

Mishlei 13-05

Truth and Falsehood

Key Concepts

Truth is a theoretical ideal that most people admire. However, in practice people are constantly tempted to utter falsehoods without even being aware of it. They lie through exaggeration and through making unjustified assumptions when they don't have sufficient information. People make statements which they pretend "they didn't really mean." People lie to others to make an argument and they lie to themselves when they subconsciously suppress knowledge that conflicts with what they want to do or believe.

In light of this unfortunate characteristic of human nature, Mishlei uses a proverb to teach the value of raising one's sensitivity to falsehood. The *tzadik* (righteous person) despises falsehood and therefore has developed an attitude of recognizing and avoiding the patterns of falsehood in speech. In contrast the *rasha* (wicked person) tends to focus on whatever he thinks will help his situation. He does not want to be bothered by fine distinctions between truth and falsehood.

A *tzadik* is careful never to use falsehood to gain personal advantage. (However, he may be motivated by kindness to hide a painful truth through silence or vague language.)

To avoid making false assumptions when there is insufficient information, the *tzadik* will make a concerted effort to investigate the truth of what he wants to say. If he finds that to be impractical, he will couch his words in a form which recognizes the ambiguity in the facts at hand.

Exploring Mishlei

(ה) דְּבַר־שֶׁקֶר יִשְׁנֵא צַדִּיק וְרָשָׁע יִבְאִישׁ וַיַּחְפִּיר:

(5) *A tzadik despises falsehood*

but a rasha dirties and insults others through the use of falsehoods.

This proverb compares the attitude of the *tzadik* and the *rasha* toward the use of falsehoods. Because the *tzadik* hates falsehoods he will be sensitive to anything

that is untrue. Therefore, he will reject the temptation in the use of falsehoods to gain advantage over another person. In contrast the *rasha* does not see any great difference between truth and falsehood. Therefore, he is happy to employ falsehoods to gain advantage, especially because falsehoods make a stronger case.

Learning Mishlei

(5) **A *tzadik* despises falsehood — דְּבַר־שָׁקֶר יִשְׁנָא צַדִּיק**

and is careful not to employ it to gain advantage over another, but a *rasha* is ready to use a falsehood for any purpose.

For example, the ***rasha* dirties — וְשָׁעַ יִבְאִישׁ**

the good name of his adversary

and insults — וַיִּחְפֹּיֵר

him to his face with false accusations.

Additional Insights

Wisdom in Words

(1) The proverb does not use the word אֱמֶת (truth) because there can be only one truth, but there are many varieties of שָׁקֶר (falsehood), all of which must be avoided. The *tzadik* will allow his lips to utter only truth. (אבן יחיאל)

(2). The word יִבְאִישׁ refers to the use of falsehoods to dirty another person's reputation. It is based on a root meaning a bad odor. (People will avoid a person exuding a bad smell.) (מצודות)

(3) The word וַיִּחְפֹּיֵר refers to shaming and humiliating by direct insults. It is the next step after dirtying a person's reputation. (הגר"א)

Other Insights

(4) Because the *tzadik* is so sensitive to anything false he is quick to detect and reject lies that may be told to him. (מצודות)

(5) The basic attitude of the *tzadik* is founded upon a love of truth. He knows that anyone who yields to falsehood he will not be acting righteously whether it be in making judgements, giving testimony, or being an agent for transmitting gossip and slander. (אבן עזרא, מלבי"ם)

(6) Even when a *tzadik* has a valid reason to dispute with another, he is careful to avoid using falsehoods to make his point. He definitely would not use the methods employed by the *rasha*. (רבינו יונה)

(7) Effective admonition and rebuke depend upon adherence to truth. If a person is able to describe a situation accurately, he is able to show how it can be corrected. (המאירי)

(8) Not only does the *tzadik* reject falsehood, he rejects anything said by a person who is motivated to prove a false point of view. Such a person distorts the truth to make his argument. (המאירי)

(9) Lying is a tool used to commit a great variety of serious offenses to morality including threats, instigation, hypocricisy, flattery, corruption, deception, and fraud. Besides all that, the lie becomes a crime in itself, undermining moral and social welfare. (רשר"ה)