

**LIFE: A LOT OF LITTLE CHOICES  
PROVERBS 12:1-28**

**By Pastor John Carlini, D.Mn**

**M.I. OUR CHARACTER IS BUILT THROUGH AN ENDLESS SERIES OF LITTLE CHOICES.**

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## **LIFE: A LOT OF LITTLE CHOICES PROVERBS 12:1-28**

**By Pastor John Carlini, D.Mn**

Did you ever stop to think about what the Christian life is all about? In particular, did you ever think about what God hopes to accomplish in us and through us, and how He goes about that task?

I think that somehow we tend to look at Christianity as the one grand gesture on our behalf when we submitted ourselves to Christ in faith. We can point to a date and a particular event when we were converted, or as some of us say, born again.

And we are waiting to make one more grand gesture when God calls us perhaps to do some great work. But as I study through Scripture, and especially through today's passage, I'm coming to realize that God works with us in our moment by moment choices. God changes us little by little and He forms our characters and destinies through the little choices we make in everyday life.

Here is an example of how our characters and destinies are formed: Mildred, the church gossip and self-appointed guardian of the church's morals, kept sticking her nose into other people's business; several members of the church were unappreciative of her activities, but feared her enough to maintain their silence.

However, she made a mistake, when she accused George, a new member, of being an alcoholic after she saw his pickup truck parked in front of the town's only bar one afternoon. She commented to George and others that everyone seeing it there would know what he was doing.

George, a man not yet confused by religious language and customs, and a man of few words, stared at her for a moment and then just walked away. He didn't explain, defend, or deny, he said nothing.

Later that evening, George quietly parked his pickup in front of Mildred's house and left it there all night.

Keep this in mind; if you live by the sword, you die by the sword. It's the little choices that we make in life that form our character and determine our destinies.

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I hope that all of you have a copy of the text in one hand, and your outlines in the other, because we are dealing with poetry. You can't just listen to the text being read and hope to follow the sermon. Before we deal with the structure of the passage, let's deal with a couple of key elements.

First, let's look at the verses where God is mentioned; verse 2 and verse 22 mention God by name. The LORD, Jehovah, Yahweh bestows grace on good people, but condemns crafty people, and God delights in people who are truthful, but He detests those who lie. So we could say that good here describes people who live truthfully before God; what you see is what you get. Honest, humble people find favor with God. On the other hand, crafty is defined as playing with the truth, manipulating the truth, lying to make one look good. God detests phonies; so this passage will have a lot to do with the way we live our everyday lives.

Secondly, there are only three verses that do not follow the antithetical parallelism format. In other words, there are only three verses where the second line does not describe the opposite of the first line. Verse 14 describes good words and good

actions, verse 25 is instruction on good self-talk, and verse 28 describes the rewards of good choices. So again, we see the theme that how we act and what we say affects the outcome of our lives.

I think that the main idea of today's passage is this: **OUR CHARACTER IS BUILT THROUGH AN ENDLESS SERIES OF LITTLE CHOICES**, our attitudes, our actions, and our words during the course of everyday life determine who we are and who we belong to.

If you look at your outlines, I'd like to explain why I broke down this passage the way I did. Verses 1-15 form a chiasmic poem. If you were to lay verses 1-7 alongside verses 8-15, you will immediately recognize that there are words and thoughts that connect them in reverse order, verse 1 and verse 15 go together; whereas verse 2 matches verses 13 & 14. Verse 3 matches verse 12, verse 4 matches verses 8-11, and we find the conclusion in the middle, verses 5-7. Verses 16-21 contain the second poem of this nature.

Although verses 24-28 follow a different structure, the passage is tied together in this. Verse 28 completes the thought found way back in verse one. "Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge." It is the wise, the righteous who find the way to life: abundant life and eternal life.

