

SESSION #27

PROVERBS

1. Theme and Purpose

This book consists of a whole series of wisdom sayings. The book of Psalms focussed on worship, drawing us closer to the heart of God. We could say the Psalms shows the Christian on his/her knees.

Proverbs, then, is the Christian walking, the Christian on their feet. A practical application of some wise principles that can be used in knowing how to live wisely. It's rather like the book of James in the NT in terms of its practicality.

Solomon, who wrote most of the proverbs (though not all) tells us why these were collected and written down. He states the purpose in the first six verses (quoting from The Message version): *“These are the wise sayings of Solomon, David’s son, Israel’s king – written down so we’ll know how to live well and right, to understand what life means and where it’s going; a manual for living, for learning what’s right and just and fair; to teach the inexperienced the ropes and give our young people a grasp on reality. There’s something here also for seasoned men and women, still a thing or two for the experienced to learn – fresh wisdom to probe and penetrate, the rhymes and reasons of wise men and women.”*

Since there are 31 chapters in Proverbs many people have taken up the habit of reading one chapter each day. If you do this for a few months, you’ll begin to realize how valuable and deep and complex these practical principles are.

The key verse is 1:7 because it gives us the source of wisdom – *“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge or wisdom (meaning righteousness and holiness). Only fools despise wisdom and discipline.”* Being wise begins with fearing the Lord.

There are three building blocks in the development of wisdom: reverence for God, respect for parents and regard for law. And the wise sayings collected in this book are based on this foundational set of principles.

2. Author

The Proverbs are mostly written by Solomon, as we noted earlier. The Jewish people believed that he wrote the Song of Solomon in his youth, when his blood was hot! Then the book of Proverbs was written at the peak of his intellectual capacity, in middle age. In his old age, he wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, looking back over his lifetime and chewing over some of the lessons he had learned.

3. Structure

This is not a highly structured book like some of the earlier ones we've studied. However, Norman Geisler suggests this general outline:

Chapters 1 – 9: Wisdom is valuable; seek it.

Chapters 10 – 22a: Wisdom is practical; follow it.

Chapters 22b – 24: Wisdom is admonitional; hear it.

Chapters 25 – 31: Wisdom is ethical; do it.

4. Topics

The book of Proverbs deals with lots of different topics: wisdom, pride, pleasure, the tongue, time, eternity, sin, wealth and poverty, purity and impurity, social relationships, characteristics of good people, characteristics of evil people and so on. An astonishing variety!

It is written in what is called ancient wisdom literature style. Some of it is perhaps borrowed from Middle Eastern cultures in which the people of Israel grew up. Some reflect Egyptian wisdom and others Mesopotamian wisdom.

These proverbs are not meant to be promises, like many other parts of the Bible. They're not necessarily intended to be commands either, even though they are sometimes stated in imperative terms. They are instructions on how to walk wisely in this world. These will be especially valuable for you if you uncover the principles beneath these concise sayings which concentrate truth in striking ways.

5. Forms

There are a number of forms Solomon uses in dealing with these different topics.

Sometimes the form is contrastive, identified by the use of the word "but". The key verse is a good example. "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, BUT fools despise wisdom.*" (NKJV)

Another form is completeive, that is it starts with one statement and then adds another one, seen in the use of the word "and". The verse following the key verse, 1:8, is an example: "*My son, hear the instruction of your father, AND do not forsake the law of your mother.*" The first 9 chapters are especially instructions from a father to his son, but also include instructions from the mother using the completeive form.

Some proverbs are in a comparative form, identifiable by the use of the word "than". Chapter 8 verse 11 uses this figure of speech: "*For wisdom is better THAN rubies.*" Something compared to something else and in the comparison helping us to see some important principles in wise living.

Proverbs, by their nature, are pithy, punchy, penetrating pronouncements that grab the mind by the throat and say, "*Listen up! This is great stuff.*" These wise principles are reduced to simple language so that we can get the main point and chew it over.

It's the reason proverbs, all over the world, are memorable and powerful sayings because they concentrate truth in simple words or phrases. Here are a few examples, using the Living Bible version which puts them into contemporary language:

"Don't talk so much. You keep putting your foot in your mouth. Be sensible and turn off the flow!" (10:19)

“Trust in your money and down you go! Trust in God and flourish as a tree!” (11:28)

“What a shame—yes, how stupid!—to decide before knowing the facts!” (18:13)

I am not a morning person so I especially appreciate this one: *“If you shout a pleasant greeting to a friend too early in the morning, he will count it as a curse!” (27:14)*

One of my classmates in Bible college was asked by a professor why he didn't speak up in class. The student replied with Prov. 17:27-28: *“The man of few words and settled mind is wise; therefore even a fool is thought to be wise when he is silent; it pays him to keep his mouth shut.”*

Eugene Peterson's The Message communicates a powerful image with 11:22: *“Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful face on an empty head.”*

These are colorful statements that grab your attention and then encourage the reader to give some more thought to the wise principles underlying those words.

6. The Ideal Woman

Even though much of the book of Proverbs has to do with men, it is significant and appropriate that the whole book ends with a beautiful description of the ideal woman. Not many women can claim all these attributes, but they are great goals to strive for. This lady is a good woman, a wonderful wife, a caring mother and a generous neighbor.

And what is her secret of success? It is stated in 31:30 which takes us right back to the key verse in the first chapter: she is a woman *“who fears the Lord”*. That's the key to her life. And out of that relationship with God comes this marvelous character.

And out of *your* relationship with God can come a walk that is also wise and commendable.

One final word. The Global Study Bible suggests that the deeper meanings of the proverbs will reveal themselves if the following questions are kept in mind:

(1) What virtue does this proverb commend?

(2) What vice does it disapprove of?

(3) What value does it affirm?

Our next book is another one written by Solomon, the book of Ecclesiastes, an unusual book examining the emptiness of life under the sun. Join me then.
