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Wisdom Worksheet: 12 Words to the Wise

Equity (meyshar) (Prov. 1:3)

Introduction

One of the first phrases that we learn to utter in elementary school is, “That’s not fair!” A slick 5-year old, street smart beyond his years, devises a way to commandeer our favorite toy during kindergarten play time, and we say, “That’s not fair!” During a second-grade recess kickball game, the runner on third base steals home as the ball bounces from the pitcher’s hand—that sacred time when every base runner stays on the bag, and we say, “That’s not fair!” Fast forward to fifth grade school play tryouts. The teacher’s pet connives away the lead role. We go home to our parents, and we say, “That’s not fair!” It is the conclusion of middle school basketball team tryouts when both the “A” and “B” team members are listed on the locker room doors. We see our name printed under the “B” team heading, and we say, “That’s not fair!” Homecoming arrives. Our best friend wins yet another coveted crown, and we say, “That’s not fair!” Entering college, our name is somehow misplaced by the admissions office, resulting in our austere assignment to the dorm with no air conditioning. If that’s not bad enough, we also get the non-accommodating class schedule, and we say, “That’s not fair!” On we go through career, marriage, home buying, parenting, sometimes even divorce, and we say, “That’s not fair!” Finally, to get away from all the inequities in our life, we rejuvenate by turning on the television...to NASCAR. Coming off the last caution flag, it’s a shoot out. We expectantly watch the restart to finish the race under both white and green flags as our favorite driver is squeezed from the line going into turn one by two of his most



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heated rivals sending him into the wall. In the post-race interview following the checkered flag first met by our two arch-menaces who caused the wreck, we hear our guy exclaim, “That’s not fair!”

What is fair? In dating, marriage, parenting, education, sports, friendships, business partnerships, ministry collaborations, and national alliances we often ask this question. The wisdom literature in Proverbs offers us the answer in a key word imbedded in the *12 Words to the Wise*. That word is *equity*, (*meysnar* in Hebrew), the second of three pearls in the strand of *morality*. The NIV translates *equity* as “*doing what is...fair*” (Prov. 1:3). In a world where some say, “God isn’t fair,” the Bible speaks to the contrary. “*God is fair*” (Heb. 6:10; cf. Ps. 145:17 *GWT*). Proverbs offers us insight into how we apply not only *what* is fair, but also *Who* is fair to those occurrences in our lives when two objects attempt to occupy the same space at the same time. A study of Solomon’s uses of the Hebrew word for *equity* in his book of wisdom reveals four contextual patterns to help us wisely navigate through conflict toward community. *What is fair* includes: (1) *straight paths*, (2) *blameless motives*, (3) *intimacy with God*, and (4) *integrity*.

(1) Straight Paths (Prov. 4:11; 3:5-6)

First, we see that *what is fair* includes *straight paths*. Solomon passed along his father’s advice, saying, “*I guide you in the way of wisdom and lead you along straight paths*” (Prov. 4:11). *Straight* is interpreted from the same root as *equity*, or *what is fair*. That root can be interpreted *smooth*, or *evenly applied*, a reference to the fashioning of metal. Three thousand years later, we often say, “*Even Steven.*” *Paths* represent our



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track, or course, of life. Typically, in the course of interpersonal conflict in our lives, we do not evenly apply *risk* and *return* between the other person involved and ourselves. *Risk* is the potential for loss. *Return* is the profit, gain, or reward. When relational tension arises, we tend to pile up risk on the other party while we attempt to retain all of the return. Consequently, our paths become crooked, or uneven. Wisdom's tool for evening our paths is *equity* which begins by risking with God. "*Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight*" (Prov. 3:5-6). When we risk all of our heart: (1) choices, (2) thoughts, (3) prayers, and (4) feelings, we risk all of our ways, or all three resources of our life: (1) time, (2) talent, and (3) treasures. God responds by making our paths straight, or fair. The antithesis of *equity* is trusting in our own fallen understanding which minimizes our relational risk, or vulnerability, in a false attempt to maximize our egocentric return.

