

Proverbs 12:10

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

A righteous man regardeth the life of his beast: but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel.

Analysis

This proverb reveals character through treatment of animals and contrasts true compassion with counterfeit mercy. "A righteous man regardeth the life of his beast" uses yode'a tsaddiq (יֹדֵעַ צַדִּיק, knows the righteous) and nefesh behemto (נפש בָּהֶמוֹת, the soul/life of his animal). The verb yada (יְדַע, know) implies intimate awareness and care. The righteous understand and attend to their animals' needs —food, rest, humane treatment.

"But the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel" presents shocking paradox. Even when the wicked attempt compassion (rachamey resha'im, רַחֲמֵי רְשָׁעִים, mercies of the wicked), it remains akhzari (אַכְזָרִי, cruel, fierce). Their best efforts at kindness are tainted by selfishness, neglect, or exploitation. What appears as mercy serves ulterior motives rather than genuine care.

This verse establishes that character penetrates all relationships—even with animals. Deuteronomy 25:4 commands not muzzling the ox while treading grain, and Exodus 23:12 prescribes Sabbath rest for livestock. Jesus noted that Pharisees would rescue animals on the Sabbath yet opposed healing people (Luke 14:5). True righteousness shows compassion to the vulnerable, including beasts. Conversely, cruelty to animals reveals hard-heartedness that will manifest toward people. The gospel transforms hearts from cruelty to genuine mercy (Micah 6:8).

Historical Context

Ancient agrarian societies depended on livestock for transportation, agriculture, food, and clothing. Animals represented significant economic investment requiring proper care. Mosaic Law included provisions for animal welfare, unique among ancient Near Eastern legal codes. This distinguished Israel's ethic from neighboring cultures where animals were purely utilitarian. The proverb tests character through treatment of vulnerable, voiceless creatures—if one mistreats animals, how will they treat people?

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. How does your treatment of animals, employees, or others under your authority reveal your character?
2. In what ways might we perform 'tender mercies' that are actually motivated by selfishness rather than genuine compassion?
3. How does the gospel transform hard hearts toward genuine mercy for all God's creatures?

Interlinear Text

וְיִדְעֵן אָמֵן בְּנַפְשׁוֹ בְּנַפְשׁוֹ וְבְנַפְשׁוֹ
man regardeth A righteous the life of his beast but the tender mercies
H3045 H6662 H5315 H929 H7356

אַכְזְרִים רַבְשׁוּם
of the wicked are cruel
H7563 H394

Additional Cross-References

Deuteronomy 25:4 (Parallel theme): Thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn.

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