I. CHOICES TO ACT RIGHT (Vs. 1-15)  
**THERE ARE CONSEQUENCES TO THE CHOICES WE MAKE IN LIFE.**

Let's get into the passage itself. Verses 1-15 inform us that we have choices to act right. The important thing to remember about choice is this: **THERE ARE CONSEQUENCES TO THE CHOICES WE MAKE IN LIFE.**

A. CAREFUL LISTENING (Vs. 1 & 15)

Verses 1 and 15 lay out the foundation for a life that is pleasing to God. This life is characterized by careful listening. Let us take the positive in both these verses; verse 1 says that people who love discipline love knowledge, and verse 15 says that wise people listen to advice. So it seems to me that the way we become wise is to be good disciplined listeners. First, discipline is a tough word; it involves dedication to living life the way God designed it. It is dedicated to always improving. It is a life dedicated to submitting to truth. The word discipline is best described by a soldier or an athlete. The soldier trains intensely so he can win the battle. The athlete trains hard so he or she can win the medal. Being able to take instruction and correction is critical in this type of training, if a soldier is being taught how to set up an explosive, and he does it incorrectly, the instructor will tell him he did it wrong and show him the correct way. How long do you think the soldier will last in battle if he ignores or resents the correction of his teacher? Having played a lot of competitive sports, you can easily see that the athletes that listen to their coaches are the ones who excel. I have seen athletes with a lot of natural talent fail, because they were proud and refused to take instruction, but soldiers and athletes who are teachable make good soldiers and good athletes.

The quality needed to be a good listener and to be teachable is humility. I would say that the characteristics that are stopping most Christians from growing are pride and arrogance. Here is what amazes me the most; I hear so many Christians make religious rationalizations for what they are doing, and they seem so positive about these choices. I have been a pastor for over 25 years, and the longer I pastor, the more I realize that I don't understand these complicated issues. I find myself more often saying, "I don't know," to a lot of questions. I think that for me God's mystery and His grace are

growing day by day in my mind. I don't like to give advice and I don't often give advice. But when I do, I'm fairly certain of what I'm saying. I'm fairly certain of what I preach as well. We have some well-trained, godly leaders in our church and we would do well to get one another's perspective on life.

Most importantly of all, we have the Bible, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the presence of God with us. A lot less talking and a lot more listening go a long way to becoming wise.

But as these verses also remind us, our natural bent is to hate correction and to do things our own way. Fools easily trick themselves into thinking they are o.k. and that they know what's best for them. Let me give an example that all of us in Chicago will easily remember; Last year, Sammy Sosa, a great hitter got injured. When he started his rehab, he was advised to go down to the minor league to get his swing back in the groove. But Sammy, a superstar, thought it was beneath him to go down to the minor leagues, so he didn't listen to the advice of those who knew best. Instead, he had himself inserted into the regular line-up. Soon he found out that he couldn't catch up to those major league fastballs, so he devised a scheme that would help him swing faster and catch up to those fastballs. He illegally corked his bat.

We all remember the fateful day when an inside pitch shattered his bat, and the cork was exposed. Sammy was then ejected from the game and was suspended for several more games. Here is the tragedy of that whole event: Sammy is a great hitter. I believe that all his home runs before and after that were legitimate, but his record is now tainted forever. There will always be a shadow over his career and always a question of how many home runs resulted because of a corked bat.

If he had been humble enough to take some good advice, and if he had been humble enough to set his ego aside and rehab the proper way, there would be no such disgraceful incident in his life?

I wonder how many of us are so proud and arrogant that we don't listen to good godly advice. I wonder how many of us twist the Bible so that it fits our lifestyle.

Good soldiers, good athletes, good Christians are disciplined, seek out correction, and listen to solid mature advice. Good Christians are careful listeners.

#### B. CAREFUL TALKING (Vs. 2 & 13-14)

As verse 2, along with verses 13-14 point out, careful talking is also a choice we have to make. We already talked a little bit about verse 2. The word crafty has to do with someone who uses their skill and intelligence to take the easy way out, they are basically lazy and put together with verses 13-14 we can see that they are big talkers, smooth talkers, and they manipulate the truth and situations.

Again, it takes a lot of discipline to speak truthfully. In fact, the more we talk, the more likely we are to sin in the things we say. I am always suspicious of people who use a lot of religious language; they sound as if they are growing spiritually, and often they sound very wise and spiritual. But spewing out a lot of religious language can be as bad as out and out cursing, in fact, cursing would be better since there is no pretense involved.