After David's sin with Bathsheba and his subsequent plot to kill her husband Uriah, the prophet Nathan explained to the king through a parable that he had been unfair (2 Sam. 12:1-9). The reason for the inequity was that David had taken all of the return while Uriah had unknowingly assumed all of the risk. The same risk-to-return relationship is also evidenced in the balance of responsibility (risk) with authority (return). In this situation, David's responsibility was not commensurate with his authority. Jesus offered a dramatically different example that provided insight into the heart of God. When treated unfairly, the One with ultimate authority equally exercised



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His responsibility and risked with His Father Who is fair (1 Peter 2:23). In Christ, God took all of the risk to provide us with all of the return (1 Peter 2:24).

Pause and Let Wisdom Work

Risk with God. Are your paths uneven? When relational conflict occurs, do you risk little in an effort to return much? Do you create your own limited scale of what is fair? If so, you are leaning on your own understanding, rather than trusting in God. Straighten your paths, and *risk with God*. Rather than leaning on your own finite perspective, trust in the Lord with all your heart; and in all your ways acknowledge Him. Choose to, think to, pray to, and want to. Seek the One Who is fair with all of your time, talent, and treasures. He will even your paths by bringing equity to your conflict.

(2) Blameless Motives (Prov. 11:5)

Second, *what is fair* includes *blameless motives*. Solomon wrote, “*The righteousness of the blameless makes a straight way for them, but the wicked are brought down by their own wickedness*” (Prov. 11:5). *Blameless* refers to our *motives*, which can be defined as our desires, intentions, drives, or purposes. They represent the spiritual heartbeat that connects the heart with the three resources of life. God’s perspective of equity includes peering into our hearts and weighing our motives (Prov. 21:2). *Blameless motives* make us fair. To be *blameless* is to be *selfless*. Too often in interpersonal conflict, we are *selfish*. The Apostle Paul said, “*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others*” (Phil. 2:3-4).

When in the midst of conflict, it is acceptable for us to look to our own *selfless* interests,



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but not our own *selfish* interests. The former represents blameless motives. As we have seen above, doing what is fair begins with risking our *heart* and *resources* with God. Motives, or desires, link the two. Paul said that *blameless motives* are a byproduct of our hearts being united with Christ and having fellowship with the Holy Spirit (Phil. 2:1).

What is fair includes God's allocation of our uniquely designed hearts with our subsequent desires (motives) and our resources. Our hearts are unique (Ps. 139). Our desires are unique (Ps. 37:4). Our gifts, or our resources, are unique (1 Cor. 12:4-6). God distinctively orchestrates these so that we will serve the interests of others in an effort to reveal His grace (1 Peter 4:10). He holds us accountable to blamelessly stewarding only the unique gifting that we have (Matt. 25:15). This exclusive gifting is the one-of-a-kind expression of His story in us. We are not to *selfishly* compare or contrast our circumstances with others, searching for inequities (Gal. 6:4). After Jesus alluded to the tragic death that Peter would endure, He balked at His rocky disciple's comparative inquiry about what would happen to John. In essence, Peter was asking if Jesus would be fair. Jesus said, "*If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me*" (John 21:22). Jesus was saying that the Creator determines what is fair, considering the unique expression of His story in us. Individually, we are called to trust in the One Who is fair. At the same time, God is not giving us a one-for-one punishment for our sin (Ps. 103:10). Nor is He divvying out tragedies onto "worse sinners." He merely desires that we individually repent with all of our hearts, all of our desires, and all of our resources (Lk. 13:1-5). In doing so, we are free to have blameless motives in interpersonal conflict.



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Pause and Let Wisdom Work

Inventory your motives. Are your motives blameless? Does interpersonal conflict cause you to first look toward your selfish interests, rather than your selfless interests and those of others involved? During the next week, ask the Holy Spirit to help you inventory your motives in conflict. When two objects attempt to occupy the same space at the same time, let the Holy Spirit examine the selfishness or selflessness of your motives. When you uncover ignoble motives, humbly surrender them to God and ask His Spirit to move you from *selfish* to *selfless*. Then pursue the interests of the other parties involved in the conflict.

