that we will never depend on a man for something that he can never give in the first place. The result is that, rather than preventing healthy and meaningful relationships, this understanding gives us the liberty and courage to pursue the deepest humanly possible relationships with even imperfect and sinful people, relationships that are not easily destroyed by sin. This is because, from the beginning, we would not lie to ourselves that the other person is sinless and flawless, or for that matter, that we are perfect ourselves. But we would realize that only God is perfect, and only he is completely trustworthy and almighty, both willing and able to perform all his promises.¹⁰

For some, this biblical answer produces another question. That is, if Christ is the only proper bond between meaningful human relationships, and Christian love is the only

¹⁰ Consider how this would offer a firm foundation for a marriage relationship. On this basis, one would regard God as the source, provider, and the bond, and the primary motive is not to see how one can profit from the relationship, but to love and care for the other person.

proper motive, then does it follow that there can be no deep and sincere relationships between non-Christians, or between non-Christians and Christians?

We affirm this without hesitation. When the ultimate commitments between two parties are directly opposed, or when they are both evil, then genuine love, peace, and hope are always impossible.¹¹

We will revisit the concern about cynicism again and add to our answer, but right now we need to reconnect all that we have said in this section with the context of our passage, Proverbs 23:4-5.

Verse 5 says that riches are fleeting, that such things as wealth, status, and favor are unreliable. There are a number of ways that material success can disappear overnight, but we have focused on *human* fickleness and dishonesty, mainly because the surrounding verses emphasize how people can complicate situations by their deceit and ulterior motives (v. 1-3, 6-8).

What is asserted in verse 5 provides the explanation for verse 4, which says, "Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint." There are some translation issues with both parts of this verse, but especially the latter part.

All the common alternatives are taught in other parts of Scripture, and so in this sense there is no immediate doctrinal danger. For example, the latter part of the verse has been variously rendered, "cease from thine own wisdom" (KJV), "have the wisdom to show restraint" (NIV),¹² and "cease from your consideration of it" (NASB).¹³ The first option would mean that one should stop determining his priorities by human wisdom, or to cease striving after riches through human wisdom. The second option conveys the idea that it is foolish to pursue something as fleeting and unreliable as riches, and so one should have the good sense to stop, that is, to refrain from putting all of his strength into obtaining material success. The third one simply means to stop engaging the mind with how to get more riches – stop being obsessed with it.¹⁴

All three options are consistent with biblical teaching, and none does violence to the context, so the concern is not whether Scripture teaches any of these, but with what Scripture teaches *here*. Among others, I suggest *Keil & Delitzsch* and Bruce Waltke's commentary if you are interested in the grammatical considerations. I favor the second option, as represented by the NIV, ESV, and others.

¹¹ To illustrate, if the Christian were to discuss his ultimate commitment to his non-Christian friend, the latter must offer a disinterested, patronizing, or even hostile reaction. If the friend reacts in a *sincerely* agreeable way, as if he shares this ultimate commitment, then he is already a Christian. Now if two people can never agree on the ultimate level, then no matter how socially compatible they appear to be, to define this as a deep friendship only betrays the shallowness of the one who calls it such.

¹² See also the ESV, REB, NRSV, NCV, and CCNT (Jay Adams).

¹³ See also the HCSB, and The New Jerusalem Bible.

¹⁴ There are other less serious contenders. See the GNT, NLT, and The Jerusalem Bible.

As for the first part of the verse, translations other than the typical one had been suggested, but they were rather implausible. Precise considerations regarding the second part aside, the first part is clear and defines the intention of verses 4 and 5: "Do not wear yourself out to get rich."¹⁵

To review, let us paraphrase what we have learned so far (22:29-23:5): "If you are competent and efficient in your work, you will not remain among obscure men, but you will be taken into the presence of kings and rulers. Now, when you dine with one of these important individuals, you must restrain your appetite if you are prone to indulge. This is because the feast is probably not just a simple gesture of hospitality, but the host might have ulterior motive in mind. He is watching you, testing you, and you should take care lest you offend him, or do something to entrap yourself, or to incite his contempt. Nevertheless, no matter how careful or discreet you are, wealth is fleeting. Take a mere glance at it, and it flies away. And because wealth is so unreliable, do not overwork yourself to obtain it, but have the sense to stop."

