

The Wise Get Wiser, And the Foolish More Foolish

(A Study of the Book of Proverbs)

**By
Stan Mitchell**

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Publisher's Statement

I first met Stan Mitchell in Zimbabwe while visiting with his Dad and Mother, Loy and Donna Mitchell. By this time Stan had already gone to college in the States, had returned to Zimbabwe and was married. Both he and his father were teaching daily in a "Christian School" at the time, as well as teaching in Mutare School of Preaching, preaching for the church in Mutare, and also for congregations in the general area.

Since Stan's return to the States, he has preached for the Church of Christ in California and Texas. From Borger, Texas he has sent us his weekly bulletin with the good articles he writes for it.

Stan had authored a very interesting manuscript, based on the book of Proverbs. Proverbs itself is filled with words of wisdom on numerous subjects, written through the guidance of the Holy Spirit and offering common sense advice and conclusions. Through this study of many of these statements, Stan concludes that indeed "The wise get wiser, and the foolish more foolish." With light from the Proverbs cast on the present day world, one would have to agree.

The Wise Get Wiser and the Foolish More Foolish has been well written. The set of questions at the end of each chapter makes it ideal for a class book. You will treasure these studies and will want to share them with your friends.

J. C. Choate
Winona, MS
January 15, 2002

Preface

“Common sense,” declared Voltaire, “is not so common”. A sense of what God would have us do is less common still. Ours is an age of acute Biblical illiteracy. Recently I watched one of those general knowledge contests on television. I could not help but be impressed by the erudition of the contestants in almost every subject under heaven. When the subject was geology, history and literature, they seemed to have answers at their fingertips. The moment came when the program host asked a question from the Bible. “What wood,” he inquired, “does the Bible say Noah built the ark out of?”

They were stumped. These world-wise and educated people could not answer a question almost any Sunday school second grader knew! It should be apparent from the way that people live and treat each other that a knowledge of God’s ways in our day is very uncommon indeed.

The book of Proverbs is a practical expression of the godly life-style. Its themes are as up-to-date as today’s CNN broadcast, its wisdom as broad and deep as the God who inspired it.

This book is not a commentary on Proverbs. It is instead a study on Proverbs, aimed at the informed Christian or Bible class teacher who wants to pass the wisdom of this book on. How long has it been since the book of Proverbs was taught in your congregation? This is a humble effort to fill a “black hole” in our spiritual development. My hope and prayer is to “equip the saints” for “service” (Ephesians 4:12).

My interest in the book of Proverbs arose in graduate school when I was compelled to learn a little Hebrew, and began to translate Proverbs. In the original language its sayings are pithy, pared

to the bone, and often laugh-out-loud funny. I was hooked. I have since taught Proverbs in Bible classes, and many have remarked on how rich a study it is.

I have often been asked why my approach has been a verse-by-verse study rather than a topical approach. There is no question that a topical study of Proverbs would have great value. Following such themes as the use of words, friendships, raising children and the responsibility of rulers to the citizens they rule is a valuable way to study Proverbs. I suppose I chose a verse-by-verse study because as a Minister of the Word in a local congregation that's the way I would approach the book of Romans, John's Gospel, or any other book of the Bible. The Holy Spirit chose to teach God's will through the Proverbs in its present format. There must be some wisdom to the form and order in which the themes of Proverbs appears. There will, of necessity, be some repetition of themes, even some verses that are repeated word-for-word later in the book. Perhaps, like any good teacher, the Spirit chose to enforce His lessons by repetition.

If this book opens the way for better understanding of God's word, then I shall be content. If by this study we can elevate common sense to the level of God's wisdom, then to God be the praise.

The Author

Introduction

Stan Mitchell has produced an excellent study of Proverbs. The introductory material gives a basis for understanding the purpose and form of the book. It is well organized and easily read. It is both an excellent study for Bible classes and also a guide for devotional reading. He writes of how he came to have interest in writing a book on Proverbs: "My interest in the book of Proverbs began while studying Hebrew at Pepperdine University. After translating the Books of Ruth and Genesis, we turned to the book of Proverbs. Because Proverbs is poetry, not narrative, the translation was much harder, but the effort was highly rewarding. This led me to teach it."

Mitchell has an excellent background to write *The Wise Get Wiser*. He is the son of Loy Mitchell, a long-time missionary in Southern Rhodesia, Africa. He returned to Africa as a young man to be a missionary in Zimbabwe for ten years. He is a careful Bible scholar and an effective preacher and teacher.

He holds both the B.A. and M.A. in Biblical Literature from Abilene Christian University and has completed his course work for a Ph.D. in Theology from Fuller Theological Seminary. He has written for the *Gospel Advocate*, *Power for Today* and *The Voice of Truth International*. He has served as the pulpit preacher for the Fraizer Park and Glendale congregations in Southern California and is now the pulpit preacher for the church in Borger, Texas.

My association with Stan Mitchell has been rich and reward-

ing. As a student he was diligent. As a young preacher and missionary he was responsible. As a mature leader in the church he is Biblical and faithful. In the book, **The Wise Get Wiser and the Foolish More Foolish**, one not only learns the meaning of the proverb, but also finds it illustrated by practical contemporary examples.

Jimmy Jividen

Introduction to the Book of Proverbs

You might be a “rocket scientist” and not be “wise” in the Biblical sense. Biblical wisdom should not be confused with academic or intellectual wisdom, at least insofar as modern society understands the term. What many think of as wisdom is only an accumulation of knowledge, or “book learning” that lacks the tempering and refinement of godly wisdom. What our “Age” understands as wisdom is a galaxy away from God’s revealed wisdom, but this is nothing new. Even in the days of the Bible’s writing, human beings felt that theirs was an understanding of reality superior to God’s. The Apostle Paul remarks on the gap between human and divine wisdom:

None of the rulers of this age understood it (i.e. God’s wisdom), for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory.

1 Corinthians 2:8

Read the following passages, and try to ascertain the Bible’s (and therefore God’s) definition of wisdom:

(Proverbs 23:23)

(Proverbs 15:33)

(Psalm 111:10)

(Job 28:28)

(Proverbs 1:7)

(Proverbs 9:10)

(Ecclesiastes 12:12,13)

A good, working definition from these passages might be: “Wisdom comes when we fear God and keep His commandments.” The word “fear,” used in several of these verses could also be translated “deep respect.” It stands to reason that we cannot respect someone while disregarding what he says. God’s people must have the deepest respect for God’s commands; respect deep enough to “keep” His commands. By this definition, the wisest person on earth would be the one who held God’s words in the greatest honor, and who obeyed them. Conversely, the most foolish person on earth might be an academic genius who mocks God’s ways.

The word “wisdom” (hokmah in the Hebrew) is found thirty-nine times in the book of Proverbs, while the adjective “wise” (hakam) is used forty-seven times. The root meaning behind the word hokmah is “skill,” especially in the sense of some craft. The artisans who built the tabernacle were described as “skilled men” whom God had “given wisdom” in the arts of woodwork and casting metals (Exodus 28:3; 31:3). In Proverbs this idea takes on the force of life-skill, the ability to conduct one’s life and relationships in a manner that reflects a “fear” of the Lord.

In Luke 12:16-20 Jesus described a man of obvious intelligence and ability. His farming skills led to bumper crops and his business acumen to full barns. You could even say that he was a

man of great vision, for Jesus tells of his plans to “tear down” his barns, “and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.” Here was a man of great talent and intelligence, yet in a spiritual sense he was foolish:

But God said to him, “You fool!

This very night your life will be demanded from you.”

Luke 12:20

Just because one is “smart” does not mean that he is “wise.” The “Rich Fool” of Jesus’ story was intelligent in a worldly sense, but was a spiritual fool. An uneducated and unsophisticated person in the eyes of society might be wise in God’s eyes. Wisdom, defined as it is in the book of Proverbs, is attainable for every person who desires to achieve it. All but the most incorrigible will find wisdom in the pages of Proverbs. This is a blow to the modern mind, impressed as it is with its own “advancement” in science and technology. How can we who live in the twenty-first century possibly benefit from the writings of an ancient book such as Proverbs? What could it possibly have to tell us? One outstanding mark of the modern age is our arrogance; we cannot be taught by an ancient writing such as scripture, because we will not be taught by it.

Hebrew Poetry

The book of Proverbs is part of an entire section of the Hebrew scriptures called either “Wisdom Literature,” or “Books of Poetry.” The books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon are all considered to be works of Hebrew poetry. English poetry usually contains rhyme and meter:

Roses are red,
Violets are blue;
Sugar is sweet,
And so are you.

Hebrew poetry, called “Parallelism,” usually contains two lines where parallel ideas are expressed, or rather, one idea is expressed in parallel ways. This vehicle allows for more nuance, clarity and grace in expressing the thought. For the purposes of this study, we will note two kinds of Hebrew parallels. The first is “Synonymous Parallelism,” where the writer tries to express an idea in the first line, then repeat the same thought in the second line in different words. Consider the following examples, and circle the parallel phrases or words:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

Psalm 19:1

In this verse, the phrase “heavens” (in line 1) and “skies” (line 2) are parallel — they refer to the same thing. The phrase “glory of God” (line 1) is parallel with “the work of his hands” (line 2). This is where the study of parallels can reap rich rewards. Not only is the Psalmist teaching us that the “skies” are glorious and awe-inspiring to contemplate, but that they are much more. They display the “work of His (God’s) hands.” The next verse continues this theme. Go ahead and circle the parallel phrases here too:

Day after day they pour out speech,
night after night they display knowledge.

Psalm 19:2

“Speech” (line 1) and “knowledge” (line 2) are parallel in this verse. Not all speech, of course, is knowledgeable, but when God’s creation displays its grandeur and glory, it also speaks volumes about God’s wisdom and knowledge. Who else could have created the heavens?

The second kind of parallel is “antithetic.” As the prefix “anti” indicates, this is a parallel where a contrast is made. This is typical of the book of Proverbs:

The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life,
but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit.
Proverbs 15:4

The reader is tipped off that this is an antithesis by the connective word “but.” Frequently in Proverbs the actions of the wise and foolish persons are contrasted, the wise in the first line, and the foolish in the second.

Often the idea expressed in the first line is “sharpened, specified, intensified” by the second line, so that a proverb could be translated: “If not A, then B”, or “all the more so, B” (Murphy, xxiii). Consider the following:

A friend loves at all times,
and a brother is born for adversity.
Proverbs 17:17

Notice that in the first line the mark of a real friend is that he “loves at all times.” The second line, however, sharpens the image by specifying the moment when true friendship is most needed, in “adversity”.

Literary Devices

The writers of proverbs make skilful use of many devices to get their message across. Many proverbs are laugh-out-loud funny. When the quarrelsome wife is described as a “constant dripping” (27:15), we understand the picture, and smile. And the wise man’s taunting description of the drunk uses humor to sweep away any notion that such a man is debonair and sophisticated:

Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who
has complaints? Who has needless bruises? Who
has bloodshot eyes?

Proverbs 23:29

With deftness and gentle mockery, the writer helps the young person see a drunk for what he really is, a tragic figure, and not worthy of admiration at all.

Often the Proverbs make use of analogies. “Like the coolness of snow at harvest time,” the Wise Man begins, “is a trustworthy messenger to those who send him; he refreshes the spirit of his masters” (Proverbs 25:13).

The Proverbs teach us values by making comparisons and demonstrating that when compared to each other, one is far more valuable than the other. “Better to be a poor man whose walk is blameless,” the Wise Man begins, “than a fool whose lips are perverse” (Proverbs 19:1).

Interpreting Proverbs

How should the reader interpret the book of Proverbs? Should its sayings be considered ironclad guarantees? Should its instructions be considered commands? Consider the following statement:

He who works his land will have abundant food,
but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment.
Proverbs 12:11

Is this statement true? Do hard working farmers usually have bountiful harvests? Even as we answer in the affirmative, our minds add the qualifier, "Well, usually they do!" Bumper harvests are generally the result of hard work, but bitter experience tells us that in some years even the hardest working farmer will suffer loss from hailstorm or drought. Hard work is no guarantee of success; yet the principle remains sound, and teaching young people to work hard is always good advice. Is it true that the dreamer who "chases fantasies" will go hungry? Again, while the principle is true, we sense that even the most indolent farmer might come across a fortune by winning the lottery!

Another good example of this is in Proverbs 26:4,5, where apparently contradictory instructions are given:

Do not answer a fool according to his folly,
or you will be like him yourself.
Answer a fool according to his folly,
or he will be wise in his own eyes.

These two sayings, placed, one suspects purposefully side by

side, demonstrate that life is subtle and complex. We will have to use judgement — and wisdom — in applying these principles to specific situations.

In a similar manner, consider this verse:

Train a child in the way he should go
and when he is old, he will not turn from it.
Proverbs 22:6

When young parents seek guidance for raising their children, this is excellent advice. Children will not grow into mature, productive citizens without careful training; we cannot leave their development to chance. And yet, can we say that every child who is given guidance and training will never “turn away from it”? Does a child not have some responsibility to be receptive to direction? The Proverbs are replete with exhortations for sons to “listen...to a father’s instruction” (Proverbs 4:1). The wise man speaks of wise sons who “heed” their fathers’ instructions, but also of mocking sons “who do not listen to rebuke” (Proverbs 13:1). At some point a child will use his own discretion in heeding his parent’s advice, and at that point, he also becomes responsible for the choices he makes. Parents may grieve over a grown son’s delinquency, but they need not place the entire blame for his choices on themselves. When, after all, does a person become responsible for his own behavior?

Rather than taking the proverbs as promises to claim, rigid canons without exceptions, we should glean from them wisdom-laden principles from which we can learn and live. Life is more complicated than a snappy bumper-sticker slogan, and the various sayings in the Proverbs are more than mere slogans; their truths should not be taken in isolation, but blended and sifted together,

giving a picture of life that is whole and textured, and better able to equip us for a life that is similarly varied and complicated.

Title

The name “Proverbs” comes from the Hebrew “mashal”, and is a term rich in connotations. Read the following verses, and record the translation of mashal given:

(Isaiah 14:4) _____

(Numbers 23:7,18) _____

(Ezekiel 17:2) _____

A proverb is “A saying, usually brief, stating observations from experience so arrestingly that it gains popularity” (Hubbard, ISBE, page 1012). Both the Old and New Testaments are full of proverbs. Jesus makes use of what seems to have been a common proverb when He declares: “Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor” (Matthew 13:57), and Paul makes use of an apparently common saying, “Cretans are always lairs, evil beasts, lazy gluttons” (Titus 1:12). Twenty centuries later, and in countries far from Israel these sayings are still used proverbially! We use proverbs daily, almost unconscious of their background or origin. Such expressions as “A stitch in time saves nine,” or “It ain’t over till the fat lady sings” reflects a wisdom that has been accumulated over the years.

Author

Proverbs is actually a “collection of collections” (Hubbard, ISBE, page 1015), whose various parts are distinguished by head-

ings indicating their authors or sources. There appear to be several who were responsible for the final form of Proverbs. Solomon, who ruled Israel from 961-922 BC, wrote the majority of the Proverbs (1:1; 10:1). "God gave Solomon wisdom," we are told, "and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sands on the seashore" (1 Kings 4:28). Solomon's learning was far more than the result of academic endeavor; he was given insight from God Himself. As a consequence, we are told, "he spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five" (1 Kings 4:32).

Other contributions come from "the sayings of the wise" (22:17; 24:23), "Agur son of Jakeh" (30:1), and Lemuel (31:1). Hezekiah, who was king in Judah from 715-687 BC seems to have overseen some editorial work in the book of Proverbs:

These are more proverbs of Solomon, copied by the men of Hezekiah king of Judah.

Proverbs 25:1

It seems that the book of Proverbs was a collection of wise sayings, many of them originating with Solomon himself, which were compiled and edited by one of Israel's most godly kings, no doubt in an effort to improve the moral and spiritual state of the nation he ruled.

Date

Most of the Proverbs would date from the time of Solomon (960 BC), but the book's final compilation would not have taken place until the reign of Hezekiah (715 BC).

Message

In order to summarize the message of the book of Proverbs, allow me to coin a political phrase which I heard many times while living in a communist regime: "The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer." The book of Proverbs might have said, "The wise get wiser, and the foolish more foolish." It is important for us to remember the Biblical definition of wisdom (i.e. "Fear God and keep his commandments"). But notice more particularly the exact quotation: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy one is understanding," (Proverbs 9:10). In other words, a beginning to getting wisdom is the willingness to "fear God". As you read, watch for the Proverbs use of the word "wisdom" and its synonyms, such as "understanding," "prudence," "words of insight" and so on. If one were truly wise, he would give his attention to God's instruction. He would then learn from Divine wisdom, and become ever wiser. Solomon seems almost obsessed with the kind of person who, for whatever reason turns his attention away from God's instruction:

A fool spurns his father's discipline,
but whoever heeds correction shows prudence.
(Proverbs 15:5)

In other words, the one willing to heed correction will grow wise from it; by definition, the fool will learn nothing new, for he spurns his father's (and everyone else's) discipline. If only Solomon can get the reader to respect God and what He has to say, the way is opened up to great vistas of wisdom. The wise (he who respects/fears God) will begin to grow wiser!

