

Proverbs 6:1-5

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/prov/prov-6/proverbs-61-5/>

Using a lender-borrower analogy, Solomon warns of the danger of forfeiting our stewardship to others and provides a way out of the danger.

Solomon begins Proverbs 6 with his customary greeting, *my son*. The greeting is found throughout the book and reinforces a familial connection between author and audience. It might also infer this material was used to train young leaders in Israel.

Next, Solomon enters a short parable about lending practices amongst neighbors. The Hebrew word for “proverb” is the word “mashal,” which is just as often translated “parable” (Proverbs 1:1-6). Throughout The Book of Proverbs, Solomon writes these vignettes that carry a double meaning—practical advice for daily living as well as deeper spiritual truths.

This parable is about individual responsibility. It begins with four clauses.

The first is: *if you have become surety for your neighbor* (vs 1).

To *become surety* means “to pledge” or “to hand over.” In Chapter 5, Solomon implores his audience not to hand over their responsibilities to others. By doing so, they forfeit their ability to steward. Since wisdom is, ultimately, a practical exercise, handing over the responsibility to steward disqualifies one from truly living. We become impotent, ineffective, lacking purpose. In this case, becoming *surety* for another means to guarantee repayment of an obligation, such as guaranteeing someone else’s loan.

The second clause is like the first with one major difference—if you *have given a pledge for a stranger*. The difference here is that the first clause spoke of guaranteeing an obligation for a friend (*neighbor* has this connotation in Hebrew) and the second speaks of a *stranger*.

To have *given a pledge* again refers to assuming the obligation for another. In this case, the *pledge* is to offer property as repayment. In modern terms it would be like putting a lien on your land in order to ensure repayment for the debt of a *stranger*.

In Chapter 5, there were warnings about trusting the *stranger*. But here it seems as though Solomon is lumping *neighbor* and *stranger* together. It does not matter if one is pledging to a friend or foe; in each case, they are taking on an obligation for someone else, and become trapped.

The phrase *given a pledge* literally means “clapping the palms of hands together” in the Hebrew. So it is a physical act of exchange. You have pledged your property as repayment for the debt of another.

The third and fourth clauses are essentially the same: *if you have been snared with the words of your mouth, have been caught with the words of your mouth*. The only real difference is in the two words—*snared* and *caught*. Both are about being trapped.

A *snare* is more about being shackled, imprisoned, wounded. And being *caught* is more like being kidnapped or moved away from oneself. In this case, both are a result of *the words of your mouth*—it is a consequence of the decision you have made. Something you said. Your neighbors or friends (in this parable) are not to blame—you are the one who made the choice to forfeit to them.

Instead of interpreting these as four distinct clauses, it is likely a matter of cause and effect, with verse 2 as the effect of verse one:

- If you give a *pledge* (vs 1), you have been *snared* (vs 2).
- If you *become surety* (vs 1), then you are *caught* (vs 2).

These four clauses set up Solomon's proposed solution. He is saying, "If you find yourself in this situation, here is what you do." *Do this, then, my son, and deliver yourself* (vs 3). If you find yourself assuming someone else's obligation, then you are trapped, and need to be diligent to find a way out of the trap.

All Solomon can do is give advice. We must *deliver* ourselves. It is each one's responsibility to act. If someone made a bad choice (guaranteeing someone else's debt), they now have a responsibility to take action and make better choices. Even when one has inflicted misfortune upon themselves, they have a chance to make it right,

Since you have come into the hand of your neighbor, go, humble yourself, and importune your neighbor (vs 3).

This mini-parable is about debt. In both a financial and moral sense, it is foolish to assume the obligations of another. This ensnares, unnecessarily beholding someone for the choices of someone else. *We have come into the hand* of our *neighbor*—he "owns" us (in a sense).

To improve this situation, Solomon tells us to be active, take initiative. *Go*. Don't wait for things to change, don't sit around in apathy. The Hebrew word for *humble yourself* is "raphac," which is not the traditional word used for humility. It is only used six times in the Old Testament. It means "stamp oneself down" or "trample oneself." We might say "eat crow." It means to realize you made a mistake, and go try to unravel the mess you made.

In today's vernacular we might say "get over yourself." Our flesh is the voice of evil within us and this phrase is imploring us to *trample* that voice—to defeat it. Rather than rationalize or be too proud to admit we messed up, we need to face and admit reality.

A similar dynamic is present in the word for *importune* in the phrase *and importune your neighbor* (vs 3). The Hebrew word is "rahab" and it means "overcome, behave proudly/strong." So you are imploring your neighbor to let you out of the guarantee, to overcome the situation.