Look at verse 14. I think that here is how we can tell if people are genuine. If we were to look at what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, He says that fruit of the Spirit is what authenticates us. In other words, people can be talking a lot of religious words and doing a lot of religious things, but the ultimate test is whether or not their lives

are characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. Here is how I approach people as I listen to their religious talk. I see if what they are saying matches their lifestyle, then I look to see if the fruit of the Spirit is evident in their lives. If you listen to people and observe them long enough, they will show you and tell you to whom they really belong. That is how Jesus smelled out hypocrites. We should be careful how we talk.

C. CAREFUL LIVING (Vs. 3 & 12)

Verses 3 and 12 remind us that careful living is critical to living a life that is pleasing to God. It is not only what we do, but how we do it that matters to God. The ends do not justify the means in Christianity. I think oftentimes that Christians believe that Christianity is simply about adhering to a set of rules. As long as I keep the rules, I'm o.k. However, it seems that how we keep the rules are what's important, at every moment I'm presented with all sorts of choices. If I want to develop my character and my relationship with God, I don't simply obey rules I make a conscious choice to follow a particular course of action out of my love for God. A choice built on love for God will produce all kinds of good fruit in our lives.

The opposite is true as well; where people are running around church doing all sorts of stuff, their motives are varied, some even hidden from themselves. But these works will not stand. Many of us have done a lot of good things for the wrong motives and with wrong attitudes. Those things are harmful to us and to the Body of Christ.

D. CAREFUL ACTING (Vs. 4 & 8-11)

Careful acting, as described in verse 4 and verses 8-11 is part of living for Christ. I think if we take each individual proverb, we may miss the force of the meaning.

For example, here in verse 4, we may think the proverb is all about a wife's relationship to her husband, but I think it's much more. On the surface it seems to say that a wife with a noble character brings a lot of joy and honor to her husband. But the disgraceful wife is like bone cancer. I'm sure that is true but let's put ourselves in this proverb.

A person of noble character brings joy and honor to God, as well as to those around them, but foolish and disgraceful Christians bring sadness and dishonor to God, as well as to those around them.

Godly people are a joy to be around. Ungodly people are like cancer. Verses 8-11 describe people with good character: They are wise, they are humble and unpretentious; they are gentle, caring, trustworthy and hardworking.

On the other hand, ungodly people are pretentious, they have warped minds, are self-centered, selfish, and cruel, they use people and they are lazy. They have big dreams, but are not willing to put the hard work into making them a reality. I think that we can see that the way we act tends to build an attitude and a character in us.

#### E. CAREFUL ENDING (Vs. 5-7)

Which brings us to the conclusion of this poem: Verses 5-7 describe a careful ending. If you look carefully at these 3 verses you will notice that they talk about the plans of the righteous, the speech of the righteous, and the house of the righteous. Their plans are just and their words are healing. Their house stands firm. God builds strong character into those who are humbly trying to follow Him.

On the other hand, the advice of the wicked is deceitful. They are liars, either through ignorance or malice. Their words harm others. Their end is destruction and death. I think many of us who are living lies, know it deep down inside, and so, we can't

find the peace and joy we really desire. We live in fear because we know that God will someday step in and overthrow us. We will ultimately be exposed.

Here is what I don't understand. Most of this stuff is pretty simple and straightforward and all it takes is a little humility and honesty. Yet many would rather live lies. And don't we think that God knows? No matter how many people we are able to fool, we cannot fool God.

Today we are celebrating communion. The Apostle Paul instructs us to examine our hearts before God. Before we take communion, we should judge ourselves, humble ourselves, and come honestly before God. The Apostle warned the church at Corinth that many of them are getting sick and dying as a result of taking communion with their proud, arrogant, and unrepentant lifestyles. I pray that doesn't happen to any of us here. This is a truth that we must seriously wrap our minds around: **THERE ARE CONSEQUENCES TO THE CHOICES WE MAKE IN LIFE.**

Please understand this, the simple choices we make in everyday life make up our character. The future actions we take, based on our character, have consequences. These consequences build a path to our destinies. Every moment in life we have a choice to become more Christ-like, or not. Think about what choices we make in everyday life because they are important.