Theological Unity

Many have the impression that the book of Proverbs has little or no theological foundation. Such is not the case, though it is easy to see why this idea came about. At first glance, Proverbs is nothing more than a collection of sayings true to life. There is usually little connection in thought from one verse to the next. The scholar cannot study one proverb “in its context” in the same way that he studies the writing of the Apostle Paul in the light of its context. Yet Proverbs is founded on a theological basis that is solid and profound. The wise man should “fear God and keep his commandments” (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10). And God’s commandments infiltrate into absolutely every aspect of our lives. His will affects the way we conduct our business affairs, our marriages and the way we choose our words. His will even affects the way that we worship! But Solomon is painfully aware that most do not follow God’s commands. Why is this so? In Solomon’s view, it is due to a peculiar kind of arrogance found in human beings that assumes that man knows better than God. The result is simple, and sure, for pride does indeed “come before destruction,” and “a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18). The result is heartache.

Questions

1. What would be a good working definition of Bible wisdom?
2. What are the two main types of parallelisms mentioned?
3. Name the five Old Testament books of wisdom.
4. What does the term “fear God” say about our worship and relationship with God?

5. Why would it be hard for people of our age, or era to listen and learn from an ancient book such as Proverbs?
6. If certain proverbs are not “iron-clad guarantees,” in what sense can they be considered authoritative for us today?

Contents

Introduction	vii
1. An Invitation to Read On	1
2. God Still Speaks to Those Who are Listening	13
3. The Appeal of Two Contrasting Women	25
4. Healthy, Wealthy and Righteous	37
5. Leaving a Legacy	51
6. Tongue Twisters	61
7. Eating Your Words	73
8. Make Waste!	84
9. The Heart of the Matter	94
10. The Pro Bono Barrister	105
11. Look Before You Leap, Think Before You Speak	115
12. Weathering the Future	123
13. Without Any Liberty and Justice At All.....	132
Scriptural Index	148

An Invitation to Read On

Proverbs 1-3

Perhaps you have heard the story of the US Navy captain who was hailed by another officer.

“Turn your ship ten degrees north,” the message said.

Annoyed at being told what to do, the captain responded, “No, you turn ten degrees north.”

Back came the message. “Turn your vessel ten degrees north. I am Chief Petty Officer Michaels of the Royal Canadian Navy.”

“Well,” roared back the captain, “I am Captain Rogers of the US Navy. You turn ten degrees north.”

Presently the message returned. “Captain Rogers, turn your vessel ten degrees north.”

Incensed that this mere petty officer would persist in giving him orders, the Navy captain shot back: “Do you know who I am? I am a battleship! Now you turn ten degrees north!”

Petty Officer Michaels was not long in replying. “Battleship, turn ten degrees north. I am a light house!”

One wonders how close that million-dollar battleship came to being dashed against a rocky Canadian shore! Sometimes the reason we don't learn is because we aren't listening. The Officer's actions in the story are pretty typical of humanity! In our pride of position and accomplishment, we simply stop listening to others, and there are times when our self-imposed ignorance becomes dangerous to ourselves and those around us.

When I was a missionary in Africa, poverty was a constant challenge. Everyone from social workers to businessmen and

Christians offered solutions to the problem. One of the slogans, repeated endlessly, was:

The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer.

Let's adapt that "proverb" to our study by declaring that the message of Solomon was:

The wise get wiser, and the foolish get more foolish.

This is what he was getting at when he wrote:

Let the wise listen, and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance.

Proverbs 1:5

Notice that the wise would "listen and add to (his) learning." There is irony in that statement. Although this person is already wise, he is not satisfied; he wants to learn more. The reason he can still learn is that he is still *willing* to learn; he is prepared to "listen." Is attaining wisdom so simple as that? Perhaps. But one thing is certain. If we don't "listen" to anyone, whether a trusted friend, or the word of God, we will never become wiser!

Proverbs 1:1-6 forms a preface to the book of Proverbs. It begins with a remarkable explanation of the book's purpose, namely, to provide the young and naïve with the wisdom necessary to face life's complex choices and dangers. It ends with a motto that could be applied to the remainder of the book: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline."

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, King of Israel:
for attaining wisdom and discipline,
for understanding words of insight;
for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life,
doing what is right, and just and fair;
for giving prudence to the simple,
knowledge and discretion to the young —
Proverbs 1:2-4

The book of Proverbs was addressed to “the young” and was designed to provide “learning” for the “simple.” The simple person was not necessarily stupid; like young people today, he was naïve and easily influenced. Although this book is helpful for anyone, it seems designed especially for young people, in the most vulnerable period of their lives. It is when our children are young and impressionable that we must provide the guidance they will need for life.

Solomon wanted to help his readers attain wisdom. Look at the synonyms for wisdom that are used in these verses. “Wisdom” is used interchangeably with “discipline,” “understanding,” “insight,” “prudence, and “knowledge.” Biblical wisdom was far more than tearing open the message of a fortune cookie, or seeking guidance from the astrology section of the Sunday papers; it was a way of life that took into account God’s ways, and His direction in everything, from the conduct of our business, to our friendships, and the very words that we use. Solomon gives his own definition of wisdom:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and instruction.
Proverbs 1:7

Attaining wisdom is a process, not an end in itself. There is a fork in the road, where one person chooses to “hear” the Lord, and embarks on the path to “knowledge,” while the other despises “wisdom and instruction,” and finds his path leading away from learning. It stands to reason that we will not listen to one whom we do not respect. Without a reverent “fear” of the Lord, we will not listen to His counsel. This is vital to our understanding of God and His will for us. Will you continue to read Proverbs? Only if you are convinced that its words will help you to live wisely! If you think you “know enough already,” you probably won’t read on. If you are convinced that your own day and age is smarter than the words of these ancient Biblical writers, you probably will not.

A Biblical “fool” is not someone who lacks brain cells, or whose education stopped short of high school. Conversely, a Biblical wise man is not necessarily a “rocket scientist”. A wise person respects God enough to listen to His words. By that standard today there must be many brilliant, educated, biblical “fools”. This is not intended to be insulting; it simply means that there are those who have decided that God’s word has nothing new to teach them. The irony is that a truly wise person admits his need for more learning; the foolish person thinks he has learned it all, and given that attitude, never will. Are you ready to become wise? Begin the process by respecting (“fearing”) God’s word!

The first four chapters of Proverbs contain extended pleas for Solomon’s reader to “read on.” Wisdom is personified. She “calls out in the streets,” we are told, “raising her voice in the public squares” (Proverbs 1:20). Wisdom makes herself available for those who will listen, but Solomon seems uncomfortably aware that wisdom is not the only voice that speaks:

My son, if sinners entice you, do not give in to them.
if they say, “come along with us...”
Proverbs 1:10

What a surprise (or is it, really?), to find that young Israelites tended to be drawn into the wrong crowd! Solomon could just as easily be addressing a modern church youth group! Folly is not just an individual matter but a social one as well. We travel in groups, whether it is a bunch of “the guys” in the locker room, colleagues in the boardroom or a street gang. The young Israelite did not live in isolation. While his parents should have been a strong influence for good, there were other influences out there. This is even more true today, given the greater mobility offered to our children by means of the automobile and the Internet. There are so many other voices clamoring for the young person’s attention.

Wisdom calls aloud in the street,
she raises her voice in the public squares;
At the head of the noisy street she calls out,
in the gateways of the city she makes her speech.
Proverbs 1:20,21

The background is urban (Wisdom calls aloud “in the streets,” not on country lanes!). Solomon’s readers have been uprooted from the relative safety of rural life and have been thrust into the city, with all its temptations. Urban illnesses such as street thugs lying in wait to “mug” the innocent for instant wealth can be seen. Wanton acts carried out against “some harmless (or innocent) soul” is exactly the sort of random violence we might expect to find in New York, Johannesburg or Mexico City.

Can you imagine the ancient Israelite parent asking the very questions modern parents do? “Where are you going? How late will you be? Who will be there?” And like any parent, the Israelite might try to help his child scratch beneath the surface of the temptations to see the dangers in befriending such violent companions. He tries to pull away the veil of temptation to see into the future, and the inevitably violent end of such bad characters.

It is remarkable that Wisdom, personified here as a woman, should make her appeal so public. In the market places and at the city gates, where public business is conducted by community leaders, she stands and calls on her hearers to consider what she says. Wisdom, after all, belongs in the conduct of public life. Living according to God’s ways is not to be relegated to what happens in a temple, or at “church.” It is a way of life that should pervade every aspect of our lives; the conduct of city life, the meting out of justice, and the moral standards that should characterize our society. In the mind of Lady Wisdom, there is no distinction between the secular and religious. The universe that God created is one where our religious presuppositions affect every aspect of our lives.

To that end, wisdom is willing to bring her principles into the realm of public discourse. In ancient times, perhaps, the city square and the street corner. In our day, no doubt, it means that wisdom should stand for truth in letters to the editor, on television talk shows, and on the Internet! Because her appeal is so open and bold, her appeal is often met with derision from passers by, eliciting this response:

How long will mockers delight in mockery,
and fools hate knowledge?

Proverbs 1:22

Even in our day, Christians will find that speaking for God elicits either stony resentment or open defiance. Society's deafness to wisdom's appeal renders it sick and foolish.

My son...if you call out for insight,
and cry aloud for understanding,
and if you look for it as for silver,
and search for it as for hidden treasure...

Proverbs 2:3,4

Wisdom does not simply fall into our laps. Age and experience do not always guarantee that we will acquire wisdom. Wisdom must be appreciated if it is to be sought, and sought if it is to be found. Notice the verbs that are used in 2:1-9 to describe our search for God's wisdom: We are to "accept" God's words, and "store up" His commands (verse 1). If we are to gain from wisdom's message, we will have to "turn our ears" to it, and "apply our hearts" to its understanding (verse 2). Wisdom comes to those who "call out" for it, we are told, "cry aloud" for it, "look" and "search" for it (verses 3,4).

(Wisdom, verse 12) will save you from the adulteress,
from the wayward wife with her seductive words,
who has left the partner of her youth,
and ignored the covenant she made before God.

Proverbs 2:16,17

This verse introduces a rival to "Lady Wisdom". While wisdom "calls aloud in the street" (2:20), there is another woman who appeals for the youth's attention. Raising a theme to which he will return frequently, the Wise Man describes her vividly as a

wayward woman with “seductive words.” So susceptible is the male ego to such “sweet nothings” that the Wise Man must unmask the sweet-talking woman for what she really is, a covenant breaker. There is an undeniable attraction to her appeal, especially to a naïve and inexperienced youth. The description of her as one who has “ignored the covenant she made before God” reminds us of Malachi’s description of divorce as breaking a covenant made not only with spouse, but with God (Malachi 2:14). Joseph understood this: when he was sorely tempted by Potiphar’s wife, he declared: “How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?” (Genesis 39:10). If we were more conscious of the presence of God in our sexual and marital commitments, we would be more faithful to each other.

My son, do not forget my teaching,
but keep my commandments in your heart,
Proverbs 3:1

The natural request, of a teacher is to “take my message seriously.” Significantly the Wise Man refers to his instructions in authoritative terms. These are not mere suggestions he is making, they are “teachings” and “commandments.” They had a binding quality to them because they were drawn from the teacher’s God-fearing observations of how life worked.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make your paths straight.
Proverbs 3:5,6

In a time of crisis, our instinct is to “lean on our own understanding.” We try to figure our way out of trouble by depending on our own resources, drawing from our own wisdom. That is the usual response; but Solomon urges us to “Trust in the Lord.” Nothing less than whole-hearted “trust” will do. Decisions, motives and priorities must all be given to the Lord and we must trust Him to see us through.

It is hard to let someone else “do the driving,” so to speak. When he does, we quickly become “back seat drivers,” aware that someone else has the controls. We find ourselves urging the Lord to “watch out for that lamp post,” or to “slow down on that curve.” But it is well to remember that the Lord has had no “accidents,” that His “no-claim bonus” reaches back to the beginning of time. You can “trust” Him to drive the affairs of your life, and to “make your paths straight.” And need I add that allowing Him to drive is the “wise” course of action?

Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord and shun evil.
Proverbs 3:7

This verse probably continues the theme of the previous verses, where we are urged to “trust in the Lord” and “lean not on our own understanding.” Being “wise” in our “own eyes” is the ultimate folly (26:12), for there is “more hope for a fool” than one who “knows it all already.”

My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline,
and do not resent his rebuke,
because the Lord disciplines those he loves,
as a father the son he delights in.
Proverbs 3:11,12

These verses, repeated in Hebrews 12:5,6, are the only words applied to the subject of human suffering in Proverbs, outside of the natural consequences of human folly, of course. The lazy man might bring disaster onto himself as a natural outflow of his indolence (Proverbs 24:33,34), but here another possible explanation for hardship is suggested. It might be that God is lovingly providing discipline for His children. This thought may help us understand passages that deal with a human father's responsibility to discipline his son (Proverbs 23:13,14).

Verses 13-35 form a sort of hymn to wisdom. "Blessed," the Wise Man declares, "is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding" (3:13). Finding wisdom is no easy thing. According to Job 28:12, no man can find wisdom. The "blessing" of wisdom is instead a gift from God. Like all gifts, however, it must be sought after, and accepted when offered. The Wise Man is always fearful that this gift, precious though it may be, will be spurned or at the least underrated. This is why he declares wisdom to be "more profitable than silver," and yielding "better returns than gold." This imagery is interesting in light of the Wise Man's frequent promise of "long life" and prosperity in exchange for "trust in the Lord" (Proverbs 28:25). While material rewards might come in exchange for hard work and faithfulness, the Wise Man knows that there are more valuable things in life than mere riches.

By wisdom the Lord laid the earth's foundations,
by understanding he set the earth in place;
by his knowledge the deeps were divided
and the clouds let drop the dew.

Proverbs 3:19,20

God's creative power is described as being derived from "wisdom" in the same sense as a skilled craftsman might use the "knowledge" of his hands to build a house. "By wisdom," the Wise Man declares elsewhere, "a house is built, and through understanding it is established" (Proverbs 24:3). When God answers Job's queries out of the whirlwind, for instance, it is to the mysteries of creation that He appeals. The secrets of fashioning snow and hail, horses and hawks reside in God's wisdom alone. The only and proper human response is to be overwhelmed at such wisdom and craft, and to respond with Job, "Surely I spoke of things that I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know" (Job 42:3). The message is simple enough. If God was able through wisdom to set the heavens and the earth in their place, then surely His wisdom could benefit those who hear Him speak through the Wise Man. Our reaction should be one of humble willingness to listen to such unearthly and wise counsel.

Do not envy a violent man
or choose any of his ways,
for the Lord detests a perverse man
but takes the upright into his confidence.
Proverbs 3:31,32

There is no young person who is in such grave peril as the one who idealizes a violent man, and there is no society in as grave a position as the one that makes heroes out of its most violent members.

The violent man is described as one whom the Lord "detests" (the NIV "detests" lacks the sting and the force of the KJV's "an abomination"). This is a frequent theme in the Proverbs, famous-

ly used for the “Seven Abominations” of Proverbs 6:16-19: “There are six things the Lord hates, *seven that are detestable* to him...” This theme is also found in Proverbs 11:1,20; 15:8,9, and seems to apply especially to cases where legal recourse is difficult. We are reminded that outrages such as violence, while not always addressed in a human court of law, are duly noted in another, superior court.

So will Solomon’s young charges listen to his appeal? The attention span of a young person is so easily diverted. The pride of an older person is so easily an impediment to learning. The Wise Man’s first task in Proverbs is to convince us of the surpassing value that lies in reading on.

Questions

1. What is the key to learning anything in life?
2. What is the most common hindrance to learning in life?
3. Proverbs 1:7 gives what could be considered the “motto” of the book. What is it?
4. In what sense is fear the “beginning” of wisdom?
5. How can the sincere Christian today attain wisdom?
6. Why would a young person “envy” a violent man (3:31)?

God Still Speaks to Those Who Are Listening

Proverbs 4-6

A couple of years ago, a young friend went to live with his aged grandfather. Knowing the young man's liking for playing popular music loudly, I wondered how he and his rather conservative elder was getting along. One day I went by to visit. I could hear the music, shaking the very windows and doors of the house. I rang the doorbell, and was met by the septuagenarian's wrinkled face, and a wave of music. He smiled a greeting, and let me in. The din was almost unbearable. I shouted my greetings, and could barely hear my own voice. The young rocker entered from the depths of the house, and waved a friendly hello. How could the old man stand such a noise? Almost as if he had been reading my mind, he clutched my elbow to get my attention. Then he pointed a bony finger at his ear, and made the motion of someone turning a dial. It took me a moment to understand. The old man had turned his hearing aid off! He had literally tuned the boy's music out!

Solomon feared that his readers, too, would tune him out.

Listen, my sons, to a father's instructions;
pay attention, and gain understanding.

Proverbs 4:1

In the first 13 verses of Proverbs 4, Solomon urges his "sons" to seek wisdom at all costs. "Hold on to instruction," he pleads,

“do not let it go; guard it well, for it is your life” (Proverbs 4:13). Why? Partly because he wants his son (and his readers) to read the rest of this book. This reminds us of what he says in Proverbs 23:23:

Buy the truth and do not sell it;
get wisdom, discipline and understanding.

Overconfidence is a pretty common human characteristic, then as now. If we could only appreciate the value of attaining wisdom, we would read on, and benefit from the wisdom offered in succeeding chapters. Solomon fears that his reader will assume that he does not need any guidance, at least not from a religious source, and he will close the pages of the book of Proverbs.