(3) Intimacy with God (Prov. 3:32)

Third, *what is fair* includes *intimacy with God*. *Intimacy with God* is the connection of our innermost being with His. Solomon said, “*For the crooked man is an abomination to the LORD; But He is intimate with the upright*” (Prov. 3:32 NASB). *Upright* refers to those who are fair. The *New International Version* translates this intimacy with God as being taken “*into his confidence*” (Prov. 3:32 NIV). The *King James Version* says, “*His secret is with the righteous*” (Prov. 3:32 KJV). The *Amplified Bible* references intimacy with God as, “*His confidential communion and secret counsel*” (Prov. 3:32 AB). The more intimate we are with God, the fairer we will be in conflict. The fairer we are in conflict, the more intimate we will be with God. This cycle changes how we measure the success of conflict management in our lives, from horizontal, competitive victory to knowing God more deeply.



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Through interpersonal conflict we can grow in our intimacy with God by doing all things *through* Christ who gives us strength (Phil 4:13). As we draw near to God, He draws near to us (James 4:8). He never leaves or forsakes us (Heb. 13:5). He is our Helper freeing us from the fear of man (Heb. 13:6). In Christ, He understands our temptation to be unfair (Heb. 4:15). He allows us to endure only what temptation we can bear, always providing a way out (1 Cor. 10:13). He comforts us (2 Cor. 1:5). He matures us (James 1:4). He gives us wisdom (James 1:5). He develops our perseverance (Rom. 5:3). That perseverance produces character that gives us hope because we have *intimacy with God* through the indwelling of His Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:4-5). He works in all conflict for our *good* (Rom. 8:28). The *good* is that He shapes us to be like Christ (Rom. 8:29). Then He uses our *intimacy with God* to introduce Christ to others who are encountering similar trials (2 Cor. 4:7-10; Phil. 1:12).

Pause and Let Wisdom Work

Get intimate with God. How well do you know God? Are you familiar with His will, His mind, His emotions, and His Spirit? Read one verse in Proverbs each morning, and meditate on it with God, applying the words to all of your tasks and appointments throughout the entire day. At day's end, reflect on what you learned about the heart of God. Do this for the next thirty days as you learn to do what is fair in interpersonal conflict.

(4) Integrity (Prov. 11:3; 2:9; 8:6)

Fourth, *what is fair* includes *integrity*. “*The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity*” (Prov. 11:3). Once again, the *upright*



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are those whose paths are straight. When we are fair with others, we are guided by integrity. *Integrity* means *complete*. God calls us to be completely fair all of the time. Too commonly, we become unfair after we have endured being fair for a period of time that was sufficient to us. We finally see an opportunity where being inequitable might provide immediate gain. Perhaps we perceive the party involved in our conflict as unfair, so we justify our action to be unfair in return. In these cases, we become incomplete, or duplicitous, in our attempt at equity. In order to be completely fair all of the time, we must pursue wisdom with all of our heart. Referencing the benefits of an all-out pursuit of wisdom, Solomon said, “*Then you will understand what is right and just and fair—every good path*” (Prov. 2:9). God uses that pursuit amidst our conflict to complete us (James 1:4). His wisdom prompts us with what is fair (Prov. 8:6).

Pause and Let Wisdom Work

Confess and complete. Are you completely fair to both sides of all conflict? Is there any conflict with a spouse, a friend, a relative, a coworker, a customer, a vendor, a competitor, or even a fellow church member where you have cut equity short? If so, *confess and complete.* Confess your shortfall to God Who will *complete* His work in you to be like Christ (Phil. 1:6). Christ in you will complete your attempt at equity in your interpersonal conflict.

Conclusion

We move forward in wisdom’s strand of *morality* by adding to *righteousness* the pearl of *equity, what is fair*. This becomes evident in our lives through (1) *straight paths*,



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(2) *blameless motives*, (3) *intimacy with God*, and (4) *integrity*. These characteristics help us navigate through conflict toward community.