We now have more than enough context and background to understand verses 6-8. These verses convey several ideas that overlap with the previous verses, but they also make some unique contributions in teaching us about human nature and how to deal with people.

Verse 6 literally refers to one who has an "evil eye" (KJV). Most people who have heard of this term would associate it with a later usage, which refers to the magical power to harm or curse others with a glance or glare. But this is not the biblical meaning.

When it comes to expressions such as "an evil eye," "an eye that is evil," "a good eye," "a bountiful eye," and so forth, many modern translations put down the interpretations instead of the actual words of the text. And since "the evil eye" and other related terms might mean slightly different things in different contexts, they are often rendered differently even within the same translation, making it impossible to perform a simple cross-reference study of the various verses that use these expressions. On the other hand, the KJV seems to be more literal and consistent when translating "the evil eye" and related terms.

Our first example comes from Deuteronomy 15:7-11. In the KJV, we read as follows:

If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother: But thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wanteth. Beware that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and *thine eye be evil* against thy poor brother, and

¹⁵ Since I have already addressed this elsewhere in detail, I will refrain from repeating everything here. Instead, please see "Kingdom First" in my *Doctrine and Obedience* and "Godliness with Contentment" in my *Godliness with Contentment*.

thou givest him nought; and he cry unto the LORD against thee, and it be sin unto thee. Thou shalt surely give him, and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him: because that for this thing the LORD thy God shall bless thee in all thy works, and in all that thou puttest thine hand unto. For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.

The context makes it clear that the expression "thine eye be evil" (v. 9) means to "harden thine heart," "shut thine hand," and "givest him nought." The opposite of this is to "open thine hand," "lend him sufficient for his need," and "shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him." The NASB translates, "...and your eye is *hostile* toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing."

In describing a people under God's curse, Deuteronomy 28:54-56 says:

So that the man that is tender among you, and very delicate, *his eye shall be evil* toward his brother, and toward the wife of his bosom, and toward the remnant of his children which he shall leave: So that he will not give to any of them of the flesh of his children whom he shall eat: because he hath nothing left him in the siege, and in the straitness, wherewith thine enemies shall distress thee in all thy gates. The tender and delicate woman among you, which would not adventure to set the sole of her foot upon the ground for delicateness and tenderness, *her eye shall be evil* toward the husband of her bosom, and toward her son, and toward her daughter... (KJV)

"His eye shall be evil" means that this person who is eating the flesh of his own children would refuse to share it with the rest of his family. The NIV renders the expression "will have no compassion" (v. 54) and "will begrudge" (v. 56).

Then, "is thine eye evil" (KJV) in Matthew 20:15 is translated "are you envious" in the NIV. The workers who started at the beginning begrudge the fact that those who came later are given the same wages. Similarly, "an evil eye" (KJV) in Mark 7:22 is rendered "envy" in the NIV. In contrast, one who has "a bountiful eye" is one who "giveth of his bread to the poor" (Proverbs 22:9, KJV). He is "a generous man" (NIV).

So to think that one with an evil eye is "a stingy man" in Proverbs 23:7 is not wrong, but perhaps it is too weak and incomplete in that it fails to fully convey what kind of man we are talking about. This is not just a penny pincher, but a hard and mean person – stinginess is probably just one symptom of his rotten spirit.

When dealing with such a person, Scripture says, do not *eat* or *crave* what he offers you. This is because he is not the person that he presents himself to be – he is not as he appears, but "as he *thinks within* himself, so he is" (NIV, margin).

Now we have finally arrived at 23:7. It should be obvious by now that the verse is not teaching positive thinking, or that man has some mysterious power to transform or enrich himself by the power of his mind. The verse is talking about something entirely different. It is teaching about shrewd social behavior in the light of the truth about human nature.