When I was a boy in my father's house,
still tender and the only child of my mother,
he taught me and said,
“Lay hold of my words with all your heart;
keep my commands and you will live.
Get wisdom, get understanding...”
Proverbs 4:3-5

These days in television sitcoms the laugh is always on the parents, it seems. The phrase “father knows best,” once a respected proverb itself has now become parody. Fathers are depicted as foolish and children as world-wise and street-smart. Society as God would have it has been turned on its head! Have our children rebelled to the extent that they no longer accept parental authority? Or have we as a generation of parents reneged on our

responsibility to teach our children? Which ever way it is, this one thing remains certain; in godly families, the parents pass on their work ethic, their values and their faith to their children.

Of course there are other forces that compel a young person's attention. The parent must warn against these. In a peril as modern as our day of drugs and gangs, the Wise Man pleads with his son not to fall into the wrong crowd. All of us can remember, surely with shame, a time when we did something as part of a crowd which we would never have done without its malevolent influence.

Do not set foot on the path of the wicked,
or walk in the way of evil men.
Avoid it, do not travel on it;
turn away from it and go on your way.
Proverbs 4:14,15

The Wise Man humorously depicts these young thugs as being unable to sleep in their anxiety to commit still more violent crimes. "They cannot sleep until they do evil; they are robbed of slumber till they make someone fall" (4:16). In every age, it seems that the young feel an irresistible urge to be swept up with the wrong crowd.

So two distinct ways are held before the young reader, the violent way of the wrong crowd, or the guidance offered by wisdom. The brutal and seductive ways of our society may be compelling, but Proverbs beckons us to take a closer and more prolonged look at the wisdom of a great God. "Do not let (my words) out of your sight," he pleads, "keep them within your heart" (4:21).

In 4:20-27 the Wise Man speaks of the role of various organs

in accepting his wise advice. His lips will have to avoid “corrupt” talk, and his eyes will need to focus on the path indicated, but the control of one organ, the heart, is paramount:

Above all else, guard your heart,
for it is the wellspring of life.

Proverbs 4:23

Jesus made a similar point in Mark 7:14-23: “*For from within*, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft murder...etc.”.

The adulterous woman appears again in Proverbs 5:1-21. Much of Proverbs is devoted to the influence of the wrong kind of companions, and there is nothing in life that so clouds our judgment or makes such fools of us as succumbing to illicit passion.

My son pay attention to my wisdom,
listen well to my words of insight.

Proverbs 5:1

The Wise Man’s plea betrays the urgency he feels. “Pay attention,” he pleads, and “listen well.” Experience demonstrates how poorly people listen when they are ensnared in their passion! It muffles their hearing and prevents wisdom from speaking. They have an array of reasons for pursuing their illicit relationship. They respond to censure indignantly. They’re not listening!

For the lips of an adulteress drip honey,
and her speech is smoother than oil;
but in the end she is bitter as gall,

sharp as a double-edged sword.

Proverbs 5:3,4

The “adulteress” offers undeniable pleasures. Her “lips” virtually “drip honey.” Here is the seductive flattery of the harlot, intent on nothing more than clinching a deal, netting a victim. Notice the chasm that exists between her enticing proposition (“Her words *drip* honey”) and her real character (“in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double edged sword”). Her promises are sweet as honey, but the reality is as bitter as quinine!

The Wise Man’s advice (4:7-14) is to “keep your distance” from her:

Keep to a path far from her,
do not go near the door of her house.

Proverbs 5:8

The “door” of the strange woman’s house is an ominous location, for it is here that he will find her, waiting for any who pass by. The Wise Man tries to look into the future, something that youths are notoriously unable to do, and see the end of such folly. If he listens to her siren call, he will expend his sexual and financial energies on “one who is cruel,” and at the end of his life, exhausted, he will ruefully remember his failure to listen to instruction:

You will say, “How I hated discipline!
how my heart spurned correction!
I would not obey my teachers
or listen to my instructors.
I have come to the brink of utter ruin
In the midst of the whole assembly.”

Proverbs 5:12,13

What the young person imagines is the thrill of conquest, the sly admiration of his peers. What he receives is a loss of dignity in the “whole assembly”. What began as a secret tryst is exposed in public, the most intimate of details becomes the subject of speculation and gossip. How many modern politicians and televangelists could attest to that truth!

But if sexual looseness contains its sorrows, sexual faithfulness has its considerable benefits. Sexual relations within the God-given marital relationship is like water from a well — an ever-fresh resource, refreshing as a spring. The harlot’s honey that turns bitter (verses 3-4) and the wife’s love that remains ever-sweet (running water) makes the point exactly.

“Drink water from your own cistern,” Solomon pleads, “running water from your own well” (Proverbs 5:15). Often when I traveled in the African bush, the heat and dust would make me thirsty. When I came to a river that crossed the road, my passengers would tumble out of the truck and begin drinking. I was always hesitant to do so, however, in spite of my great thirst. What or who, I wondered, had used the river upstream of me? I much preferred to drink from a well. At least in my own “cistern,” I knew where the water had been!

The key to understanding the appeal of verses 15-20 lies in the fact that the word “strangers” (4:17) is masculine plural. In contrast to the “strange woman,” here we learn of other men, who, if the “waters” of our “cistern” extend outside the home, will take advantage of the opportunity. The Wise Man has another suggestion. Nurture and care for the legitimate sexual attraction that exists within marriage. The Wise Man was no Victorian prude. He emphasized the full and rewarding relationship that was possible in the faithfully preserved marriage:

May her (that is, your wife's) breasts satisfy you always,
may you ever be *captivated* by her love.

Proverbs 5:19

His words are evocative. Sexual satisfaction is something frequently sought outside the marriage; it can be won, however, within marriage. Being “captivated” by another is usually the starting point to an adulterous affair, but it can be avoided by remaining captive to one’s own spouse and her attractions. The imagery is startling; the wife is a well, springing forth as a source of life, while the wayward woman is nothing more than an empty pit (5:5).

God created us with the capacity to enjoy romance and sex. It is only when human beings misuse this precious gift and seek its privileges outside of marriage that it becomes harmful and wrong. “Marriage should be honored by all,” a New Testament writer declares, “and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral” (Hebrews 13:3).

The Wise Man clinches his argument with the strongest factor of all. God sees what man in his delusion thinks is done in secret.

For a man’s ways are in full view of the Lord,
and He examines all his paths.

Proverbs 5:21

One of the “givens” in an adulterous relationship is the search for secrecy. Clandestine meetings and aliases in hotel registers might fool family and friends, but we should be mindful of the watchful presence of God, and this knowledge should temper and direct our actions.

These verses carry an extremely contemporary feel. In our mobile society where vehicles, jet travel and loose societal mores enable us to engage in the illicit, the divine factor should never be forgotten. Whatever society says about the subject of adultery, there is still a God in heaven who sees all, and to whom we must all be accountable!

Here is some sound advice for when we get ourselves into financial trouble:

My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor,
if you have struck hands in pledge for another,
if you have been entrapped by what you have said,
ensnared by the words of your mouth,
then do this, my son, to free yourself...
since you have fallen into your neighbor's hands:
Go and humble yourself,
press your plea with your neighbor!
Allow no sleep to your eyes...
Proverbs 6:1-3

There are two points in this message about incurring debts. The first is implied, namely, that it would have been better not to have made a rash and thoughtless pledge in the first place. The second deals with the wise course of action if one finds himself cornered by just such a rash commitment. The message seems to be, "Swallow hard and eat your humble pie." Don't delay the embarrassing but necessary interview. Lay the situation out before your creditor and make wiser arrangements. It is better, when in trouble, to "face the music" — admit your fault — and to seek relief than to allow the situation to boil and fester.

Go to the ant, you sluggard;
consider its ways, and be wise!
It has no commander, no overseer or ruler,
yet it stores its provisions in summer,
and gathers its food at harvest.

Proverbs 6:6-8

With gentle humor, the Wise Man contrasts the “sluggard” with the ant, whose hard work and initiative allows him to prosper. Imagine a full-grown man, over five feet tall learning from the diminutive ant! Picture this man leaning over an anthill and observing the tiny creature’s initiative and teamwork! There are two things this big, strong man can learn from the plucky insect. First, the ant needs no “commander” or “overseer”. He carries his work out by his own initiative. How often in church work is nothing done because no one felt the compulsion to do more than point out congregational failures and take the initiative! Often church members will declare that “something must be done” rather than rolling up their sleeves and saying, “I must do something.” The second characteristic of the ant is his ability to plan for the future. The ant “stores provisions in summer” and “gathers food at harvest” with an eye for the rigors of winter. The Wise Man switches from the ant to mimic the words of the lazy man:

A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest,
and poverty will come on you like a bandit,
and scarcity like an armed man.

Proverbs 6:10,11

“Scarcity,” like a bandit in ambush is depicted as leaping out from

its surroundings and attacking the unsuspecting lazy man. The surprise of the attack is thorough due to his inattention (“slumber”).

There are three things the Lord hates,
seven that are detestable to him:
haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked schemes,
feet that are quick to rush into evil,
a witness who pours out lies
and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.

Proverbs 6:16-19

The emphasis in this kind of grammatical structure is on the final clause. While God hates all seven things listed, He hates the seventh and last most of all. Another example of this structure is found in Proverbs 30:18,19, where the writer lists several things that leave no trace (and are therefore indecipherable); a “ship on the sea,” and an “eagle in the sky,” but, he concludes, the most unexplainable phenomenon of all is “the way of a man with a maid,” or the magic and mystery of romantic love. In both cases, the final characteristic is thrown into bold relief. Who can doubt that for God the most detestable thing of all is a divisive brother?

The Lord is not merely “bothered” or “annoyed” with these things; He hates them. They are “detestable” (or an abomination) to him. God’s perspective on these activities contrasts greatly with our tendency to excuse them.

If we are right in identifying the seventh sin as the one which Solomon wants to emphasize, then it follows that each of the other seven sins contribute to number seven. In other words,

“haughty eyes” (an arrogant attitude toward others) is bound to cause resentment amongst brethren. A “lying tongue” would cause confusion and mistrust between brethren, muddying up the process of communication. “Hands that shed innocent blood” refers to violence that, whatever the rationale, tends to engender more violence. The opposite of this would be “clean hands” (Psalms 24:4; 73:13). A “heart that devises wicked schemes” might today be described as a person with an unworthy “agenda” for God’s people, one who plays deceptive politics with the church. “Feet that are quick to rush into evil” expresses the urgency which these divisive people feel to carry out their mischief. So dedicated to their divisive actions, and so lacking in anything that would strengthen and edify! A “false witness who pours out lies” in ancient Israel refers to testifying in court, but in the church today could apply to the gossip and slander that accompanies the actions of a divisive brother. By all these means a wedge is driven between beloved children of the Father, and hence the Lord’s disgust!

Finally comes the clincher. All of these actions are the actions of a “man who stirs up dissention among brothers.” This, the Wise Man proclaims, the God of heaven hates most of all! If we could truly see these actions the way God does, we might take our responsibility to unify brethren far more seriously than we do.

Questions

1. Why have parents today lost much of the respect they once had? Is it entirely the children’s fault?
2. Solomon tries to help his reader see two things in his depiction of the adulteress. He helps us see past her “honeyed” promises to the reality of illicit sexual relations,

The Appeal of Two Contrasting Women

Proverbs 7-9

In her book “The Ten Commandments,” Dr. Laura Schlessinger recalls a time when she was a little girl. She had been particularly naughty one day when in frustration her father threatened to leave her in an orphanage if she didn’t straighten up.

“You can’t do that,” the little girl declared.

“Why not?” her father asked.

“Because it’s against the law!” she declared.

“What law is that?”

“When parents leave their kids somewhere,” she concluded triumphantly, “it’s called adultery!” (page 208).

When you think of the devastation an abandoned child feels, you begin to understand the magnitude of the betrayal grown ups feel when infidelity tears families and psyches asunder. Towering passions, succumbed to in a moment, can devastate for generations. All you need to do is couple Biblical names to know how ancient a problem this is: Samson and Delilah, Judah and Tamar, David and Bathsheba bring to life passions as familiar as the scandal next door, or the “private life” of the President. Is infidelity nothing more than a private affair between consenting adults? Does adultery say something about a man’s (or woman’s) character? Nothing could be timelier than Solomon’s effort to depict two women in these chapters. There is the wayward woman, whose charms are evident to all but a fence post, and

there are the less obvious, but more enduring offers of “lady wisdom.” Both make an appeal to our eyes and our hearts. Which woman will captivate us? He begins with the adulterous woman:

Do not lust in your heart after her beauty,
or let her captivate you with her eyes,
Proverbs 6:25

At least part of the responsibility for avoiding the allure of the adulterous woman lies with the young man himself, who will have to guard his “heart” (one remembers Jesus’ similar caution in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:28), and avoid being caught by her eyes! How modern this passage seems, with Solomon’s description of her “eyes”, no doubt artfully made-up and casting hot, meaningful looks at her victim, so near to becoming her “captive.” This could have come directly out of a tawdry Hollywood script!

Just in case his young charge decides that being enticed by such a woman is “cool,” Solomon paints the real picture.

For the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread,
and the adulteress preys on your very life.
Proverbs 6:26

Far from being the sophisticated conqueror of the woman’s heart he imagines himself to be, the young man is “reduced” to something so inelegant as a “loaf of bread.” The man who succumbs is a simpleton, a buffoon. And he is playing with powerful forces that will consume him if he is not careful.

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

Talk about sustaining “third degree” burns! If you don’t want to get burned, don’t play with matches! “Fire” is the perfect analogy for the rapidly igniting heat of sexual passion.

For jealousy arouses a husband’s fury,
and he will show no mercy when he takes revenge.
He will not accept any compensation;
he will refuse the bribe, however great it is.
Proverbs 6:34,35

The aggrieved response of the husband seems to be public and excruciatingly humiliating. The adulterer is a loser, no matter how sweet the hours of stolen “loving” may have been.

How easy it is to conjure up examples to illustrate this! All of us know talented, charming leaders, Christian leaders, who have committed emotional suicide in this manner. Henry Kissinger’s declaration that “Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac” reminds those who lead God’s people of their terrible responsibility to remain sexually pure. When well meaning Christian people work in ministry together, the emotions are strong. The cause of Christ is just, and the closeness engendered by prayer, confidences shared and common endeavor have powerful pulls on the heart. How easy it is for legitimate, close fellowship to transcend into something illicit!

Proverbs 7:1-27 gives further evidence of just how “sophisticated” the man is who follows the adulterous woman. He is “among the simple” Solomon declares, and is like an “ox going

to the slaughter” (Prov 7:22). She flatters him: “I came out to meet you, I have looked for you and found you!” (Proverbs 7:15), as if to say, “Look how selective I have been, and you were the one I selected!”

What is the antidote to this society of seduction and broken vows? We must listen to God’s wisdom!

My son, keep my words,
and store up my commands within you.
They (that is, the teacher’s “words” and “commands”)
will keep you from the adulteress, from the wayward
wife with her seductive words.

Proverbs 7:1,5

The Wise Man describes the scene more vividly than a Hollywood script. He spots a “simple,” that is naïve young man walking near “her” door:

He was walking down the street near her corner,
walking along in the direction of her house.

Proverbs 7:8

Is the direction he’s taking an accident? Probably not. Perhaps he has seen this woman before, and, intrigued, walks near her dwelling where a “chance” meeting can occur.

Then out came a woman to greet him,
dressed like a prostitute and with crafty intent.

Proverbs 7:10

Her appearance is dramatic. “Behold! A woman to greet him!”

One can imagine her emerging from the shadows, clinching the “chance encounter.” It turns out that she, too, has been looking for liaisons:

(She is loud and defiant,
her feet never stay at home
Now in the street, now in the squares,
at every corner she lurks.)

Proverbs 7:11,12

Her need to fulfill her desire renders her restless. She lurks here and there seeking her victim. When she does, she pounces on him, like a cat in ambush:

She took hold of him and kissed him,
and with a brazen face, she said:

Proverbs 7:13

Whoever said that Satan would make temptation easy to resist? Would he have tempted the young Joseph with a Mrs. Potiphar who was gray-haired and elderly? And when he chose to tempt King David, he did so with Bathsheba, whom scripture explicitly describes as “beautiful” (2 Samuel 11:2). The trap set for this young man possesses all the right elements of timing and allure. And her lips do indeed drip honey (Proverbs 5:3). The seductive power of something so mundane as the spoken (or written!) word is apparent in her enticing speech.

I have fellowship offerings at home,
today I have fulfilled my vows.

Proverbs 7:14

In case the youth has any scruples at all, she forms her appeal under the guise of religion. Perhaps the fiction that their sexual romp will take place in the context of “worship” will be enough to push the young man over the edge of his reservations and participate in what she suggests. Anyone who has been involved in church work for a long time will, upon reflection, recall that far too many Christians have fallen to the subtle yet powerful pull of otherwise good people engaged in a noble task. It is one thing to revel in the closeness of Christian fellowship; it is quite another to somehow justify an illicit relationship on the basis of their growing closer together while serving the Lord!

In addition, she has spared no expense. She has purchased the finest imported fabrics.

I have covered my bed with covered linens from Egypt,
I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and
cinnamon.