## II. CHOICES TO SPEAK RIGHT (Vs. 16-23)

**THERE ARE CONSEQUENCES TO THE WORDS THAT COME OUT OF OUR MOUTHS.**

Likewise we have choices to speak right as well. These are described in verses 16-21. Again, this is one of those chiastic structures where verses 16-19 match up with verses 20-23 in reverse order. I have come to believe that we don't take seriously the

power that words have. We say harmful things, we say stupid things, and somehow we don't think anything about it. But these verses clearly state the opposite: **THERE ARE CONSEQUENCES TO THE WORDS THAT COME OUT OF OUR MOUTHS.** As we study through this section, I would like us to think of a couple of things. First, the poet clearly separates righteous people, ones who use their words for good, from evil people, and those who use their words for bad. The dilemma I personally face, and my hunch is that most of you face as well, is that I'm not one or the other. At some moments, I'm really noble and use my words for good. I comfort people, I pray for people, and I encourage people. In fact, I have even seen God do miraculous works of healing through prayers I have prayed.

On the other hand, during unguarded moments, I have used my mouth for evil. I have cursed, I have yelled at people, I have gossiped, lied, and have hurt people.

In my life, it is a constant battle to use my words for good. It is a thoughtful choice I have to make every moment.

A. CAREFUL WITH LISTENING (Vs. 16 & 23)

And that brings us to the very first principle that should govern our speech. Verses 16 and 23 remind us that we must first be careful with listening. Most of us are not good listeners because we are self-centered and we are constantly thinking about ourselves. Look at verse 16 and 23. They say that when we are wronged, we don't filter or evaluate anything. We just go ahead and blurt out our annoyance. Why is it that we are annoyed so easily? Because we are focused on ourselves! Good listening starts with an attitude that honors the other. We should honor others because they are created in the image of God and in honoring others, we are actually honoring God.

That is why righteous people, wise people can overlook an infraction. They can keep harmful thoughts to themselves. In order to be a good listener, we must put aside our own egos and truly enter into the world of the other. That is what good empathic listening is all about. The problem is that while others are talking, we use that as time to prepare in our minds what we are going to say or how we are going to defend ourselves. And so, what we say is usually irrelevant.

B. CAREFUL WITH THE TRUTH (Vs. 17 & 22)

Once we are sure of what is being said, and once it is our turn to talk, we must be careful with the truth as laid out in verse 17 and verse 22. God values truth. In a Christian community, it is imperative that we can rely on each other's feedback. For example, if I think I have the gift of teaching, and get up and teach a horrible lesson, it does me no good, and does the community no good for you to lie and say the lesson was good. Your heart was in the right place, not wanting to hurt my feelings, but the truth does more good for me than stroking my ego. If you encourage me by flattering me, then I will think my gift is teaching, when in actuality I have a different gift.

C. CAREFUL WITH OUR WORDS (Vs. 18 & 21)

To be sure, we should tell the truth in love, but we must also be honest with one another. Speaking the truth in love is what helps make our community strong. This 'in love' part is described in verse 18 and verse 20; we must be careful with our words. The obligation to speak the truth does not give us permission to be rude, obnoxious, or self-righteous. These two verses reinforce the idea that our words have power to heal or to destroy.

Please, let it be said of me and this congregation that we speak words of comfort, healing, grace, mercy, and love. Listen, I have a friend who is a pastor. When he was a teenager, his older brother had been struggling with his identity, being a pastor's kid. When his older brother was 16, he showed up for church one Sunday with ragged clothes and some alcohol on his breath. One of the adults in the church said something like, "You need to get yourself together before you come to church."

Today that guy is 47 years-old, and he still thinks that he has to earn God's grace and he finds it difficult to go to church. I'll bet that if we were to take a moment, we can easily recall something hurtful someone said to us that hurt us deeply, and that hurt still remains. Words are powerful.

D. CAREFUL WITH THE POWER (Vs. 19-20)

That is why in verses 19 & 20 we are exhorted to be careful with the power; we are reminded of this in terms of weapons. When we use harmful words, it is like cutting someone up with a sword. On the other hand, most of us can remember a time when someone spoke words of praise or encouragement to us, and how those words lifted up our spirits. This is the summary of this section: **THERE ARE CONSEQUENCES TO THE WORDS THAT COME OUT OF OUR MOUTHS.**

III. CHOICES TO LIVE RIGHT (Vs. 24-28)  
**THERE ARE CONSEQUENCES TO THE LIFESTYLES WE CHOOSE.**

This passage is all about the choices we make and their consequences. Our actions have consequences and our words have consequences. In verses 24-28 we are informed that we also have choices to live right: **THERE ARE CONSEQUENCES TO THE LIFESTYLE WE CHOOSE.**

A. CAREFUL WITH OUR ENERGY (Vs. 24 & 27)

Verses 24 & 27 warn us to be careful with our energy. Lazy people seem to start things, but never finish them. We will see some great proverbs concerning this in later chapters. But living the disciplined life means that we are diligent about the things we do. If we are not diligent with small tasks, there is no reason to think we will be diligent in our walk with Christ. We are to pursue holiness in our everyday lives.