The NIV translates one with an evil eye as "a stingy man" in verse 6, and consistent with this, it renders verse 7 as, "for he is the kind of man who is always thinking *about the cost*." But this might be slightly too interpretive, even though "think" here can mean "calculate." The ESV has "for he is like one who is inwardly calculating," and in the margin, "for as he calculates in his soul, so is he."

As the second portion of verse 7 explains, you must not accept what one with an evil eye offers because, although he urges you to eat and drink, "his heart is not with you." He is not just being hospitable, but he has an ulterior motive. He is trying to give you one impression, when in reality he has something else in mind. He is not the kind of person that he appears to be, but his true self is indicated by what goes on in his thinking, and the way he calculates costs and benefits in everything he does.

The passage is teaching you to distinguish between appearance and reality in human interactions. Things are not always as they seem, and people are not always as they appear. So if there is any indication at all that the person is a hard, mean, ambitious, and calculating person, beware, and avoid partaking of the things that he offers you. If you eat his food, accept his gifts, and hear his flatteries, you will be in his debt, and then you are trapped.

But more than this, verse 6 says, "do not *crave* his delicacies." When you covet something that another person offers, you can be baited, trapped, and manipulated. When you covet something, you are more likely to compromise your moral principles to obtain it, or to otherwise act against your better judgment. Therefore, when encountering one with an evil eye, we must not only control our actions, but also rein in our desires.

To ignore this biblical admonition would be to set yourself up for a great disappointment. When the person's true nature and purpose are exposed, all the delicacies you accepted from him and all the pleasantries you exchanged with him would now seem revolting to you. What you thought was a generous act of hospitality was nothing but a show, aimed to profit from you or manipulate you in some way. You were foolish enough to play his game, and now you are left with regret and disgust.

But verse 8 would apply even if the person is simply insincere,¹⁶ and even if he has no immediate plan to use you or profit from you.

Once my parents took me to a semi-formal New Year's Eve party. I was still attending junior high school at the time – a boarding school – and I was home for Christmas vacation, which would end at the beginning of January.

¹⁶ See John Gill, *Exposition of the Old & New Testaments, Vol. 4* (Baptist Standard Bearer, 1989), p. 486.

As I always felt during these occasions, the party was boring, and the conversation superficial. I did not want to be there, and there was no place to hide and read. But the food was fantastic! Now, if they would leave me alone and let me concentrate on the buffet...

Alas! This woman, who appeared to be walking toward somewhere or someone else, suddenly stopped next to me, threw me a big smile, and asked, "Aren't you so-and-so's son?" I nodded, skillfully and imperceptibly swallowing the slice of smoked salmon that I had just placed in my mouth.

We exchanged some meaningless pleasantries that were forgotten almost immediately after they were said. She then started to ask me several questions about my life at school, but all the while her eyes were roaming all over the large room, but mostly scanning at the area behind me.

For several minutes, she kept up an apparent interest in our conversation. Just when I thought she must have had enough of this, she asked a very specific question about the curriculum at my school. I understood that she was pulling a "Dale Carnegie"¹⁷ on me, but he would have told her to make eye contact.

I was in the middle of my answer – in the middle of a sentence – when her eyes, still wandering, suddenly brightened up and focused. She threw up her arms and called out someone's name, and without even looking back at me or excusing herself, walked straight toward the direction that she was looking at, as if we were not having a conversation at all.

If you think that I was disgusted, you are right. The salmon showed me more respect than she did. I was not surprised or hurt, because long before then I had learned from the Bible that people are often insincere. But still, I was repulsed by the fact that I had entertained her hypocrisy in the first place (v. 8).

As far as I could tell, she was not malicious, and she probably did not even realize that she had walked away from someone in the middle of a conversation. Nevertheless, her action exposed the type of person that she was. She could smile and feign interest, but her real self consisted in the thoughts and dispositions of her heart, and not the outward impression that she tried so hard to create.