Proverbs 7:16,17

How inviting this all sounds! This rather dim-witted youth is almost convinced until he remembers an important factor. “What about her husband?” he seems to say. She has the answer for that, too. Their time together will be safe from the fear of discovery:

My husband is not at home,
he is gone on a long journey.
He took his purse filled with money,
and will not be home until full moon.

Proverbs 7:19,20

Like many an observant wife, this woman had noticed the amount

of money her husband took with him and calculated the duration of his stay.

You can almost see the young man take all of this in. He, too, is making a calculation. There are the dangers of discovery, and the admittedly dim voices of his upbringing. Then there are the undeniable pleasures she offers. Then the decision is made:

All at once he followed her,
like an ox going to the slaughter.
Proverbs 7:22

What a sight he presents! Rather than being a suave Casanova, he is nothing more than a dumb ox, harnessed and lumbering after this wisp of a woman. Her bedroom, so full of supposed delights becomes a slaughterhouse, and he the dumb ox who walks right into it. Like the ox he may possess physical strength, but little wisdom.

And what of the fiction that she has especially chosen him from all the young men? The Wise Man, from the more considered perspective of age, makes an observation. The young man was not the only one, by any means, to catch her eye:

Many are the victims she has brought down,
her slain are a mighty throng.
Proverbs 7:26

In contrast to the rather wanton woman of chapter 7, who lurks at dark corners and draws her victims into the privacy of a bedroom, Lady Wisdom makes her appeal publicly, and in an up front manner.

Beside the gates leading into the city,
at the entrances she cries aloud.
Proverbs 8:3

Lady Wisdom “cries aloud.” She cares too much to whisper her message. This is a matter of life and death; she dare not whisper her warnings! She invites all those who are willing to learn, even those who are “simple” and “foolish,” for they can still gain “prudence” and “understanding” (8:5). There is always hope, even for the most naïve person to gain wisdom, if he will only listen. The one wise enough to listen will in the end become wiser still.

While the adulterous woman of the previous chapter may use honeyed words to seduce, Wisdom also depends on the power of her words to persuade:

Listen for I have worthy things to say,
I open my lips to speak what is right.
Proverbs 8:6

She, too, makes promises, but hers are genuine:

I love those who love me,
and those who seek me find me.
Proverbs 8:17

It might seem an obvious point, but the attainment of wisdom is therefore limited to those who seek it. The wise are getting wiser. The adulterous woman only flattered; Wisdom promises to genuinely reward the young man’s search. There is even a whiff of romance in these words, for the Wise Man declares elsewhere that the man who “finds” a wife “finds what is good” (Proverbs 18:22).

My fruit is better than fine gold,
what I yield surpasses choice silver.
Proverbs 8:19

Here is a message that should be heeded in our materialistically obsessed Age. There are some things more valuable than riches and possessions. Those who value wisdom thus will begin the search for it.

Wisdom was with God at creation. In fact, it was by wisdom that the earth was created.

When (God) gave the sea its boundary,
so the waters would not overstep its commands,
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.
Then I was the craftsman at his side.
Proverbs 8:29,30

Wisdom is indeed in the building business. She was present at creation, and offers her unparalleled skills to build our lives too. The wanton woman invited her unwary youth to her home; so does Lady Wisdom, but her offer is wholesome, and the pleasures she offers legitimate.

Wisdom has built her house;
she has hewn out its seven pillars.
She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine;
she also has set her table.
Proverbs 9:1,2

There is a lot of speculation, much of it fanciful, in the commentaries regarding wisdom's "seven pillars." Do they stand for the

seven climactic regions? The seven days of creation? Most likely the phrase refers simply to the teachings of Proverbs 1-8. Proverbs 24:3 observes that it is “by wisdom” that “a house is built,” and in Proverbs 14:1 we learn that the wise woman builds her house “by wisdom.” In these verses, then, Lady Wisdom issues an invitation for us to build our every relationship upon the principles espoused in the book of Proverbs.

Do not rebuke a mocker, or he will hate you;
rebuke a wise man, and he will love you.

Proverbs 9:8

This is a good illustration of the “wise” getting wiser and the “foolish more foolish”. Attempts to correct a mocker, Solomon notices ruefully, only bring an “insult” (Prov 9:7), while a wise man, rather than resenting advice, will love you for instructing him (Proverbs 9:9)!

Solomon’s definition of wisdom bears repeating:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

Proverbs 9:10

Notice that “the fear of the Lord” is the “*beginning* of wisdom.” Lying behind the attainment of wisdom is the willingness to fearfully, respectfully listen to what the Lord has to say. This humble and compliant attitude opens the way to the vistas of God’s wisdom.

In contrast to the banquet offered by Lady Wisdom, the chapter ends with the shabby invitation of the “other” woman:

“Let all who are simple come in here!”
she says to those who lack judgment.
“Stolen water is sweet;
food eaten in secret is delicious.”
Proverbs 9:16,17

She is depicted as “loud” and classless, the fare she offers must be eaten in haste as it is not even her own. She offers “stolen waters,” perhaps an echo of the analogy in 5:15-23, and a surreptitiously eaten meal (eaten “in secret”). Her very words should alert the unwary that her offerings are shady and unworthy. Otherwise why not enjoy their pleasures in public? Thus the Wise Man ends his contrast of the two women and the invitations they offer. One offers delicious though illicit pleasures which will end in tragedy; the other offers life. If the reader chooses to listen to Lady Wisdom’s offer, he will continue to read the rest of Proverbs, and live.

Proverbs 8 and 9 offer the “invitation song.” Wisdom has pled with us to read on — and listen to her for a total of nine chapters. Why the great emphasis on “hearing” the voice of wisdom? Why the constant repetition of the theme, “the wise get wiser...?” The answer is simple, and tragic. Most people are too impressed with the “wisdom” of their own age to listen to God’s eternal truths. The result can be seen easily in the violence and mean-spiritedness of our society. Just as the adulterous woman once sought to entice, so now Wisdom seeks to entice us to follow her by offering a banquet, where she sets out the food and wine. “Let all who are simple come in here,” she pleads. Being a Biblical simpleton is not a terminal illness. We can, if we accept the invitation of Proverbs, become wise. Read on, and learn!

Questions

1. Talk about the image used in 6:27 referring to an adulterous relationship as “scooping a fire” into one’s lap. What does this say about the heat of passion, and its consequences?
2. How is it that otherwise good and Christian people can succumb to the temptations of sinful extramarital relationships?
3. Much of this woman’s allure is achieved with her words. How might our words (written or spoken) become part of the temptation to break our vows?
4. Suggest some ways to make our marriages strong and “affair-proof.”

Healthy, Wealthy and Righteous

Proverbs 10-12

Bill sat at his desk. It was after midnight. He was scared for his job, and his family. He was almost sure that he had lost the contract that morning to build the new wing on the elementary school. Where was he going to get the money to pay his workers? What about his ability to provide for his wife and children? He knew his competitor, and he knew that his bid was impossibly low. In order to do a job that cheaply he would have to cut corners, to the point of endangering lives. Bill had felt an overwhelming temptation to similarly underbid, though he had no idea how he could do a safe and quality job for that amount of money. Either the building would be shoddy, or he would lose money.

But he couldn't conscientiously do that. He was not just a building contractor, he was a *Christian* building contractor, and he had some standards to live up to.

As parents we often lecture our children on the dangers of caving in to peer pressure, and make no mistake, our young people are put under enormous pressure to conform. The fact is that Christian adults, too, feel a pressure to lower themselves to the standards of those around them. From the evils of tilted scales to the value of a good name over riches, the Proverbs have a lot to say about how we conduct our business affairs.

The "proverbs of Solomon" (Proverbs 10:1) begin a transition to the major section of the book. What follows are wise say-

ings pertaining to every aspect of life, from business ethics to friendships, from the home and family to peace with God. Proverbs is entirely, imminently practical, and its advice is as up-to-date as this morning's newscast.

Ill-gotten treasures are of no value,
but righteousness delivers from death.

Proverbs 10:2

This saying presents the dilemma humans face beautifully. On the surface it might seem that an "ill-gotten" treasure benefited the dishonest person greatly. Is he not enjoying a luxurious lifestyle as a result? These words remind the reader that ultimately the advantage gained from dishonest business practice will be valueless.

The Lord does not let the righteous go *hungry*,
but he thwarts the *craving* of the wicked.

Proverbs 10:3

What is the difference between a "hunger" and a "craving"? A hunger is natural, something everyone has. A "craving" indicates something unnatural, a hunger that has gone out of control. That is a good description of what "the wicked" do. Many activities are good and natural when enjoyed in their proper context, but harmful when abused. Enjoying food is natural and healthy, for instance, but when our hunger becomes a craving, it can turn into gluttony!

Blessings crown the head of the righteous,
but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked.

Proverbs 10:6

It was a Hebrew custom to pronounce God's blessing on someone by placing hands on his head. Jacob placed his hands on the heads of Ephraim and Manasseh, for instance, when passing on a blessing to Joseph's sons (Genesis 48:14-22).

The *memory* of the righteous will be a blessing,
but the name of the wicked will rot.
Proverbs 10:7

The parallel here makes perfect sense. "Memory" and "name" are the same thing, standing for their influence, or legacy. The legacy of the "righteous" would live on after his death, as his friends and family are inspired by his manner of living. The influence of the "wicked," however, would be short lived, rotting like a piece of wood in the sun.

The wise in heart accept commands,
but a chattering fool comes to ruin.
Proverbs 10:8

The contrast in this proverb lies in the response of each person to instruction. While the "wise" person takes time to listen to instruction, the one who speaks out of turn, chattering on and on would be unlikely to hear needed instruction, and would thus "come to ruin".

The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life,
but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked.
Proverbs 10:11

The image of a righteous person's speech being a fountain is

vivid, picturing our very words as springing from the goodness of the earth and providing life-giving water for man and beast. In a semi-arid region such as Palestine, the presence of a spring was always a welcome sight. So, too, in a barren and sinful society, are the kind and considered words of a righteous person, refreshing as the water from a spring.

Hatred stirs up dissention,
but love covers all wrongs.
Proverbs 10:12

The notion of “love” covering “all wrongs” might at first glance seem troubling. Isn’t that akin to a “cover-up”? But the distinction lies in the one for whom we cover. Usually the wrongs we try to conceal are our own. Solomon is referring to the wrongs of another, a beloved friend, or a Christian brother. The loving person tries to protect his brother’s reputation against scandal and innuendo. Herein lies a message to the person who likes to “Tell it like it is,” who “likes to put all the cards on the table and let others know where they went wrong.” Haven’t you been covering for a sinner for a very long time, in fact all your life?

When words are many, sin is not absent,
but he who holds his tongue is wise.
Proverbs 10:19

Sin is present, Solomon insists, when “words are many.” Is this true? He seems to imply that the longer a group talks, the more likely that *some* word of gossip, some expression of bitterness will be made. Take just a moment to think of all the kinds of sin that a tongue can commit!

The lips of the righteous nourish many
but fools die for lack of judgment.
Proverbs 10:21

Talk about health food! Does what you say nourish others emotionally? Are they healthier for having heard you speak? Does what you say bind up wounds and heal? Or do your statements simply become a “Maalox moment” for others?

The blessing of the Lord brings wealth,
and he adds no trouble to it.
Proverbs 10:22

This seems to imply that wealth gained from improper and dishonest means *does* bring trouble. Solomon often warns that wealth gained through unjust means brings a price in stress and worry. What if my business partners discover how I’ve cheated them? What if my inferior product is discovered to be defective? In the long term, such ill-gotten wealth is not worth the trouble.

When the storm has gone by, the wicked are gone
but the righteous stand firm forever.
Proverbs 10:25

Compare these words with Jesus’ parable in Matthew 7:24-27. Solomon would be gratified to know that the Lord couched His story in terms of a “wise” and “foolish” builder, and it is no surprise to find that Jesus’ “wise man” was wise in the classic sense: He heard Jesus’ words and “put them into practice”. Solomon would have recognized him as one who “feared God and kept his commandments!”

The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom.
Proverbs 10:31

Notice the connection between wisdom and right living. Wisdom, it should be remembered, is the result, not of a high IQ, but of a righteous life!

Solomon turns his thoughts next to the matter of business ethics:

The Lord abhors dishonest scales,
but accurate weights are his delight.
Proverbs 11:1

These words reflect the use of scales in ancient days to measure business transactions. Modern readers are familiar with the depiction of Madame Justice, blindfolded and holding a pair of scales in her hand. Deceitful business practice is condemned often in the Old Testament, in the Torah (Leviticus 19:35; Deuteronomy 25:13-16) and the prophets (Amos 8:5).

It would be easy to fix either the weight or the scales themselves in order to increase profits, especially when dealing with those who could not protest, namely the poor and widowed. The Christian businessman today has the obligation to make deals that are just and fair. It is hard to imagine a genuine Christian businessperson boasting about pulling a "fast one" over a competitor. That would imply that he had either cheated or misrepresented his end of the bargain.

When pride comes, then comes disgrace
but with humility comes wisdom.
Proverbs 11:2

This is the familiar declaration that “pride comes before a fall,” and an application of the “wise get wiser, the foolish become more foolish” principle. A fool proudly refuses to accept God’s wise council, and is disgraced when his own actions lead to harm, while the humble person, realizing his need for guidance, listens to God and becomes wise.

Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath,
but righteousness delivers from death.
Proverbs 11:4

The “day of wrath,” obviously refers to a crisis in one’s life. When society is shaken to its very roots — whether the cause is natural, such as an earthquake, or human, such as the invasion of a foreign power, property value plunges and wealth is lost. The only thing that might save is character and integrity, for these are qualities that are important to God, and only God will be able to aid in such times.

With his mouth, the godless destroys his neighbor.
Proverbs 11:9

Is this possible? Can we destroy a person merely by what we say? I recall the old proverb (but *not* from the Proverbs!) that we repeated as children: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never harm me!” Do you remember saying those words, with hands placed defiantly on your hips? It was mere bravado, wasn’t it? The stinging jeers of the other children did indeed hurt. Proverbs gives us many examples of the harm that our words can cause:

A gossip betrays a confidence
but a trustworthy man keeps a secret.
Proverbs 11:13

Is it safe for people to confide in you? Even the word “confide” implies “confidence.” When someone bears his soul — his fears and weaknesses — he has shown great confidence in your integrity and compassion. Are you worthy of that confidence?

For lack of guidance, a nation falls
but many advisors make victory sure.
Proverbs 11:14

I lived many years in a country that was governed by a “One Party Democracy” (surely a contradiction in terms!). When the “loyal opposition” was thrown out, and the press was muzzled, the government *thought* that it was in the clear to rule as it pleased, but its laws were the worse for lack of “advisors.” It might have been easier to enact laws, but often they were badly thought out, not because government did not mean well, but because there was no one to point out a policy’s weakness. The same is true of leadership in the church. We can always benefit from the insights of thoughtful, spiritual members, and good leaders will always solicit such advice.

A kindhearted woman gains respect,
but *ruthless* men gain only wealth.
Proverbs 11:16

What makes this proverb interesting is the apparent contrast, not only between the “kindhearted” and the “ruthless,” but also by the

way a man and a woman might typically go about their business. While a woman might run her business affairs along the lines of compassion and concern for others, many men will gain wealth by “ruthless” means, but fail to achieve the regard of his neighbors and friends. There are a lot of euphemisms for such a person: he may be referred to as a “take charge” person, or one who can “make a sharp deal.” God calls such a person “ruthless.”

Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout
is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion.
Proverbs 11:22

What an astonishing image this is! It is easy to see how out of place a priceless piece of jewelry would be in the snout of a pig. So it is with a “beautiful woman who shows no discretion.” Women of the Bible wore such rings (Genesis 24:47; Isaiah 3:21). I lived ten miles from Hollywood. The women we see on the screen are undeniably beautiful, but beauty does not tell the whole story (grunt! grunt!). A life-style of compassion and Godly character would move the jewelry from Miss Piggy’s snout to a lovely lady’s finger!

One man gives freely, yet gains even more
another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.
A generous man will prosper
he who refreshes others will be refreshed.
Proverbs 11:24,25

These verses might be thinking of what we call “come back customers,” those who return to a business again and again because of the quality of the workmanship, and the respect with which the

customer is treated. While you may be able to “pull a fast one” over a customer *once*, have you thought about whether he will come back? You might think that you “really made a sucker” out of someone, but wouldn’t it made more sense to make him your customer for years?

People curse the man who hoards grain,
but blessing crowns him who is willing to sell.

Proverbs 11:26

Perhaps this saying reflects a time of famine, where some merchants would take advantage of the grain shortage by hoarding and waiting for prices to skyrocket. The resulting suffering would bring down curses on his head. The businessman who is compassionate enough to sell before prices rise might not make as handsome a profit, but would ultimately receive a blessing, no doubt from the Lord Himself.

He who seeks good finds goodwill,
but evil comes to him who searches for it.

Proverbs 11:27

In other words, you find what you are looking for. I learned this lesson when I enrolled in a Christian university. There were many opportunities, both for evil and good association, and the young people who were there generally found the kind of company they sought. The same is true of a church. If you seek out those members who are continually disgruntled, you will no doubt find them; if you seek those who wish to work and serve in that spiritual community, you will find them, too.

Whoever loves *discipline* loves knowledge,
but he who hates *correction* is stupid.
Proverbs 12:1

The parallel terms in this verse are “discipline” and “correction.” Discipline is a far broader concept than merely handing out corporal punishment. It also involves direction and guidance in what is right.