#### B. CAREFUL WITH OUR SELF TALK (Vs. 25-26)

Verses 25 & 26 remind us to be careful with our self-talk. I was thinking the other day, as I often get up here to preach, don't worry, don't be anxious, don't talk yourself into a depression or an illness. Yet, sometimes I find myself talking negatively to myself and I end up anxious, worried and depressed. It is at that time that I have to remember the Psalms where the author does a lot of self-talk. He says things like, "Why are you down o my soul? Why are you discouraged o my soul?" His answer is always to take the focus of attention off himself and his situation and place it on God.

I think a couple of months ago; I was struggling with some of these negative thoughts. I went out and bought a CD with the songs, "His Eye Is On The Sparrow" and "The Blood Will Never Lose It's Power." Whenever I catch myself thinking negatively, I play these songs and my mind is turned around. We have a choice to control our thought lives, these choices build into us an attitude. That attitude will be positive or negative based on the choices we make.

#### C. CAREFUL WITH OUR DESTINY (V. 28)

Based on how we think and act, verse 28 is a strong warning to us to be careful with our destiny. Making good choices on a daily basis leads to a type of lifestyle. I have seen young people make bad decisions and that would lead to a rebellious lifestyle.

When the consequences finally kicked in, they would be angry. They didn't finish school. They had children. Perhaps they ended up marrying the wrong person. Then when they couldn't get the nice things in life, they threw their hands up in the air and said things like, "Why can't I get a good job or get nice things?" I don't say this because I try to be a good pastor, but sometimes the answer is, "You refused to embrace a life dedicated to discipline in following God. You chose to follow your own stupid ideas. Now you should gladly live with the consequences of your choices." That is the answer the Proverbs give over and over again. Yet people want to be proud, arrogant, and stubborn. Here is the truth: **THERE ARE CONSEQUENCES TO THE LIFESTYLE WE CHOOSE.**

There are great rewards for making good choices. The poet tells us that good righteous choices lead to not only an eternal life after we die, but an abundant life here filled with joy, peace, and contentment.

We rarely get to a place of great success or deep disaster with one grand decision. Usually we can look back at our lives and see that we got to where we are today through a series of little choices. Our destinies tend to reflect our character. The message for us is this: **OUR CHARACTER IS BUILT THROUGH AN ENDLESS SERIES OF LITTLE CHOICES.**

In his commentary on Proverbs, Paul Koptak summarizes this section nicely. He says,

**"Those daily choices assemble themselves into a character that then weighs us on one side of the scales or the other. We may be called upon to make momentous choices that influence many or we may not, but all of us face**

**daily opportunities to speak truth, deal fairly, and receive correction when necessary. Fred Craddock, hearing many sermons in his childhood about heroic Christians, grew up believing that to give one's life meant making one great sacrifice to save someone else. 'I was sincere then, as I have been these forty-five years. I give my life, but nobody warned me that I could not write one big check. I've had to write forty-five years of little checks – eighty-seven cents, twenty-one cents, nibbled away this giving of life. Are you able to drink the cup? I can drink the cup in one giant quaff and let my life be given. No, no, no. My life is one of drinking a sip here, a sip there, and soon you reach retirement and did anybody notice that you gave your life and drank the cup?'" Paul goes on to say, "A character is not narrated by one story but many."**

Keep this in mind, every word that comes out of our mouths, and every decision we make every little act, go into forming our character, determining our lifestyle, and propel us towards our destinies. God forms our character through the seemingly unimportant little choices we make day by day, hour by hour, and minute by minute. We are all probably ready to die for Christ in one grand gesture, but are we willing to live for Him moment by moment?