

Proverbs 16:6

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

By mercy and truth iniquity is purged: and by the fear of the LORD men depart from evil.

Analysis

By mercy and truth iniquity is purged: and by the fear of the LORD men depart from evil. This proverb reveals the twofold means of dealing with sin: divine atonement and human response. The Hebrew chesed (חסֵד, "mercy") denotes covenant faithfulness and loyal love, while emet (תְּמִימָה, "truth") signifies reliability, faithfulness, and integrity. Together, these divine attributes accomplish kippur (כִּיפָּרָה, "purged" or "atoned for"), the same word used for the Day of Atonement sacrifices that covered sin.

The verse's structure shows both objective and subjective aspects of salvation: God's mercy and truth provide atonement for sin (objective), while "the fear of the LORD" produces moral transformation (subjective). Yirat Yahweh (יראת יהוה, "fear of the LORD") means reverential awe, worship, and submission to God's authority. This fear motivates believers to "depart from evil" (sur me-ra, עַזְרָה מֵרָעָה), actively turning away from sin's path.

Theologically, this proverb anticipates the gospel's full revelation: Christ embodies both God's mercy and truth (John 1:14, 17). His sacrifice provides complete atonement for iniquity (Hebrews 9:14; 1 John 1:7). Yet salvation involves transformation, not just forgiveness—genuine fear of the Lord produces holiness and departure from evil (2 Corinthians 7:1; Titus 2:11-14). This verse refutes both legalism (we cannot purge our own iniquity) and antinomianism (genuine salvation produces moral change).

Historical Context

Proverbs represents wisdom collected primarily during Solomon's reign (970-930 BC) but compiled later, possibly during Hezekiah's reforms (715-686 BC). Proverbs 16:6 reflects Israel's temple-centered covenant theology, where sacrificial atonement and ethical living were inseparable. The Old Covenant established that sin required blood sacrifice (Leviticus 17:11), while also demanding holiness and justice from God's people (Leviticus 19:2; Micah 6:8).

Ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature (Egyptian Instruction texts, Mesopotamian proverbs) emphasized moral behavior for pragmatic success but lacked Israel's theological foundation in Yahweh's covenant character. Only Israel's wisdom rooted ethics in relationship with the living God whose mercy atones for sin and whose character defines goodness. The "fear of the LORD" as wisdom's beginning (Proverbs 1:7, 9:10) distinguished Israel's wisdom from pagan philosophy.

Historical context shows the tension between ritual and ethics that the prophets repeatedly addressed (Isaiah 1:11-17; Amos 5:21-24). Mere sacrifice without heart transformation was worthless, yet true fear of the Lord couldn't exist without acknowledging sin's seriousness requiring atonement. Proverbs 16:6 holds these together—God's mercy purges iniquity, and genuine response involves departing from evil. This balance found ultimate expression in Christ's sacrifice establishing the New Covenant.

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. How do God's mercy and truth work together to provide atonement for sin, and how does this point to Christ's work on the cross?
2. What is the relationship between receiving forgiveness for sin and being transformed to depart from evil?
3. How does "the fear of the LORD" function as both the beginning of wisdom and the motivation for holy living?
4. In what ways does this proverb refute both legalism (self-purging of iniquity) and antinomianism (mercy without moral transformation)?
5. How should understanding God's mercy and truth shape our approach to personal sin and our evangelism to others?

Interlinear Text

ס וּ ! הִנֵּה בְּחִזְקָה יְכַפֵּר אַמְתָה בְּכָל־זֶד
By mercy and truth is purged iniquity and by the fear of the LORD men depart
H2617 H571 H3722 H5771 H3374 H3068 H5493

מִרְעָם

from evil

H7451

Additional Cross-References

Proverbs 14:16 (Evil): A wise man feareth, and departeth from evil: but the fool rageth, and is confident.

2 Corinthians 7:1 (Parallel theme): Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

Job 28:28 (Evil): And unto man he said, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.

Daniel 4:27 (Grace): Wherefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable unto thee, and break off thy sins by righteousness, and thine iniquities by shewing mercy to the poor; if it may be a lengthening of thy tranquillity.

Proverbs 8:13 (Evil): The fear of the LORD is to hate evil: pride, and arrogancy, and the evil way, and the froward mouth, do I hate.

Luke 11:41 (Parallel theme): But rather give alms of such things as ye have; and, behold, all things are clean unto you.

Proverbs 14:27 (References Lord): The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, to depart from the snares of death.

Proverbs 20:28 (Grace): Mercy and truth preserve the king: and his throne is upholden by mercy.

Acts 15:9 (Parallel theme): And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

Nehemiah 5:9 (Parallel theme): Also I said, It is not good that ye do: ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the heathen our enemies?