A man cannot be established through wickedness,
but the righteous cannot be uprooted.
Proverbs 12:3

Consider Al Capone, the Chicago gangster. It must have seemed that he was set for life, with more wealth than most people dream of. He “secured” his wealth with a system of bodyguards, bribes and corruption. Was his a secure fortune? How much better to build one’s life on righteous living! *That* can never be taken away.

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

Have you seen any men walking around with “crowns” on their heads lately? The phrase “wife” (or woman) “of noble character” is found in only two other passages of scripture. The best known, of course, is in Proverbs 31:10, where we read: “A wife of noble character, who can find?” And of all the good women found in the pages of scripture, who do you suppose was called a “woman of noble character?” The words belong to Boaz, and they were

spoken of Ruth the Moabitess (Ruth 3:11). The vivid image of the husband decaying “in the bones” shows the effect an ungodly wife (or husband) can have on the other when she does not live “wisely.” Her behavior corrodes his existence to the very core of his being.

The *words* of the wicked *lie in wait* for blood
but the speech of the upright rescues them.

Proverbs 12:6

Our “words” are personified as “bandits”, lying in ambush for unsuspecting victims. Harsh and abrasive words take on an aggressive nature, leaping out on the startled victim and ripping away his reputation and well being. Do we need more reminders of the destructive potential of our words?

Better to be a nobody, and yet have a servant
than pretend to be somebody and have no food.

Proverbs 12:9

This is good advice in these financially strapped times. Live within your means, and be able to distinguish between necessities and status symbols.

The way of a fool *seems right to him*
but a wise man *listens to advice*.

Proverbs 12:15

Don't try to carry out your responsibilities alone. Seek guidance and help from those you respect, and especially the help of God, whose wisdom is more than adequate to handle your problems.

A fool shows his annoyance at once,
but a prudent man overlooks an insult.
Proverbs 12:16

By this definition, have you been foolish lately? Showing one's annoyance "at once" is unwise. It is easy to imagine the person with a tinder-dry temper, on edge and ready to respond indignantly to *everything* that happens. A wise man does not assume that everything he sees is an insult, directed deliberately towards him. As a wise man, he "overlooks" insults.

Reckless words *pierce* like a sword,
but the tongue of the wise *brings healing*.
Proverbs 12:18

Here we learn of the enormous potential that our words carry, for good or for harm. We know this, deep down. We simply need to take thought for our words before unleashing them on others.

A prudent man *keeps* his knowledge to himself,
but the heart of fools *blurts* out folly.
Proverbs 12:23

The contrast in this saying lies in the difference between keeping one's thoughts to oneself and "blurting" out the first thing that comes to mind. If something does indeed need to be said, it can be expressed after a little deliberation, and not thoughtlessly blurted out. There is a lot of value in silence. We don't have to reveal everything we know about others.

An anxious heart weighs a man down,
but a kind word cheers him up.
Proverbs 12:25

Can you think of anyone who might greatly benefit from an expression of concern, or an encouraging word? If our tongues can harm, they also have the power to heal and build up. We can use them for positive purposes if we simply make the effort to do so.

Questions

1. Proverbs has a great deal to say about a person's "name." What does this refer to, and how can we keep our "name" a good one?
2. What do we gain by the image of our words coming from a "fountain" (10:11)?
3. Can you think of reasons why we should "hold" our tongues (10:19)?
4. What factors might tempt a businessman to cheat his customer today?
5. What might Solomon mean by the term a "woman who shows no discretion" (11:22)?

Leaving a Legacy

Proverbs 13,14

There is a stage in a President's service when he begins to think of his legacy. How will history judge his administration? If Herbert Hoover's years are remembered for the Depression, then Roosevelt's will be remembered for their great social projects such as his "New Deal" and Social Security.

One story about Harry and Bess Truman illustrates this. At the end of his term in office the Trumans were moving back into their home in Independence, Missouri. Harry walked into a room and found his wife tossing dozens of love letters into the fireplace.

"Bess," he cried, "think of history!"

"I have, Harry," she said, "I have."

There comes a time in our lives when we begin to think of the legacy we leave the next generation. Will our legacy be one of sin and failure, or that of a godly example for the next generation to follow? Solomon speaks to this concern when he declares that a "good man leaves an inheritance for his children's children" (Proverbs 13:22). Of course, for the legacy to be effective, the cooperation of the next generation is also necessary:

A wise son heeds his father's instruction,
but a mocker does not listen to rebuke.

Proverbs 13:1

Have you ever heard a young man respond to his father's instruction with derision and mockery? Have you ever heard young peo-

ple make fun of the convictions of older people? This is a folly that is as old as Solomon...and as new as the *Los Angeles Times*.

He who *guards his lips* guards his life,
but he who *speaks rashly* will come to ruin.
Proverbs 13:3

The parallel here helps to define what it means to “guard” our “lips”; it means to speak “rashly”. The ability to choose our words is a very underrated skill. The words we speak are not sterile; once spoken, they begin a process that will affect both the speaker and the hearers, so the wise person will carefully think his words through before speaking them.

One man pretends to be rich, yet has nothing,
another pretends to be poor, yet has great wealth.
Proverbs 13:7

Why would someone “pretend” to be rich? Is there a false value implied here? What are the prestige symbols of our time, and what does it say about our values when we seek our well being in them?

Pride only breeds quarrels,
but wisdom is found in *those who take advice*.
Proverbs 13:10

Notice that it is “pride” that prevents us from “taking advice.” How will we ever become wise unless we swallow our pride and become willing to learn from God? It occurs to me that this is precisely why our modern age refuses to heed God’s word. As a

society we are simply too proud to admit that we need guidance.

Dishonest money dwindles away,
but he who gathers money little by little makes it
grow.

Proverbs 13:11

The wise man seems doubtful about any wealth that is accumulated too quickly, suspecting that it was gathered either by questionable means or at someone else's expense.

Hope deferred makes the heart sick,
but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.

Proverbs 13:12

This should tell us something about how we motivate others, whether we are speaking of our children, our spouse, or our brethren. In addition to the criticism that we usually give, we also need to give encouragement and rewards.

A wicked messenger falls into trouble,
but a trustworthy envoy brings healing.

Proverbs 13:17

In ancient times people were dependent on messengers to bring outside news. The town crier was to convey his information accurately. If someone sent a message conveying peace and goodwill, this commendable impulse might be undermined by a false messenger who felt he could gain something by causing friction and discord.

He who walks with the wise grows wise,
but a companion of fools suffers harm.
Proverbs 13:20

Our willingness to grow wise can be seen in the friends and companions we choose. If we choose for friends those who fear God and heed His commandments, we will be influenced for good. When spending time with such wise people, be quiet for a while, and listen. You will learn much.

A good man *leaves an inheritance* for his children's
children,
but a sinner's wealth is stored up for the righteous.
Proverbs 13:22

Usually we think of an "inheritance" as being property, or accounts in trust funds. Solomon speaks of a legacy that is far more important, and one whose influence will be felt for many generations. A righteous man will benefit even members of his family who are not yet born. Passing a spiritual legacy on was very important to the Israelites. The *Torah* charged parents with the responsibility to "impress" God's commandments "on your children," to "talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deuteronomy 6:6). The Psalmist reminded parents that they were to teach their children "so the next generation would know (God's law), even to children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children" (Psalm 78:4). In our time it is important for the Christian parent to leave a legacy more lasting than trust funds and property; for the sake of generations yet to come. We must leave a legacy of faithfulness to God and His word.

He who *s pares his rod* hates his son,
but he who *loves* him is careful to *discipline* him.
Proverbs 13:24

Also examine Proverbs 22:15; 19:18; 23:13-14. We begin with the disclaimer. No one should, under any circumstances, condone child abuse. Discipline is a broad term, and the wise parent will be creative in the methods he uses to direct his children. Having said this, we should also remember what we have said about the “wise getting wiser, and the foolish becoming more foolish.” Look at our society. Consider its decay. Ponder over the delinquency, and violence and drugs. Can we, as a society, really afford *not* to listen to a wise God and Father on this point? Can we afford to dismiss “the rod” altogether as a means (but not the only means) of disciplining our children?

The wise woman builds her house,
but with her own hands, the foolish one *tears hers*
down.

Proverbs 14:1

This verse is not discussing good methods of housing construction! The “wise” woman’s “house” is her home. Psychologists are now telling us that the atmosphere of a home is affected most by the disposition of the wife. Solomon knew that to be true long ago.

Where there are no oxen, the manger is empty,
But from the strength of an ox comes an abundant
harvest.

Proverbs 14:4

Once a missionary decided to speak to an African friend about the number of cattle he kept on his land. He explained that the overgrazed land was a direct result of the fact that there were too many beasts cropping the grass. He pointed to a couple of oxen, and declared, "You could slaughter those oxen and have many meals from them." The African farmer looked him straight in the eye and asked: "Would you eat your tractor?" It might seem as if getting rid of an ox will save money, but this is a false economy. The strength of the ox provides many more meals by way of the ploughed and prepared fields.

The mocker seeks wisdom and finds none,
but knowledge comes easily to the discerning.
Proverbs 14:6

A "mocker" is a person who is too cynical to consider the appeal of the wise person. His response instead would be to deride the advice proffered, and go his own way.

Fools mock at making amends for sin,
but goodwill is found among the upright.
Proverbs 14:9

The foolish person fails to consider "making amends" because it never occurs to him that he might be wrong.

Each heart knows its own bitterness,
and no one else can share its joy.
Proverbs 14:10

This verse makes me think of the old spiritual: "Nobody knows

the trouble I've seen/ nobody knows but Jesus." A loving and understanding friend is an undeniable blessing, but even the most intuitive friend is limited by human frailties; he cannot know our deepest sorrow, nor can he appreciate our greatest joys. There is only one individual who can read the heart (15:11), and His friendship is a blessing to be sought beyond all others.

The *house* of the wicked will be destroyed,
but the *tent* of the upright will flourish.
Proverbs 14:11

The contrast in these two lines may lie in the seemingly permanent nature of a "house" as opposed to a "tent." While at face value it may seem that the "wicked" enjoy safety and permanence, it is the "righteous", who can count on the blessings that come from their upright lifestyle, who will stand.

There is a way that seems right to a man,
but in the end, it leads to death.
Proverbs 14:12

And we think that we're so smart! As we enter the twenty-first century, has society become any wiser and nobler? Have modern humans "whipped" such primitive and base emotions as greed, racism and violence? Yet we still insist on doing things our own way without consulting our all-wise and loving God. Has there ever been a society that was so smart technologically, yet so unwise Biblically?

Even in laughter, the heart may ache,
and joy may end in grief.
Proverbs 14:13

Appearances can be deceptive. Laughter can at times hide an underlying sorrow. The “good old days” were happy....and sad.

A simple man *believes anything*,
But a prudent man *gives thought to his steps*.
Proverbs 14:15

Especially when an action aids our selfish desires, human beings can be so very credulous! Before making an important decision, get the facts, weigh your options, and don't uncritically “buy” the first suggestion that comes along.

A wise man fears the Lord and shuns evil,
but a fool is hotheaded and reckless.
Proverbs 14:16

The “fear” of the wise makes him naturally cautious. He is analytical, not naïve regarding the dilemmas life thrusts at him. In contrast, the “fool” plunges ahead, trusting in his own inadequate self.

A heart at peace gives life to the body,
But envy rots the bones.
Proverbs 14:30

Solomon knew that “envy” would undermine the very foundation of our lives; it eats away at our very hearts. Thirty centuries later, man has just learned the profound effects of stress, tension and bitterness on health.

He who opposes the poor shows *contempt* for their
maker,
But whoever is kind to the needy *honors* God.
Proverbs 14:31

We usually understand “honoring God” to be something that we do in a church building, at a time of worship. Solomon expands this idea to include the way that we treat others. To show contempt for another person, even if he is poor and ragged, is to “dishonor” his Creator.

Righteousness exalts a nation,
but sin is a disgrace for any people.
Proverbs 14:34

One wonders if, by this definition, America is “exalted” or a “disgrace.” Solomon’s criterion for a nation’s greatness has nothing to do with the vastness of its wealth or the might of its armed forces.

Questions

1. What kind of legacy do we want to leave our children?
2. How do we “guard” our lips (13:3)?
3. Defining “discipline” (13:24) broadly, talk about the various ways that a child can be disciplined.
4. This is a difficult one. Discuss the differences between using the “rod” (which the Bible commends) and child abuse (which it does not). What factors lead from the one to the other?
5. Analyze the “mockers” (14:6). What does he make fun of,

and why?

6. How well do you think our nation is fulfilling God's requirement for righteousness (14:34)? In what ways can Christians be an influence for good in this direction?

Tongue Twisters

Proverbs 15,16

The first seven verses of chapter 15 have a lot to say about the power, for good or ill, of the tongue. The tongue can “bring healing” or it can “crush the spirit” (verse 4). In the usually blunt words of James, its destructive force can create a furor in any church, home or community: “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (James 3:6). The writer of Proverbs is equally aware of the potential of the tongue for destruction but he is also impressed with its potential for good.

I remember in college going out with some buddies after studies. These were basically good young people, and with a youthful zest we would laugh and kid each other. There were times however when the teasing crossed over the line of kindness, and someone would be hurt. It was at this point that a good friend would bring us around with one simple phrase: “I love you too.”

Like a splash of cold water on the face it was a reminder that we had gone too far, but it was done in the kindest of ways.

A gentle answer turns away wrath,
but the mouth of the fool gushes folly.
Proverbs 15:1

We have all been in this situation. A group is gathered to discuss an issue, and the tension begins to grow, words are carelessly thrown into the conversation, faces become red, the voices

strained. Suddenly the tinder-dry emotions are ignited by anger, and someone rises in anger, a bitter condemnation on his lips. Here is the decisive moment, the instant when either an angry word will ignite or a “gentle,” loving answer will douse the flames before bystanders are scalded.

The mouth of the wise commends knowledge,
but the mouth of the fool gushes folly.
Proverbs 15:2

The word “commends” has the idea of “dripping” knowledge, in the way, perhaps, of honey, exuding its goodness from the honeycomb. The contrast in the second line paints a marvelous picture of the fool “gushing” out his folly. Not content, apparently, with possessing foolish thoughts, he pours out the questionable benefit of his “wisdom” in great gushes.

The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life,
but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit.
Proverbs 15:4

In many African languages the word for “tree” is the same as the word for “medicine.” So much of these people’s lives centers around the benefits of a tree. Some trees provide nourishment in the form of fruit, others shade from the heat of the day. Moreover many provide medicines for ailments from the roots, the bark or other parts of the tree. This may seem strange to our ears, but think for a moment how many of our medicines come from trees and plants. Aspirin for example is an extract from the willow tree, and, as scientists like to point out, the greatest loss when forests are cut down is that potential medicines become lost to us

forever. Trees do indeed bring “life,” and so too does the person whose words, carefully chosen and lovingly given, bring healing to those who hear.

A fool spurns his father's discipline,
but whoever heeds correction shows prudence.
Proverbs 15:5

Of course if words are to have any healing effect at all, they must be listened to. A willingness to be guided is a prerequisite to the words of the wise beginning their life-giving action.

The Lord detests the sacrifice of the wicked,
but the prayer of the upright pleases him.
Proverbs 15:8

Some have thought that this proverb is teaching the superiority of “spiritual” worship such as “prayer” over more tangible forms of worship such as “sacrifice.” The weight of these words, however, is not in the merits of one form of worship over another but in the spiritual state of the worshipper. It is the sacrificer, not the sacrifice who is at issue here. It doesn't matter much if the worshipper is offering sacrifices or prayers if his lifestyle has been wicked; the Lord will not accept such an offering. Although he may fool his fellow supplicants by his apparent piety, and even convince himself that his recent session of worship will negate a life of rebellion against God, the Lord is not fooled. He demands not only the sentiments of the worshipper, but his life as well. As Samuel reminded Saul, “To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams” (1 Samuel 15:22).

Death and destruction lie open before the Lord,
how much more the hearts of men!
Proverbs 15:11

“Death and destruction,” or “Sheol and Abaddon,” refer to the underworld, the place of the dead (see also 27:20; Job 26:26 and 28:22). This proverb takes an *a fortiori* argument, from the greater to the lesser. If the Lord could see, even into the depths of the underworld how much more easily could he see into something so shallow as a man’s intentions and thoughts?

A mocker resents correction;
he will not consult the wise.
Proverbs 15:12

Here is yet another example of the foolish becoming more foolish. Notice that the impediment to becoming wise lies not with intelligence but with attitude — one which derides and resents those who would make him wise.

Better a meal of vegetables where there is love,
than a fattened calf with hatred.
Proverbs 15:17

This verse teaches the need to work out our priorities. A “meal of vegetables” indicates, not the diet of the destitute, but the wholesome but simple meal of the average Israelite. Such a meal is more satisfying than the richest of fare (a “fattened calf”) eaten in hatred and bitterness.

The way of the sluggard is blocked with thorns,
but the path of the upright is a highway.
Proverbs 15:19

The sluggard's path, blocked with thorns, is probably a reference to the excuses the sluggard uses. Every time he undertakes a task, it seems, some insurmountable obstacle comes his way, and he is unable to carry out the task. The "highway" enjoyed by the upright describes a road where all obstacles are cleared away.

