

Route 66

Proverbs: Practical Wisdom

Part 20 – October 4, 2009

“Proverbs” is the most practical book in the Old Testament. It offers frank illustrations and insights about everyday life. Unlike O.T. stories that often require us to deduce and extract their lessons, Proverbs just puts ‘em right out there!



If you find honey, eat just enough – too much of it, and you will vomit. Seldom set foot in your neighbor’s house – too much of you
... - *Proverbs 25:16-17 NIV*

Get the idea? Don’t wear out your welcome! Be sensitive to when people have had their fill of you.

Have you ever been around someone who forced you to “gorge” on their company?! Well, don’t be *that guy*. You can’t *not love* the proverbs! They’re just so practicable.

This book exists because when God blessed Solomon, and told him to request whatever he wished, Solomon asked for wisdom.

God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. ... He spoke **three thousand proverbs** and his songs numbered a thousand and five. ... Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom. - *1 Kings 4:29,32,34 NIV*

This *same* wisdom is available to *us*! It’s even been assembled into 31 convenient chapters. Take any month with 31 days in it, and read a chapter a day - it has a built-in reading plan!



If the Bible was a car, “Proverbs” would be the *tires*, because this is where the rubber meets the road when it comes to applying spiritual truth. A proverb is a compact but powerful vehicle.

But it has its limitations. And we need to keep those in mind.

1. Although the proverbs are the most trustworthy and reliable standards to live by, they are *not* divine guarantees.

So when we read: “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.” (*Prov. 22:6*) This is our best course of action, but *not* an assurance. Children possess a free will. A proverb offers a principle *not* a promise.

Proverbs 10:4 says: “Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth.” Tell that to a coal miner or a field hand.

2. Many proverbs contain part of a truth, not a whole truth.

So when we read: “The fear of God is the beginning of knowledge ...” (*Prov. 1:7*) it doesn’t mean *only* “fear” and not love or trust. It’s grabbing attention and making a singular point about reverence. A proverb is meant to be concise not comprehensive. So, at many points Proverbs is more practical than theological, and you have to “fill in the gaps” in light of other scripture. The idea was to have very brief, highly memorable illustrations. So sure, it would be more *precise* and *accurate* to say:



If you’re deficient in understanding and insight you’ll be disinclined to learn from your miscalculations and your errors in judgment – and you’ll therefore be *prone* to continue a dysfunctional cycle that will repeat the same errors and bring the same consequences again and again.

But it’s just so much snappier to say:



As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly. - *Proverbs 26:11 NIV*

Solomon had a thing for vomit! And don’t think he wasn’t aware of the humor; that’s what helps *make* it memorable.

The book is written as advice to young men, from a father figure who loves the Lord and has learned the deep truths of life. That’s why, over and over you’ll see the phrase: “My son ...”. The actual *proverbs* don’t begin until chapter *ten*. For the first *nine* chapters, the father-author uses creative illustrations to make an impassioned plea for his “sons” to treasure wisdom above all, and to keep themselves sexually pure. And on *that* subject, he asks them a memorable, vivid question:

Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? - *Proverbs 6:27 NIV*

From chapter ten, on, the proverbs cover everything a wise and loving father would want his young adult sons to be aware of as they enter life in the real world.

A wife of noble character is her husband’s crown, but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones. - *Proverbs 12:4 NIV*

(*When it comes to your spouse, pick a crown not a cancer*)

He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity. - *Proverbs 21:23 NIV*

(*Keep your mouth shut and you’ll stay out of trouble!*)

Like an archer who wounds at random is he who hires a fool or any passer-by. - *Proverbs 26:10 NIV*

(*Surround yourself with the best and the brightest*)

Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue. - *Proverbs 17:28 NIV*

(Keep your mouth shut and you'll stay out of trouble!)

The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him. - *Proverbs 18:17 NIV*

(Don't be too quick to judge or you'll regret it)

A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions. - *Proverbs 18:2 NIV*

(Keep your mouth shut and you'll stay out of trouble!)

As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed. - *Proverbs 26:14 NIV*

(Snoozers are losers!)

The proverbs often contrast the wise with the simple and the fool. Here's the difference between these three: The **wise** live out God's commands in every day life. The **simple** don't know or understand God's commands. And the **fool** understands the commands but rejects them.

And then at chapter 22, verse 17, something interesting happens. Solomon presents thirty sayings he has gleaned from other sages.

Pay attention and listen to the sayings of the wise ... Have I not written thirty sayings for you ... - *Proverbs 22:17a,20a NIV*

The idea of Solomon compiling proverbs from others lines up with something he says about himself in the book of Ecclesiastes:

Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. - *Ecclesiastes 12:9 NIV*



Many scholars have noted that Solomon's 30 sayings of the wise are similar to an Egyptian writing called the "Wisdom of Amenemope" (roughly a contemporary with Solomon). You're looking at a portion of the only complete copy.

It's so fascinating to picture Solomon sifting through this in order to discern what the Spirit would inspire him to adopt. It makes one very good point: All truth is God's truth! And it's up to us to sift and screen whatever we think looks like truth against God's revealed truth.

There's another interesting break at chapter twenty-five:

These are more proverbs of Solomon, copied by the men of Hezekiah king of Judah ... - *Proverbs 25:1 NIV*

Remember when we went through the good and bad kings? Hezekiah was one of the four really good ones! He came to power just as Israel (the Northern Kingdom) fell to the Assyrians. He eradicated idolatry from Judah (the Southern Kingdom), and when Sennacherib [suh-NAK-uh-rib] led the Assyrians to Jerusalem, Hezekiah prayed and God struck 185,000 dead while they slept.

Apparently, during this time of renewal, Hezekiah's wise men added five more chapters to Proverbs (300 years after Solomon). Some think they had access to some of Solomon's other 3000 proverbs, and that they hand-selected these for Hezekiah. You'll see the word "king" and "ruler" used throughout these proverbs.

Remove the dross [surface scum] from the silver, and out comes material for the silversmith; remove the wicked from the king's presence, and his throne will be established through righteousness. - *Proverbs 25:4-5 NIV*

It's also thought that this is when the last two chapters of Proverbs were added (about 120 years before the exile). Chapter 30 is titled: "The sayings of Agur" [AY-guhr]. Chapter 31 is titled: "The sayings of King Lemuel [LEM-yoo-uhl]; an oracle his mother taught him."

We don't know who Agur or King Lemuel were. But, they each received their own chapter of wise sayings. And Lemuel's *mother* is honored with the special significance that came with ending the book on her oracle of a wife of noble character ... the infamous "Proverbs Woman". It's kind of an overwhelming list, isn't it, ladies?

Among other things: she gets up while it is still dark, she provides food for her family, she considers a field and buys it, she is clothed in fine linen and purple, she makes linen garments and sells them, she speaks with wisdom, and her children arise and call her blessed. And on and on.

Imagine poor Lemuel bringing home a woman to meet mom! No one was ever good enough. "You're the king! My son's the king." He finally says, "Mom, why don't you make a list?!" So, she does and she says, "Here. Bring this woman home!" He looks at it and says, "Well, if the Messiah comes as a woman - we've got her!"

Remember ladies, the Bible offers us patterns to live by and strive for, not to beat ourselves up over. The whole purpose of this book is to inspire profound reverence for God, and a deep love for wisdom and godly living.

And Lemuel's mom makes it very clear in the last verse of Proverbs that the husband has a strategic part to play: show your wife some appreciation!

Show her respect — praise her in public for what she has done. - *Proverbs 31:31 NIV*

And so ends Proverbs; with a woman getting the last word!