You are finding a way out. You have humbled yourself by asking them to let you off the hook. You are importuning him rather than becoming surety for him.

The idea in this mini-parable is to take back your life where you are responsible for your own choices. Don't assume the responsibility to make choices for another.

A broad application of this principle relates to the perspective we choose relative to our decisions. If we assume responsibility to make choices for others, we have trapped ourselves into living in an imaginary world that will only bring us frustration, anxiety, and disillusionment. This is because God has given each person the stewardship to choose for themselves—we cannot make choices for others. To assume the obligation to make choices for another is like assuming an obligation that can't be repaid; both will lead us to ruin.

Each of us only has control over three things: who/what we trust, the perspective we choose, and what we do. If we try to assume responsibility for anything else, we are trapping ourselves. If we find ourselves in this state, it is imperative we do whatever it takes to extract ourselves from the situation. This includes humbling ourselves and asking our way out of obligations that cause us to be responsible for the choices of others. It also includes coming to admit to ourselves that "I do not make choices for them," replacing that with trust that "God is in control of results, not me."

We are urged to escape the forces to which we have surrendered ourselves so that we can begin again to steward the life (and resources) God has given us. The great irony is that when we try to control the choices of circumstances, or other people, we lose stewardship of the things we actually do control. We can either live in reality, and make good choices of the three things we do control, or we can live in non-reality and futility. It is a binary choice: No more and no less.

There appears to be a sort of frantic element to these verses. There is so much time wasted in trying to gamble, find shortcuts, blame-shift, etc. Solomon begs, *give no sleep to your eyes nor slumber to your eyelids* (vs 4) prior to attempting to get out of this mess.

Do not rest until you take back ownership of your life, your resources, and your decisions. Until you peel yourself away from being obligated for the decision of others, you cannot walk in the way of wisdom and righteousness. So don't rest until you get to that place—the place of self-governance, owning your personal stewardship. It is an urgent task to get away from any and all obligation you have assumed for the choices of others.

A practical application of this is "Don't ever guarantee someone else's loan." By describing the dire situation you are in after guaranteeing, it follows that Solomon is also saying "Don't ever get yourself into this situation."

A further application goes beyond finance. We can find ourselves obligated for the emotional well being of someone else. For their happiness. For their success. And it is just a reality that we cannot make choices for other people. So when we come to our senses and realize we have become *surety* for the choices of others, we need to make it a high priority to extract ourselves

from that situation. We need to avoid putting ourselves in situations where we are responsible for the choices of others.

This can apply to parents. Parents desire a good outcome for their children. But they do not make choices for their children. So when they become “surety”—attempting to guarantee an outcome—they are putting upon themselves an obligation that does not properly belong to them. They are assuming the obligation of another and need to extract themselves from the situation. Parents can teach; they can equip. They can be good examples. That is their responsibility. But they cannot make choices for others.

Solomon urges: *Deliver yourself like a gazelle from the hunter’s hand* (vs 5). Imagine what it looks like for a gazelle, so near death, to escape. The animal, caught in the *hunter’s* grip would fight and wiggle and wrestle because his life depended on it. The gazelle certainly wouldn’t dare fall asleep because *sleep* almost certainly would mean death. And as soon as it were free, it would dart in the opposite direction, putting as much distance between it and the hunter as possible. The same is true for *a bird escaping from the hand of the fowler*.

Evil, both internally in the form of the flesh and externally in the form of Satan, are working to ensnare us. And the only way it is effective is if we decide to forfeit our agency. Solomon warns us not to do this.

Wisdom requires that we stand in reality and truth. But just as we need to avoid forfeiting our own agency to make choices, we similarly need to avoid becoming *surety* to assume agency for others. We cannot control outcomes. And we should strenuously avoid guaranteeing what is someone else’s to steward. We should, rather, be diligent to navigate well our own responsibilities.

If we find ourselves caught in false promises and danger-filled shortcut attempts, we are urged to fight our way out of it.

Biblical Text

My son, if you have become surety for your neighbor,

Have given a pledge for a stranger,

² If you have been snared with the words of your mouth,

Have been caught with the words of your mouth,

³ Do this then, my son, and deliver yourself;

Since you have come into the hand of your neighbor,

Go, humble yourself, and importune your neighbor.

⁴ Give no sleep to your eyes,

Nor slumber to your eyelids;

⁵ Deliver yourself like a gazelle from the hunter’s hand

And like a bird from the hand of the fowler.