Plans fail for lack of council,
but with many advisors they succeed.
Proverbs 15:22

Where do you go for counsel? Do you try to "go it alone" in life, confident in your own insight? Do you have a trusted, godly friend in whom you confide? And of more importance, do you confide in the Lord?

A man finds joy in giving an apt reply —
and how good is a timely word!
Proverbs 15:23

In this saying, the second line adds something to the first. There is an undeniable art in finding the right ("apt") thing to say, but there is an even greater skill in being able to supply the right word at the right time! Good advice and good timing do not always coincide. The wisdom literature puts great emphasis on not only using the right words, but also using them when the time is ripe (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8). I must admit that I am not very good at this, though I have learned that when I know I will see certain people

to give some thought to what I will say prior to meeting them. I have learned, at any rate, that giving thought to my words beforehand is superior to simply blurting out the first thing that comes to mind!

The Lord tears down the proud man's house
but he keeps the widow's boundaries intact.

Proverbs 15:25

One of the most devastating things that could happen to an ancient Israelite was to lose his ancestral land, apportioned at the time of Joshua's conquest. The land was not only the source of one's livelihood, it was part of his heritage as an Israelite, conferring the rights of citizenship. Those who were most vulnerable to losing their land would be the weakest members of society, such as orphans and "widows." The rich and powerful could take their land, either by force or deceit, and there would be few with the courage to defend them. The Lord, however, promises to do so, keeping "the widow's boundaries intact."

A greedy man brings trouble to his family,
but he who hates bribes will live.

Proverbs 15:27

It seems that in this proverb the man's greed has led him to accept bribes. It was his excessive attachment to wealth that created the atmosphere in which corruption could thrive.

The heart of the righteous weighs its answers,
but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil.

Proverbs 15:28

This verse makes a contrast between considered speech, where the righteous “weighs” or ponders his words, and rash speech, where the wicked “gushes” out evil things regardless of the consequences. The more mature we become as children of God, the more we will consider how our words can ease a difficult situation. The evil person pours out his thoughtless words regardless of the hurt they cause.

The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom,
and humility comes before honor.
Proverbs 15:33

A deep respect (“fear”) of the Lord brings about a willingness to accept teaching. This verse reflects similar teaching in Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10. An attitude of “humility” allows us to quietly sit and listen to God’s wisdom, and this is the only way to eventually obtain the “honor” of a person who is wise in God’s sight.

All a man’s ways seem innocent to him,
but motives are weighed by the Lord.
Proverbs 16:2

This proverb speaks of our all too human ability to delude ourselves. We may convince ourselves that our actions were taken with the best, most “innocent” of intentions, but the Lord is a far more objective judge of motives. With this in mind, the wise man advises us in the next verse:

Commit to the Lord whatever you do,
and your plans will succeed.
Proverbs 16:3

The word translated in the NIV “commit” is unusual, meaning, “to roll.” It carries a similar meaning to that of 1 Peter 5:7, where we are urged to “cast our cares upon him...” Because our motives are not always as innocent as we believe them to be, we should throw ourselves along the way of the Lord, who will ensure our success in what is right.

When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord,
he makes even his enemies live at peace with him.
Proverbs 16:7

So often when our relationships become frayed and torn we try to put the pieces together by making things right with the people around us, and find to our dismay that it still doesn't work. “Where have we gone wrong?” we wonder. The wise man suggests that the problem might be resolved by returning God to the center of our lives. When our “ways” become “pleasing to the Lord,” we will find that the strain of misalignment is taken off of our other relationships too.

In his heart a man plans his course,
but the Lord determines his steps.
Proverbs 16:9

Especially for shortsighted, fallible human beings, the future “course” of our lives is unknown. Who knows whether our decisions are right? Life brings many uncertainties to our way. But for the one who trusts in the Lord, there is the confidence that ultimately, our steps are given divine guidance. “I know, O Lord,” the prophet declares, “that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps” (Jeremiah 10:23). Of course

“direct his steps” is exactly what willful human beings do, to their own hurt.

Kings detest wrongdoing,
for a throne is established through righteousness.
Proverbs 16:12

The ambition of all rulers, one supposes, is to secure their rule, whether by force or popular consensus. There is a powerful temptation to secure this rule by dishonest and repressive means. Some might even conclude that this is the only sure way to hold on to power, but the Wise man disagrees. A throne’s true power lies in the righteousness of the one who rules.

Kings take pleasure in honest lips,
they value a man who speaks the truth.
Proverbs 16:13

Of course this verse refers to the wise king preferring to surround himself with honest men. Many rulers would rather surround themselves with mindless “yes men,” but the ruler with greater wisdom sees the value in an advisor who has both the integrity and courage to tell the king what he needs to hear.

Pride goes before destruction,
a haughty spirit before a fall.
Proverbs 16:18

Of course we can observe this principle in everyday life. How many times have we watched a sports team that was “supposed to” defeat reputedly weak opposition fail due to overconfidence?

And what of the child of God who prides himself in being free from sin succumbing suddenly to a trap of the Devil because he arrogantly believed he was immune? But there may be more to this than meets the eye, for scripture suggests that there are times when God actively humbles the proud. “God opposes the proud,” James declares, “but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6).

Whoever gives heed to instruction prospers,
and blessed is he who trusts in the Lord.
Proverbs 16:20

In this verse, giving “heed” and trusting “in the Lord” are parallel. One of the reasons the wise become wiser is because, when in a crisis, they trust the Lord’s direction.

A wise man’s heart guides his mouth,
and his lips promote instruction.
Proverbs 16:23

How wonderful it would be if our mouths were indeed guided by our hearts! The importance of that process — thinking, then speaking — is so fundamental, and so seldom utilized. There is a necessary progression from the “heart” (or mind) to the speech (“mouth”).

There is a way that seems right to a man,
but in the end it leads to death.
Proverbs 16:25

Once again we come across the human propensity for self-delusion. The way we choose might seem “right” due to our igno-

rance, or to the subduing of our conscience, but invariably, man's ways are the wrong ways, and they lead to tragedy.

The laborer's appetite works for him,
his hunger drives him on.

Proverbs 16:26

Ecclesiastes 4:7-8 suggests that the wealthy man might labor for nothing more important than greed and pride. This verse looks at hard work from the eyes of the more humble manual laborer. He works because he must. His own day-to-day survival depends on his hard work, and it is his hunger that "drives him on."

A perverse man stirs up dissension,
and a gossip separates close friends.

Proverbs 16:28

A "close" friendship is such a special thing, and represents such a profound investment in time and effort. How unfortunate, therefore, to have this investment marred by someone so cheap and insidious as a tawdry "gossip."

Gray hair is a crown of splendor,
it is attained by a righteous life.

Proverbs 16:31

In our day it is almost proverbial that gray hair is the result of hard times! Such things as a demanding boss and teenagers might bring about "gray hair." The first line in this proverb, declaring that there is honor in becoming aged, is a fairly common thought in the proverbs. It is the second line that provides a

mild surprise. It might seem at first that a “righteous life” brings about “gray hair.” The emphasis, however, is probably on the second part of the first line, where a “righteous life” leads to a “crown of splendor,” referring not just to the grizzling of follicles, but to the honor attained by a righteous, aged person.

Better a patient man than a warrior,
a man who controls his temper than one who takes a
city.

Proverbs 16:32

This proverb urges patience and self-control under provocation. Most people are impressed more by the powerful and influential man who uses force to “take a city,” but the wise man suggests that much more can be accomplished by a man who is in control of his own emotions.

Questions

1. How can a tongue give “healing” (15:4)? Suggest some idea for using our words in this way.
2. “The Lord detests the sacrifice of the wicked” (15:8). What does this verse teach us about worship?
3. Discuss some strategies for giving an “apt” reply (15:23).
4. How do “motives” affect our actions (16:2)? Why are we sometimes fooled into thinking that our actions have worthy motives?
5. What has our society missed by failing to respect the person with “gray hair” (16:31)? What factors have caused this obsession with youth?

Eating Your Words

Proverbs 17,18

There used to be a popular antacid commercial that pictured people in stressful situations where they would have to reach for their Maalox tablets. These were known as “Maalox Moments.” Here is another of life’s “Maalox Moments.” Rich food, eaten in an atmosphere of animosity and tension results in a reach for the medicine cabinet!

Better a dry crust with peace and quiet,
than a house full of feasting with strife.
Proverbs 17:1

The crucible for silver, and the furnace for gold,
but the Lord tests the heart.
Proverbs 17:3

The “crucible” and the “furnace” were used to put newly mined ore under tremendous heat. Only the purest gold could withstand such heat, and the molten metal would be purified of the rocks and dirt. In the same way, the Wise Man teaches us, the Lord is able to test, and purify a person’s “heart,” his motives and thoughts. Peter expressed the same idea when he declared that our faith must be “refined by fire” in order to be “proved genuine” (1 Peter 1:7). The writer of Hebrews (12:5,6) also indicates that God makes use of trials in our lives in order to develop the quality of our character.

A wicked man listens to evil lips;
a liar pays attention to a malicious tongue.
Proverbs 17:4

We have given a lot of attention to the harm caused by gossip; yet there is also a heavy responsibility on the part of the *listener* to turn away from the malicious talking of a gossip. The reference seems to be to the kind of trouble maker who eagerly keeps his ears open for gossip, which he will immediately pass on as the “absolute truth.” A willing and listening ear is to gossip what a can of gasoline is to a flame. When put together, the result is highly combustible, and it will singe the reputation of many an innocent person.

He who mocks the poor shows contempt for their maker;
whoever gloats over disaster will not go unpunished.
Proverbs 17:5

This verse may be a continuation of verse four, where the one who listens to gossip does so hoping that the news will be of “disaster” for others. His response is to gloat over their heartbreak. Normally gossip is listened to, and passed on with great glee. Both, however, show “contempt” for the one who made them, for the “maker” of the poor is, of course, God. To gloat over another’s misfortunes is an affront to the one who created them, and should serve as a warning to the gossip.

Children’s children are a crown to the aged,
and parents are the pride of their children.
Proverbs 17:6

This verse speaks of the respect that should exist between the generations, and teaches the importance of continuity in the Israelite community. When children respect their grandparents (and when grandparents live a godly life), the priceless Israelite heritage of reverence for God is passed down from generation to generation, thus ensuring that Israel would always be a people of God. This, too, is the only way to ensure the survival of the church. Parents bear a heavy responsibility to pass on their faith to the generations that follow.

A bribe is a charm to the one who gives it;
wherever he turns, he succeeds.

Proverbs 17:8

This is not so much Solomon's advice as it is an observance of human nature. Elsewhere, Solomon will roundly condemn bribery (Proverbs 17:23; 15:27).

He who covers over an offense promotes love,
but whoever repeats a matter separates close friends.

Proverbs 17:9

Someone has said that a friend loves us in spite of our *bad* points, and an enemy hates us in spite of our *good* points. In modern times we speak of the public's "right to know." This is probably a good thing in politics, where we seek to hold our elected officials to certain standards of ethical behavior, but in personal relationships it is not always necessary to repeat what we know about a friend or brother. A *loving* friend will gently put our mistakes to rest.

A rebuke impresses a man of discernment
more than a hundred lashes a fool.
Proverbs 17:10

One can almost imagine a “discerning man” stopping to consider the merit of the “rebuke” he has just received, and benefiting from it; on the other hand a “fool” is so impervious to direction that he won’t even learn from the chastening of “a hundred lashes.”

Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam,
so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out.
Proverbs 17:14

One should always be cautious at the outset of a quarrel; like opening a sluice in a dam, things can easily get out of hand. Like water held back by earthworks, tensions may be pent up, and ready to overflow. It is often better to walk away from a conflict before tempers flare, and civilians are hurt. The wise person learns to save his energies for a fight that really matters.

A friend loves *at all times*,
and a brother is born for *adversity*.
Proverbs 17:17

Even in our own day we recognize the value of a friend who is “there” for us in tough times. “A friend in need is a friend indeed.” The Wise Man explains what he means by the phrase “at all times” with his parallel in the second line. He is a friend who remains true in “adversity.”

He who loves a quarrel loves sin;
he who builds a high gate invites destruction.
Proverbs 17:19

In spite of these words of wisdom, there are Christians who feel that the number of fights they have been in shows their spiritual maturity! There are times when it will be necessary to stand for truth, but the one who loves the atmosphere of combat, and the smell of cordite in a church meeting is susceptible to sin. The “high gate” that “invites destruction” may refer to the temptation that high security provides. An observant thief might conclude by all the gates and alarms on a house that there is something worth stealing within! How ironic, then, that these efforts to provide security are in fact the cause of a thief’s turning aside and breaking in.

A cheerful heart is good medicine,
but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.
Proverbs 17:22

Long before modern medicine learned of the effect of stress and conflict on human health, the Wise Man understood that “a cheerful heart” is healthier than a life of worry and fear.

A discerning man keeps wisdom in view,
but a fool’s eyes wander to the ends of the earth.
Proverbs 17:24

One does not stumble upon wisdom. It must be sought, focussed upon, in order for it to be attained. The fool is distracted, never fixing his gaze on that which is truly important.

A man of knowledge uses words with restraint,
and a man of understanding is even-tempered.
Proverbs 17:27

One of the most difficult things to do when provoked or attacked is to respond in a measured and even-tempered manner. One good way to ensure that our words are not similarly harmful and foolish is to use them with restraint.

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

This verse continues the thought of the previous one. If silence under great provocation can make a “fool” appear wise, how much more will a wise man appear “discerning” when he holds his tongue? Sam Levenson once declared: “It’s so simple to be wise. Just think of something stupid to say and then don’t say it!” Or, as a modern proverb puts it: “It is better to be silent and have people wonder if you are a fool than to open your mouth, and remove all doubt!”

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

Another classic case of “The wise get wiser, and the foolish more foolish.” It would be hard to learn if one were talking constantly himself! In the realm of Biblical studies, or Christian living, will we ever learn it all? If not, then we should continue to listen and learn.

The words of a man's mouth are deep waters,
but the fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook.
Proverbs 18:4

This verse may be referring to different kinds of wells. A well whose source is "deep waters" is one drawing its water from dark, muddy depths. The water is not pure. On the other hand, a fountain refers to a well whose water is a spring, fresh, invigorating, and constantly renewed. God's wisdom is such a source, if only we would drink from it.

The words of a gossip are like choice morsels;
they go down to a man's inmost parts.
Proverbs 18:8

How easily and readily we accept gossip. So much do we relish these tasty morsels that when we hear gossip, however unreliable the source, we accept the bait "hook line and sinker." Why is it that people who check their sales slip for errors, and question their politicians on their performance will gulp down the "truths" of gossip without a murmur of dissent?

One who is slack in his work
is brother to one who destroys.
Proverbs 18:9

Solomon believed that no godly person would be responsible for shoddy workmanship. Doing a cheap and shabby job is about as useful as hiring someone to simply destroy, in Solomon's opinion. The Christian (and this includes preachers) should prepare himself well for his task, and do the very best job that he is able.

The name of the Lord is a strong tower,
the righteous run to it and are safe.
The wealth of the rich is their fortified city;
they imagine it an unscalable wall.

Proverbs 18:10,11

In a dangerous world, where do you turn for sanctuary? These verses present a sweet contrast, between the absolute safety of those who trust in the Lord, and the overconfidence (“they imagine”) of the wealthy in what they have built.

He who answers before listening;
that is his folly and shame.

Proverbs 18:13

Have you been guilty of “folly and shame” recently? The fool does not listen, and hence is not having a conversation. When the only thing we have heard is our personal view, we have been in monologue, not dialogue! Someone has observed that in parent-child relationships, it is the parent who actually exhibits the short attention span. When someone is speaking, we should allow him to *speak* before we decide what he means!

A man's spirit sustains him in sickness,
but a crushed spirit, who can bear?

Proverbs 18:14

This verse speaks of the determination and drive to live that often sustains a person in sickness. It is a psychological observation many years ahead of its time! The converse is also true; when one's spirit fails in sickness or adversity, hope of recovery dims.

The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge;
the ears of the wise seek it out.
Proverbs 18:15

The “heart” and the “ear” are the inner and outer organs of reception. Unless we possess the desire, from deep within our hearts, to attain wisdom, spirituality or emotional maturity, our “ears” will not seek those qualities out.

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

Have you ever followed a prominent trial, and wondered if the prosecution and the defense were talking about the same person? One presents him as the Devil from hell, and the other as an angel of light! The same is true when we try to make sense of a dispute, or listen to gossip; we need to find both sides of the story, to hear out both sides, before we make decisions.

The tongue has the power of life and death,
and those who love it will eat its fruit.
Proverbs 18:21

Solomon is impressed with the extraordinary power, for good or evil, of the spoken word. The importance he attaches to the power of words is intensified by the reference to “life” and “death,” both of which are the preserve of God alone. Choosing our words could be compared to handling explosives; they have their good purposes, but we must be careful when carrying them around.

He who finds a wife finds what is good,
and receives favor from the Lord.
Proverbs 18:22

When the Godly person entrusts his relationships to the Lord, finding the right person will be no accident; a fulfilling relationship will be a gift of “favor from the Lord.”