We have reached the end of our passage, and I promised to revisit the question of cynicism, adding to what I have already said about it.

Our passage warns that people can be selfish, insincere, hard, mean, calculating, and manipulative. Now, we are supposed to believe this and teach it to our children, as the

¹⁷ See Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends & Influence People*. I had already read all of Carnegie's books by that time. Although I would barely permit one to read his *How to Develop Self-Confidence and Influence People by Public Speaking*, I would not recommend the rest for the Christian. See "Ungodly Counsel" in my *Renewing the Mind*.

Book of Proverbs is teaching all of us. But some people might worry if this would generate a cynical outlook.

Merriam-Webster defines "cynical" as "contemptuously distrustful of human nature and motives." If cynicism must be contemptuous by definition, then perhaps this is not the best word to describe the biblical attitude. Nevertheless, knowing the doctrine of human depravity, we must at least be "distrustful of human nature and motives."

The resistance that many believers show toward this teaching indicates how much they have been influenced by humanistic thinking, which teaches that human beings are essentially good, and that we bring out the best in people by trusting them.

Scripture declares that human beings are essentially evil, at least until God sovereignly changes them, and even then they are still capable of great wickedness. Experience proves nothing, since examples in support of one view is always easily neutralized by just as many counterexamples. But if we care about experience at all, there is an abundance of examples illustrating how we often invite people to do their *worst* to us when we trust them.

Yet the Bible does not teach cynicism – in the sense of a bitter and hopeless pessimism, or an attitude that imposes a sour and sarcastic interpretation on everything. But along with the reality of sin, it teaches us to develop and exercise wisdom, discernment, shrewdness, and discretion.

In fact, the only rational prevention for cynicism is God's revelation to us concerning sin and salvation. Those children who are being taught that all human beings are essentially good, and that a trusting and affirming attitude can draw the good out of them, are being prepared for the shock of their lives. They are being taught something that is simply not true, and when they are inevitably forced to face the depths of human wickedness in the future – whether in the form of hate and harassment, greed and deception, or rape and murder – they will be left without the proper framework by which to interpret what they experience.

This is the very worst way to learn anything, partly because one cannot learn anything at all in this manner.¹⁸ Without revealed truth to structure and control their thinking, they will make the wrong generalizations about human nature and society, and they will produce sinful and destructive emotional reactions. Many would turn to blame God, and charge *him* with evil and injustice. Multitudes have developed an intense hatred of God just because people have done to them whatever Scripture says they would, but what their parents and teachers said not to expect.

On the other hand, someone who has been taught all the biblical precepts and doctrines regarding the depravity of man would not at all be surprised when things that are thoroughly consistent with what he has been taught occur. Whereas experience does not teach a person how to react, whether spiritually, emotionally, or socially, Scripture offers

¹⁸ See Vincent Cheung, *Preach the Word and Prayer and Revelation*.

complete information on both what to expect from people and how to react when they behave exactly as expected.

In addition, the biblical doctrine of human depravity does not only teach that *other people* are sinful, wicked, and dishonest, but that *we* are this way as well. This and other related biblical teachings help to stem pride and bitterness from taking root in the believer's heart.

More than that, the Christian is also taught the solution for human depravity, that is, God's sovereign work through Christ and by the Spirit to justify and transform the sinner. An understanding of the extent of human depravity motivates him to cling to Christ that much more, and to earnestly hold forth the word of life to this crooked generation. Thus the informed Christian is taught not only to expect evil from people, but also to protect himself from this evil, to pity and forgive those who wrong him, and to preach Christ as the only hope.

Therefore, when the whole biblical worldview is taught – human depravity as well as how God addresses it – there is no inherent danger that one would develop a false or destructive kind of pessimism. A person with the right kind of pessimism toward man is not easily swayed by treachery and scandals, as many believers are swayed, but he fully expects them, and he expects them often. But he is never driven to cynicism or despair, because he also knows the Lord who is always true and always reliable, and it is only upon him that he trusts and depends.