

***Proverbs 14:34.***

*What is America's most valuable asset? We have a vast amount of land that's rich with resources, an economy that's twice the size of any other nation on earth, a Constitution that's led the world in modern democracy. Still, there's something more valuable than all of these. It's a certain kind of citizen.*

*According to Proverbs, upright people are the greatest asset to any nation. Unrighteous ones are the greatest liability.*

One of our first Supreme Court Justices, John Marshall said, "The government of the United States has been emphatically termed a government of laws, and not of men." It isn't a perfect system, but it's remarkable that even our highest officials can be removed from office or sentenced to prison. Ancient Egypt, Babylon, or Rome, the medieval empires of Europe, or Japan just eighty years ago—in each of these, the people were ruled by men who claimed a divine right over them. Rulers didn't answer to the law; they were the law.

The United States, however, charted a different course by becoming a nation of laws. Legislation governs our entire way of life, but all of those laws require people who will respect and uphold them. In 1682, William Penn stated:

Governments depend upon men, not men upon governments. Let men be good, and the government cannot be bad; if it be ill, they will cure it. But, if men be bad, let the government be ever so good, they will endeavor to warp and spoil it to their turn.

Penn nailed the point when he said, "Good laws do well, good men do better." Good laws can't survive where corruption is tolerated, vice is promoted, or immorality paraded. They will erode in time and become overturned. As the people change for good or for worse, so will a nation's laws.

***Proverbs 14:34—"Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people."***

Good laws are necessary, but nothing could be more important than good people to uphold them. Righteousness in Proverbs refers to a moral uprightness, people with integrity and character. These are the kind of people that make a nation shine.

If upright people exalt a nation, what does this imply about leaders? It means a political leader should be a model of God-honoring virtue and integrity. Any nation with people and leaders like this will be a blessed place to live. Here are a few of the qualities highlighted by Proverbs on upright men and women:

**LEAD WITH INTEGRITY**

***Proverbs 11:3—"The integrity of the upright guides them, but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them."***

Machiavelli believed a politician shouldn't adhere to the same moral standard publically and privately. According to *The Prince*, morality shouldn't matter. It is appearance that matters in politics. It's a book no politician today would publically endorse, but one that countless politicians have privately studied. It's been a bestseller for 500 years; apparently someone's reading it.

Unlike *The Prince*, the wisdom of Proverbs hails the value of integrity. Upright leaders have a moral code and firmly adhere to it. Lying is always wrong, bribery is never justified, and no amount of horse trading should cause an upright man to abandon his morals. Right and wrong aren't situational; they're absolute.

If it's a leadership position you so dearly love, then look to *The Prince* to see how to keep it; integrity might not help. Yet, there are things more valuable and lasting than a position. The upright realize this and choose the highroad in order to please God. As for the corrupt, their path was crooked in life, and it ends with destruction in death.

**JUDGE JUSTLY**

***Proverbs 29:4—"By justice a king builds up the land, but he who exacts gifts tears it down."***

Many studies have been done on the cost of corruption. Though it's hard to assign an amount, they all agree that corruption is expensive. According to the World Bank corruption is, "the single greatest obstacle to economic and social development." It distorts the rule of law, adds prosecution costs, creates uncertainty for investors; in general, a corrupt people weaken the entire structure of a nation.

The second half of Proverbs 14:34 says that, "sin is a reproach to any people." Exacting gifts is one form of sin, and it causes the people to yearn for better leaders. We call it horse trading or bargaining, and in

# A Valuable Asset

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many cases it's perfectly legal. Yet, what's legal isn't always ethical or honorable in the sight of God.

Some people enter politics with high ideals and solid convictions believing they will never become like *that* lawmaker. Then seeing all the alluring opportunities and chances for gain, they slowly become the man or woman they never wanted to become.

Gain has nothing to do with justice. A just judge has no interest in self, and as a result, he or she is impartial. An exalted nation is governed by just leaders, and the people are blessed because of it.

## SPEAK TO EDIFY OTHERS

*Proverbs 11:11—"By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is overthrown."*

A king once tested his counselors to discern which ones were yes-men by ordering all to sacrifice to a god they didn't follow. Some obeyed, showing they would do anything to please him... and the king banished them. Those who refused had proven their character. If they wouldn't *do* what they shouldn't to please him, they wouldn't *say* what they shouldn't either. He knew he could trust their counsel.

The "blessing of the upright" is a fountain of goodness flowing from their mouth. Their words build, edify, or encourage others in their work. What they say is consistent, well-thought, and gracious (Prov 8:8, 12:18, 16:24). Their words are "choice silver" (Prov 10:20a).

In contrast, the "mouth of the wicked" mocks what it doesn't understand, shares confidential details, flatters, and tells lies (Prov 11:12-13, 26:28). In general, a wicked tongue is a self-serving one that's of little worth to others (Prov 10:20b).

The upright exalt others, but the wicked exalt themselves. When "a city" is filled with people intoxicated with self, it's difficult to see how it could be a desirable place to live. By seeking the good of others, upright men and women use their words to bless. They foster an environment that's praiseworthy and good.

## DESIRE TO PLEASE GOD

Proverbs indicates that goodness is a product of righteousness. The upright are a blessing to others; they make a positive contribution to society. On the other hand, the unrighteous make a negative impact; and when they rise to power, the people suffer. An upright citizenry is critical to the prosperity of any nation, because they support and promote upright laws. Therefore, be the kind of leader that causes this kind of people to thank God you're there.

*So, be upright—it's good for America?* Good citizens are good for our nation, but that's not exactly all that Proverbs teaches.

Proverbs shows us what divine wisdom looks like in everyday life. Anyone can mimic it, but not everyone has a heart that's inclined toward it. This is why Proverbs stresses the necessity of fearing the Lord—*this* is the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1:7, 9:10, 28:14). A person who humbly submits to the Lord has a heart that's inclined to grow in His ways. The God of the Bible is the all-wise God, and as surely as unbelievers see that His wisdom just happens to work, many will try to mimic it.

God's people delight in His statutes (Psalm 119:17-24) and live for a higher aim—God's glory through their lives (1 Cor 10:31). Thus, they are inclined to grow in His wisdom. They actually want to be corrected and change (Prov 9:7-9). One result is their lives begin to depict the wisdom described throughout Proverbs. They live it out.

How do you become a person who sees "wondrous things" in God's law, who's "consumed with longing" for the Lord's way of living, who delights in His testimonies? (Psalm 119:18, 20, 24). It doesn't happen by trying harder to mimic God's wisdom; it happens when God works a new heart within. Having the righteousness of Christ, this is the beginning of an upright person. The good works of people saved by grace have an impact that causes families and churches, companies and organizations, even states and nations to shine.

May God bless us with an increase of upright citizens and leaders.