A poor man pleads for mercy,
but a rich man answers harshly.
Proverbs 18:23

This proverb is probably declarative in nature, observing the fact that rich people are usually freer to speak their mind, while poor people must be more cautious about what they say. Their speech will reveal their respective classes. In other verses, Solomon’s sympathy for the poor is obvious (Proverbs 14:31; 17:5; 22:2).

Questions

1. Can you think of some ways that the Lord “tests” the human heart (17:3)?
2. Proverbs has much to say about the responsibility of the speaker to use his words carefully. Proverbs 17:4 adds that the listener has some responsibilities, too. Name some of them.
3. “He who loves a quarrel loves sin” (17:19). Is there a sense in which controversy and argument can become addictive? Explain.
4. “The first to present a case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him” (18:17). How can the principle

of listening to both sides be used in family and church difficulties?

5. In what sense can words have “the power of life” (18:21)?

Make Waste!

Proverbs 19,20

A common English proverb speaks of “haste” making “waste.” The book of Proverbs also emphasizes the value of putting care and thought into our decisions.

It is not good to have zeal without knowledge,
nor to be hasty and miss the way.
Proverbs 19:2

Compare this with Paul’s remark about the Israelites of his day: “I can testify that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge” (Romans 10:2). So, should our Christian lives be characterized by zeal, or knowledge? The answer is “both.” Anyone who thinks that he has “learned it all” is delusional. The true Bible scholar will speak, instead, of how much more Bible he has to learn. This should not be surprising, for God’s wisdom is so much greater than ours.

A man’s own folly ruins his life,
yet his heart rages against the Lord.
Proverbs 19:3

The point of this proverb is that we often blame God for things that were actually brought on by our own failures. It is amazing how many will blame God for tragedy that has come from their own sin and neglect.

Wealth brings many friends,
but a poor man's friend deserts him.
Proverbs 19:4

This is a realistic observation about wealth and poverty, rather than a commendation of this state of affairs. The Wise Man could have added that friends who desert the poor man were not very good friends.

A man's wisdom gives him patience,
it is to his glory to overlook an offense.
Proverbs 19:11

Yet our society tells us the opposite. A real man (or an assertive woman) will confront the offending person, and let him have it with "both barrels." "Patience" is, after all, a god-like quality (Exodus 34:6), and we should take our cue from him rather than those around us.

A king's rage is like the roar of a lion,
but his favor is like the dew on the grass.
Proverbs 19:12

This saying reflects reality under the reign of absolute rulers. Because their lives are so thoroughly subject to the whims of such rulers, subjects will expend considerable effort in observing them. Their survival may depend on an accurate observation of the king's moods.

Houses and wealth are inherited from parents,
but a prudent wife is from the Lord.
Proverbs 19:14

This proverb indicates that the Lord takes an interest in so ordinary a thing as romance and human relationships. This knowledge should give us the courage to commit our relationship concerns to him in prayer.

He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord,
and He will reward him for what he has done.

Proverbs 19:17

Jesus expressed the same truth: “If you have done it to the least of these my brethren, you have done it to me” (Matthew 25:32). The implication in this proverb is that “kindness” to the poor is a loan to the Lord, which He will one day repay — with interest!

A hot-tempered man must pay the penalty,
if you do it, you will have to do it again.

Proverbs 19:19

If you extricate a hot-tempered man from his predicament, he will be spared the natural consequences of his conduct, and will, therefore, learn nothing. I remember some teen-age boys who were found in possession of drugs. It was, as you can imagine, a traumatic time for their parents. How should they handle the situation? What would have been the wise response to the boy's mistake? One father's response was to allow the police to hold his son in jail overnight. What may have seemed a severe punishment at the time in fact had the effect of sobering the young man up, and teaching him a valuable lesson.

Listen to advice and accept instruction,
and in the end you will be wise.

Proverbs 19:20

“The wise get wiser and the foolish more foolish.” If I lack intelligence, there is probably little that I can do about it, but there is something I can do to increase my wisdom. If I am willing to listen to the Lord and learn, I will become increasingly wise.

**Many are the plans in a man’s heart,
but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails.
Proverbs 19:21**

Human beings are always coming up with schemes and designs, many of them ill conceived. We should remember, however, that in the end it is God’s single purpose that will prevail.

**The sluggard buries his hand in the dish,
he will not even bring it back to his mouth!
Proverbs 19:24**

This is an obvious caricature, demonstrating the ultimate in laziness. The “sluggard” is so lazy that he will not even summon the energy to eat out of a dish!

**Penalties are prepared for mockers,
and beatings for the back of fools.
Proverbs 19:29**

There is so much in the book of Proverbs about mockers that it should collar our attention. To the Wise Man’s thinking, this is obviously a common human vice. So who is the “mockers”? And what does he make fun of? Isn’t it a sin when I make fun of things that are wholesome, holy and righteous? There are times when heaping derision on the church and its members becomes a

cottage industry, and I wonder if this failing does not come closer to home than we realize.

Wine is a mocker, and beer a brawler.
whoever is led astray by them is not wise.
Proverbs 20:1

Those who overindulge in drinking lose normal restraint and become “mockers” and “brawlers.” “Whoever is led astray...is not wise.” What an understatement this is! It would be hard to imagine a truly wise man (who “fears God and keeps his commandments”) becoming “roaring drunk.”

It is to a man's honor to avoid strife,
but a fool is quick to quarrel.
Proverbs 20:3

Most fights break out, ironically, because people think they are defending their “honor.” In God's view, however, that person has just lost it.

A sluggard does not plow in season,
so at harvest time, he looks but finds nothing.
Proverbs 20:4

Perhaps the “sluggard” is the victim of Spring Fever! He is too lethargic to break the soil in early spring; when he does get around to plowing and planting, it is summer already and his crops do not ripen in time to avoid the first freeze of winter, and his crop is a failure.

Many a man claims to have unfailing love,
but a faithful man, who can find?
Proverbs 20:6

This is similar to the question asked in Proverbs 31:10: “A worthy woman, who can find...” This does not imply that a true friend (or worthy woman) cannot be found, but that such loyalty is a rare and valuable thing. There seems to be a rift between the man’s claim to fidelity and his actual practice in a crisis.

Who can say, “I have kept my heart pure,
I am clean and without sin”?
Proverbs 20:9

Even if a person was good at keeping his actions and words in check, who is to say that his motives and thoughts are good and wholesome? This proverb teaches humility, for no one can say that even his motives are perfect. The Wise Man seems to feel considerable doubt as to a man’s ability to judge his own actions. As someone has said, “There are only two kinds of people; those who sin, and those who admit that they sin.”

Even a child is known by his actions,
by whether his conduct is pure and right.
Proverbs 20:11

Obviously we don’t expect as much from a child as we do an adult. Parents who are sincere about training their child “in the Lord,” however, will begin early in childhood to instill responsibility and godly behavior in their children. The word “even”, however, indicates that the primary application of this saying is

not with children but adults. In an argument that goes from the lesser to the greater the wise man declares that if a child's character can be seen by his behavior, how much more an adult?

“It's no good, it's no good,” says the buyer,
then off he goes and boasts about his purchase.
Proverbs 20:14

In ancient Israel prices were generally agreed upon by bargaining, so the speaker is attempting to negotiate with his client by indicating his unhappiness at the price of the product: “It's no good!” Once out of earshot, however, he congratulates himself on the “hard bargain” he drove. What he obviously considers a victory over his business competitor is in fact a demonstration of his questionable character! One wonders if the Christian businessman should ever be known for his “sharp deals” or for “pulling a fast one” over his customer.

Food gained by fraud tastes sweet to a man,
but he ends up with a mouthful of gravel.
Proverbs 20:17

Gravel is not usually considered to be nutritious! A person might indeed gain much wealth by dishonest means, but its reward will be as satisfying as gravel to the taste.

Make plans by seeking advice,
if you wage war, obtain guidance.
Proverbs 20:18

“War” is only one example, though a rather serious one, of activ-

ities where we should seek advice. Here is another example of the wise seeking to become wiser still; his attitude is one where in any great undertaking he will consider the advice of wise counselors.

A gossip betrays a confidence,
so avoid a man who talks too much.
Proverbs 20:19

The Proverbs has much to say about the destructive nature of “the gossip.” This verse’s contribution to the discussion is in the second line, where we are told to avoid a man “who talks too much.” The person who endlessly chatters is bound, sooner or later, to betray a confidence, or to say something disparaging about others.

Do not say “I’ll pay you back for this wrong!”
wait for the Lord and he will deliver you.
Proverbs 20:22

This proverb is not referring to the right of society to carry out its carefully considered justice, such as punishing a criminal. It has in mind instead a sort of personal vigilante action, where the person who was wronged wreaks out personal vengeance on others. This is similar to Paul’s exhortation: “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord” (Romans 12:19). Human anger finds it difficult to distinguish between revenge and justice.

It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly
and only later to consider his vows.
Proverbs 20:25

The scenario in mind here is when one finds himself in dire straits, and, in his desperation is willing to offer something, anything, in order to be delivered. The Wise Man reminds us that these vows are to be taken seriously, and not made rashly. One is reminded that every Sunday we make promises in the songs we sing. It is far too easy to blissfully sing lyrics such as “O Jesus I have promised, to serve thee to the end,” or “King of my life, I crown thee now,” distinct commitments, and yet to not truly mean them.

The lamp of the Lord searches the spirit of a man,
it searches out his inmost being.

Proverbs 20:27

One can almost imagine the Lord holding up a lamp in order to illuminate the most intimate thoughts of a man. God’s ability to search out our hearts could be either a consolation or a warning, depending on the condition of our hearts.

The glory of young men is their strength,
gray hair the splendor of the old.

Proverbs 20:29

This verse is more than a simple observation on the various advantages of youth and age. The weight of the saying leans toward the second line. While there is undoubted glory in the “strength” of youth, the more lasting and valuable quality is that of the elderly person’s “gray hair” and its attendant wisdom and maturity.

Questions

1. Rather than reflexively blaming the Lord for our troubles (19:3), can you suggest some other causes of suffering and hard times?
2. If a prudent wife (or husband) is “from the Lord” (19:14), and if the Lord is interested in the process of choosing a mate, how can we best allow Him into the process?
3. Talk about some strategies to “avoid strife” (20:3) in the home, at work and in the church.
4. We should “seek advice” when making plans (20:18). Suggest some resources for seeking this wise counsel.

The Heart of the Matter

Proverbs 21,22

In the early 1980's the country of Zimbabwe suffered a debilitating drought. I remember one evening watching the nation's parliament debating the measures government should take to alleviate the drought. One speaker, Anglican Bishop Dube stood and suggested, to his credit, that they all pray for rain. I'll never forget what happened next. The entire house of parliament broke up into helpless, mocking laughter.

Of course in America we hear politicians invoke their faith in God frequently, albeit usually around election time when they think such references will garner votes. While our leaders invoke God's name more frequently than those of many other nations, their life-styles and legislation seems to have been affected little by His principles and teachings.

So does that mean that presidents and politicians are outside the control of God? Hardly. He still rules the nations, as the next proverb demonstrates.

While many of the kings around Israel considered themselves to be divine, Israelite Kings were reminded that they represented God alone, and were in fact flawed human beings like the subjects they ruled.

The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord;
he directs it like a watercourse wherever He pleases.
Proverbs 21:1

If only rulers today would recognize that God is ultimately the

ruler of all. A “watercourse” was used by farmers to irrigate crops; they would direct water from one field to the other by diverting the flow of a canal. It is easy to imagine the Lord, in turn, directing the fate of rulers and nations.

All a man’s ways seem right to him,
but the Lord weighs the heart.
Proverbs 21:2

One of the Wise Man’s greatest concerns seems to be the danger of self-deception. How easy it is for a man to convince himself that his actions were taken with the best of intentions. We are blinded by our own pride, stubbornness and self-interest. In this verse we are reminded that we cannot fool a God whose sight penetrates even to the intentions and motives of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).

To do what is right and just
is more acceptable than sacrifice.
Proverbs 21:3

Sometimes this is a surprising truth for religious people to grasp. Is it really true that God values fair and merciful behavior over church attendance? This is a frequent Old Testament theme. Hosea declared that God desired “mercy, not sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6). This did not mean that God rejected sacrifice; it was instead a reminder that God could see the hearts and intentions of those who worship Him, and that their living should reflect the sentiments they express in worship.

Haughty eyes and a proud heart,
the lamp of the wicked are sin!
Proverbs 21:4

“Haughty eyes” refers not to the appearance of the eyes as seen from the outsider, but the attitude of the person who is looking, his way of seeing and perceiving things. “Haughty eyes and a proud heart” indicate an arrogant and disdainful way of looking at people. “Eyes” are viewed as a mirror to the heart in the wisdom literature. In 22:9 the Wise Man speaks of the “generous eye” (translated “generous man” in the NIV); in 28:22 we learn of the “stingy eye” (“stingy man,” NIV) that “is eager to get rich.” In a very real sense the way we look at people and events affects our values and attitudes. In this way the eye becomes the “lamp of the body” (Matthew 6:22), coloring our perceptions for better or worse.

The *plans* of the diligent lead to profit,
just as surely as *haste* leads to poverty.
Proverbs 21:5

The words “haste” and “plans” are parallel in this verse. By definition, an action carried out in “haste” is not “planned.” In business affairs, and especially in church matters, where souls hang in the balance, it is important to make careful preparation.

The way of the guilty is devious,
but the conduct of the innocent is upright.
Proverbs 21:8

The contrast in this proverb lies in the open and honest demeanor

of the innocent — he has nothing to hide — and the instinctive devious style of the guilty. You can see this most clearly in the disingenuous ploys of politicians to divert the public's attention from their mistakes. The question we should ask ourselves is this: If I find myself resorting to deception to hide my actions, is that an indication that my actions were reprehensible?

Better to live on the corner of a roof
than share a house with a quarrelsome wife.
Proverbs 21:9

This saying assumes a house, typical in Biblical times, where the roof is flat, and where it would be possible to ascend to the top and view the surrounding area. Peter did this at the house of Simon the Tanner (Acts 10:9). From that vantage point he could see the net full of creatures lowered to the earth. While living on the corner of the roof, exposed to the elements may not be comfortable, the Wise Man declares that this is better than living in close proximity to a “quarrelsome wife.” It might be useful to understand this phrase generically, for it would be just as unpleasant to live in close quarters with an autocratic and “quarrelsome” man.

The righteous one takes note of the house of the wicked,
and brings the wicked to ruin.
Proverbs 21:12

Who is “the righteous one?” It probably refers to God, who “alone is good” (Matthew 19:17). God does indeed see unkindness, deceit and sin, and He will take the appropriate action in the right time.

He who loves pleasure will become poor;
whoever loves wine and oil will never become rich.
Proverbs 21:17

This verse offers at least one explanation for poverty. The person who “loves pleasure” is one whose lifestyle is characterized by “wine and oil.” This extravagance will soon outstrip its income, and the lover of such luxuries will fall farther and farther behind. In an age of credit cards and instant gratification, what could be more applicable?

In the house of the wise are *stores* of choice food and oil,
but a foolish man *devours* all he has.
Proverbs 21:20

This is a companion to verse 17, emphasizing the wisdom behind gathering rather than wantonly consuming resources. The key words of contrast are “stores” (line 1) and “devours” (line 2).

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

Experience demonstrates how many problems we cause ourselves with unguarded speech. The emphasis here seems to be on guarding one’s impulse to say things until some thought is applied to its wisdom.

The proud and arrogant man, Mocker is his name,
he behaves with overweening pride.
Proverbs 21:24

A mocker is one who casts his derision on the honest efforts of others. It is easy to ridicule another person's work; it is not so easy to build yourself. The question is, are you a builder, or a mocker?

The sacrifice of the wicked is detestable,
how much more so when brought with evil intent?
Proverbs 21:27

It is possible to do the right thing for the wrong reasons. It was not the sacrifice that was wrong. God looked into the heart of the one sacrificing, and saw a person who no doubt thought that his ritual would compensate for a wicked life. While the outwardly observable action of an insincere worshipper may look identical to that of the sincere, the difference is clear to God, who can read the heart.

A false witness will perish,
and whoever listens to him will be destroyed forever
Proverbs 21:28

This is a reminder that it takes two for gossip to spread, a speaker, and a willing listener.

There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan
that can succeed against the Lord.
Proverbs 21:30

The three negatives, "no wisdom," "no insight," "no plan" covers the whole range of human claims for self-reliance. Even when all of humanity's wisdom and ingenuity is lined up in opposition to

God, it still proves inadequate. When the Lord opposes a plan, His opposition is, to say the least, formidable!

The horse is made ready for the day of battle,
but victory rests with the Lord.

Proverbs 21:31

A nation will prosper only if the Lord gives it His blessing. It would be a good idea for nations to consider the conditions under which He would grant His blessing.

A good name is more desirable than great riches;
to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.

Proverbs 22:1

You cannot put a price on a good reputation, which is why gossip is so abhorred by Solomon. With just a few thoughtless words, and within just a few moments, a reputation built over many years can be destroyed. It is often a characteristic of the young person to disregard the importance of building a “good name,” blissfully assuming that “reputation repair” can be taken later.

Rich and poor have this in common;
the Lord is the maker of them all.

Proverbs 22:2

Solomon reminds us that a man's value does not lie in his bank balance, or in the mode of his transportation. God created all humans, and our value is therefore inherent.

A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge,

but the simple keep going and suffer for it.
Proverbs 22:3

This verse continues the theme of the foolish becoming more foolish. The “danger” that the prudent man sees is not identified. It might be some sort of sinful or harmful activity. Whatever it is, he sees the danger and avoids it. In contrast, the “simple” person simply does not read the signs, probably because he is not looking for them, and plunges to disaster.

Train a child in the way he should go,
and when he is old, he will not turn from it.
Proverbs 22:6

There is a right and a wrong way to apply this passage, it seems to me. The wrong way is to berate parents whose child has gone astray for not doing their job. Sincere parents will be all too aware of their mistakes. The right way to apply this verse is to encourage young parents to train their children in the right way. To “train” literally means to “dedicate” (1 Kings 8:63; Genesis 18:19). Have you ever “trained” a vine along a trellis or fence? Picture the process whereby the branches are gently guided, and the vine nourished and fed. There is far more to raising godly children than telling them what they can’t do. Children need to be encouraged and directed along a path, trained in the right moral and spiritual direction.

The rich rule over the poor,
and the borrower is servant to the lender.
Proverbs 22:7

This saying is probably just reflecting the harsh realities of life. Anyone with a credit card knows how true the principle is. It seems to be directed toward the ordinary person, advising them not to surrender their freedom by going into debt.

Drive out the mocker, and out goes strife;
quarrels and insults are ended.

Proverbs 22:10

The image of the “mocker” in Proverbs is vivid. Here he is depicted as a troublemaker, constantly provoking disputes in the community. Someone has said that a critic knows the cost of everything, and the value of nothing. It is much easier to point out the flaws in another’s work than it is to do a task oneself. The question is, are you a doer, or a mocker of those who do?

The sluggard says, “There is a lion outside!”
or, “I will be murdered in the streets.”

Proverbs 22:13

This humorous description of the lazy person depicts a man so anxious to avoid labor that he will use any excuse to get out of work, no matter how improbable.

Folly is bound up in the heart of a child,
but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.

Proverbs 22:15

Here the Wise Man refers to a sort of innate foolishness in a child which only discipline can eradicate. Left to his own devices, a child will choose the self-serving way, as most humans will!

Proverbs 22:17 begins a series of sayings uttered by “the wise” which ends in Proverbs 24:34. These unnamed wise people were probably Israelites whose sayings were collected by Hezekiah’s scholars (Proverbs 25:1), along with the sayings of Agur (Proverbs 30:1) and Lemuel (Proverbs 31:1).

Do not exploit the poor because they are poor,
and do not crush the needy in court,
for the Lord will take up their case,
and will plunder those who plunder them.

Proverbs 22:22,23

This proverb depicts the kind of mentality that crushes people simply because they are weak and vulnerable, as if to say, “I exploit the poor because I can. No one can stop me.” To these exploiters of the helpless the Wise Man issues a sobering warning. The Lord Himself has taken up their cause, like a lawyer taking up a *pro bono* case. They will find the poor aren’t nearly so helpless as they supposed!

Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man,
do not associate with one easily angered.
Or you may learn his ways,
and get yourself ensnared.

Proverbs 22:24,25

Some people have a disposition that is constantly bitter and angry. The Wise Man’s advice is that we should choose other company.

Do not move an ancient boundary stone,
set up by your forefathers.

Proverbs 22:28

Boundary stones were stacked up into a cairn to mark the edge of the ancient Israelite's property. It would be an easy thing, late at night, to move the mound of stones several feet over, and thus increase one's land. This command rises out of Israel's entry into the Land of Canaan, where Joshua allotted the land to tribes and families. The story of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21) demonstrates how seriously the Israelites took their family allotments. This prohibition is a warning against the thirst for power by land-grabbing that the rich might be tempted to indulge in at the expense of the poor.

Questions

1. "The Lord directs (the king's heart) like a watercourse" (21:1). Can God use a mistake-prone or even sinful leader to do His will? How?
2. "All a man's ways seem right to him" (21:2). Discuss the reasons why we are so adept at "self-deception."
3. Can you suggest some scenarios where a Christian will have to choose between a "good name" and "great riches" (21:1)?
4. Talk about what is implied in the phrase "train up a child in the way he should go" (22:6). What "way" is this?
5. How might modern people "move ancient boundary stones" (22:28)? How might we be tempted to cheat the helpless in society?

The *Pro Bono* Barrister

Proverbs 23,24

A number of years ago I was privileged to sit at a meal with three distinguished Christian professors of Bible. I have no idea how I came to be in such exalted company, but one thing is certain. It was not a time for me to talk. I had the good sense to listen, and soak up the wisdom. The Wise Man who wrote Proverbs must have been thinking of a similar situation when he said:

When you sit to dine with a ruler,
 note well what is before you;
And put a knife to your throat
 if you are given to gluttony;
Do not crave his delicacies,
 for that food is deceptive.
Proverbs 23:1-3

Is the host in these verses testing the response of his guest? It is hard to tell, but the Wise Man's advice to "put a knife" to one's throat seems to be a warning not to be overcome by the honor of being invited, or the grandeur of his surroundings, and curb his appetite. The food is "deceptive", not because the king intended to deceive, but because when we eat in such exalted circumstances, we are fooled into thinking that we are something that we are not.

Do not wear yourself out to get rich;
 have the wisdom to show restraint.
Proverbs 23:4

The obsession to become rich can ruin a person in other facets of life, namely in his family life, or his spiritual condition.

Do not speak to a fool,
for he will scorn the wisdom of your words.
Proverbs 23:9

In modern parlance, “You’re wasting your breath” if you try to help a fool. He’s not listening, for he either despises wisdom, or feels he knows so much that no one can add to his understanding! The foolish therefore becomes more foolish.

Do not move an ancient boundary stone,
or encroach in the fields of the fatherless.
For their defender is strong,
he will take up their case with you.
Proverbs 23:10,11

In a society where there is such selfishness and greed, who will plead the cause of the widow and orphan? These verses proclaim that the Lord is interested in whether or not justice is done. He takes up the *pro bono* responsibilities on their behalf. The defender (literally, the “kinsman-redeemer,” or *goel*) was obliged to buy back property his relative was forced, due to poverty to sell (Leviticus 25:25; Ruth 2:20; Jeremiah 31:11). Because the widows and orphans had no relative to do this, God would Himself stand in as the “kinsman redeemer” and defend their cause.

Do not withhold discipline from a child;
if you punish him with a rod, he will not die.
Proverbs 23:13

The phrase “he will not die” might have reflected the melodramatic, overwrought objection of an Israelite parent: “But if I discipline my child, he will die!” Ours is not the first generation to err on the side of indulging our children their every desire! Can you imagine an Israelite protesting that punishing a child might mean “hurting his self-image?”

Do not let your heart envy sinners,
but always be zealous for the fear of the Lord.
Proverbs 23:17

Sinners would be the object of envy, presumably, because they embezzled and cheated with impunity, and appeared to live off of the profits of their dishonest gain. In the short term, at least, life did not seem to provide just retribution, and the faithful Israelite might conclude that living righteously was not worthwhile. The Wise Man urges us to remain true to our principles in spite of appearances, and “fear the Lord.”

Listen to your father, who gave you life,
and do not despise your mother when she is old.
Proverbs 23:22

Verses 22 and 24,25 form an inclusion dealing with the subject of the son’s response to his parents. If at first the appeal seems to be a statement of the obvious — that a compliant and respectful child would please his parents — it deserves a closer look. The Wise Man’s words explain the intent behind the fifth commandment (Deuteronomy 5:16) to “honor your father and mother.” A son or daughter who refuses to “listen” to his father, or who despises his mother’s council is certainly not “honoring” his par-

ents! It is a characteristic of the immature to care little for the effect of his actions on those around him. “It’s my life,” is the mantra of the young. And yet, why should a parent’s joy not be part of the child’s motivation to do right?

Buy the truth, and do not sell it;
get wisdom, discipline, and understanding.
Proverbs 23:23

Jesus spoke of making investments that were lasting and reliable (Matthew 6:19-21), reminding us that “moth and rust” invariably destroyed earthly investments. The Wise Man uses the language of the market when he advises us to attain “wisdom, discipline and understanding,” and to hold on to these investments.

Who has woe, who has sorrow?
Who has strife, who has complaints?
Who has needless bruises?
Who has bloodshot eyes?
Proverbs 23:29

These verses take on the form of a riddle, where the student is supposed to guess the identity of the person described. Each phrase describes beautifully the nuances of a drunk’s tribulations. The tone is humorous, but the humor is used in a very serious cause, demonstrating the trials and tribulations of the drunk.

Do not gaze at wine when it is red,
when it sparkles in the cup,
when it goes down smoothly!
In the end it bites like a snake,

and poisons like a viper.
Proverbs 23:31,32

The lure of the wine is undeniable. It “sparkles” to the eye and slips “smoothly” down the palate. But the comparison to it biting “like a snake” is our reality check. There is more to wine than its alluring appearance. “Your eyes will see strange things,” we are told (one thinks of the modern notion of the drunk man seeing pink elephants) and “You will be like one sleeping on the high seas, on top of the rigging.” Perhaps the writer uses humor in an attempt to destroy the perception that drinking is sophisticated, and “cool.” Only by pointing out the drunk’s indignities and sorry plight could he convince the young people of his day that drinking was foolish behavior. This is shrewd psychology. The writer *could* have simply declared that drinking was forbidden. Instead, he demonstrated how “smart” and “wise” a drunk looked, sitting in a gutter and bemoaning his misfortune:

“They hit me,” you will say, “but I’m not hurt!”

“They beat me, but I don’t feel it!

When will I wake up

So I can find another drink?”

Proverbs 23:35

These words seem to describe the bluster and bravado of the “macho” drinker who has survived a hangover and seeks to drink still more wine. He will not learn from his mistakes. He wakes up, finds himself bruised and bleeding from the previous night’s festivities, yet rather than learn from his hangover, he wonders where he can find his next drink.

By wisdom, a house is built (or a nation, or a church!)
and through understanding, it is established;
through knowledge its rooms are filled
with rare and beautiful treasures.

Proverbs 24:3,4

This is the major premise behind Proverbs. Only when we “fear God, and keep his commandments” will our efforts succeed.

Wisdom is too high for a fool;
in the assembly, at the gate, he has nothing to say.
Proverbs 24:7

The “city gate” was where official town business was conducted. In it the elders of the city gathered to make decisions. Boaz went to the city gate in order to enact the legal details of his marriage to Ruth the Moabitess (Ruth 4:1), and the worthy woman’s husband was “respected at the city gate” (Proverbs 31:23), probably indicating that he was considered an elder himself.

Rescue those being led away to death;
hold back those staggering towards slaughter.
If you say, “But we knew nothing about this,”
does not he who guards your life know it?
Will he not repay each person
according to what he has done?
Proverbs 24:11,12

This seems to be an indictment of those who do not want to “get involved” with someone else’s difficulties. Sometimes we are tempted to say, “Well, it’s none of my affair,” or “That’s very sad,

but helping those kinds of people is not *my* problem!” This attitude of apathy might be directed towards an erring brother, the poor and needy, or to those who need the gospel.

Eat honey my son, for it is good;
honey from the comb is sweet to the taste.
Proverbs 24:13

The Psalmist declared that “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it” (Psalm 24:1). God made the earth. He made sunsets and friendship and honey, and He created these things with our enjoyment in mind. It’s OK to enjoy God’s world, as long as we do so within the bounds of His Laws and word.

Know also that wisdom is sweet to your soul
if you find it, there is a future hope for you,
and your hope will not be cut off.
Proverbs 24:14

The words “know also” are a tip off that verse 14 is the culmination of the thought in verse 13. The thought moves from “honey” which is “sweet to the taste” to the much deeper satisfaction of attaining “wisdom” whose sweetness reaches to the very depths of our being and is “sweet to the soul.”

Do not gloat when your enemy falls;
when he stumbles, do not let your heart rejoice,
or the Lord will see and disapprove,
and turn his wrath away from him.
Proverbs 24:17,18

Exulting in the tragedy of one's enemy is a characteristic of the wicked. "But when I stumbled, they (David's enemies) *gathered* in glee; attackers gathered against me when I was unaware. They slandered me without ceasing" (Psalm 35:15). The mark of a truly spiritual individual is to have compassion even on his competitor when tragedy strikes.

Fear the Lord, and the king, my son,
and do not join with the rebellious.
Proverbs 24:21

This verse deals with our attitude toward authority. The Christian should respect God, church leadership, civic and political leaders (*even the referee in a ball game!*).

An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips.
Proverbs 24:26

An honest answer is beneficial, even if it includes some correction for the hearer.

Finish your outdoor work, and get your fields ready;
after that, build your house.
Proverbs 24:27

In other words, ensure that you have the means and income to pay for your luxuries.

I went past the field of the sluggard,
past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment.
Proverbs 24:30

With these words, the writer begins to describe the decay of a lazy man's endeavors. His property displayed neglect in almost every way; weeds grew in his fields, and his stone walls were falling down. Then comes the clincher:

I applied my heart to what I observed
and learned a lesson from what I saw:
A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest —
and poverty will come on you like a bandit
and scarcity like an armed man.
Proverbs 24:32-34

When the speaker uses the phrase "I applied my heart to what I observed," he is doing exactly what the wise person would do. He sees the state of the lazy man's farm, applies his "heart" to its implication, and learns a lesson. Presumably a dilapidated farm is equally observable to a fool, but he would learn nothing from what he saw! A Christian may not be the most talented person around, but he should be the most conscientious. He does whatever his hand finds to do "*with all his might.*" Whether it is raising a child, or building a bridge, the godly person will do the best he can.

Questions

1. "Do not despise your mother when she is old" (23:22). Why have we lost our respect for the elderly, and how can we regain this Christian virtue?
2. "Buy the truth and do not sell it" (23:23). We live in an Age when the concept of absolutes is mocked. Is there such a

thing as absolute, moral or doctrinal truth, and if so, how can we determine this truth?

3. Alcohol abuse is a growing problem in our society, and there are indications that teenagers especially are turning to this drug. Discuss the methods Solomon adopts to persuade his young readers to turn away from drink.
4. What does Proverbs 24:11,12 have to say about the Christian's responsibility towards the lost?

Look Before You Leap, Think Before You Speak

Proverbs 25-26

Perhaps you have read this old poem.

There is no nourishment in verbs;

Nouns don't have much flavor.

Prepositions are quite flat;

Pronouns have no savor.

Adjectives have little spice;

Adverbs haven't any;

Words are pretty tasteless things.

I know — I've eaten many.

(Author unknown)

One can almost imagine the words of the Spiritual Surgeon General: "Warning: Eating one's words has been found to cause sleepless nights for the user, and heartbreak for second-hand users." There is not much nutrition in "eating one's words," as this rueful piece illustrates! Solomon has a lot to say about choosing one's words carefully.

The first verse of chapter 25 gives us some hints about the compilation of the book of Proverbs. Hezekiah, who lived about 215 years after Solomon, was involved in the compiling and editing of at least part of the book of Proverbs. He was one of the few good kings in Israel, a fact to which God Himself testified (Isaiah 38:1-8).

These are more proverbs of Solomon, copied by the men
of Hezekiah king of Judah.

Proverbs 25:1

Hezekiah restored the singing of hymns in Israel's worship (2 Chronicles 29:30), and it is easy to imagine his taking other measures to foster spiritual faithfulness in Israel. One can imagine this good king sponsoring a team of researchers to gather and edit the sayings of Solomon and other wise men, and putting together the book we know as Proverbs.

Remove the dross 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

How frightening to think that the aides and advisors who surround the president of our country might be crooks and charlatans! This was just as true of rulers in ancient times. Solomon uses an image that comes from the process of purifying metal: to "remove the dross" meant to remove the impurities from the ore — the grit and dirt — until all that remained was the pure metal. In the same way, Solomon realized (as did Hezekiah, no doubt) that a nation depended on its righteous and God-fearing leadership.

Do not exalt yourself in the King's presence,
and do not claim a place among great men.

Proverbs 25:6

Jesus makes a similar point in Luke 14:7-11. In the spiritual realm, the honors do not go to the “assertive” and the “self-confident”, but to the humble. This is so because the one who rewards is God.

What you have seen with your eyes
do not bring hastily to court.
For what will you do in the end
if your neighbor puts you to shame?
Proverbs 25:8

Initiating a conflict is a very serious matter indeed. There are times when confrontation is necessary, but beginning it should only be done after careful consideration. In this verse, Solomon points out one of the dangers of launching hastily into battle; what if your information was wrong? What if your neighbor “shames” you by setting the record straight?

If you argue your case with a neighbor,
do not betray another man’s confidence;
Or he who hears it may shame you,
and you will never lose your bad reputation.
Proverbs 25:9,10

It is far too easy in the heat of the moment to let slip a hurtful bit of knowledge about someone else. Especially when riled, the Christian should carefully choose his words before using them.

A word aptly spoken,
is like apples of gold in settings of silver.
Proverbs 25:11

In contrast to verses 9,10, these words point out the positive effects of a word aptly chosen for the moment and the needs of the hearer. Such words are no accident. They can only be spoken by one who genuinely cares about others, and *wants* his words to uplift and edify. These words are often the result of planning, praying, and preparing what we will say to others.

Through patience, a ruler can be persuaded,
and a gentle tongue can break a bone.

Proverbs 25:15

This saying is a tribute to the power of words used with “patience” and gentleness to make a difference, even in the highest corridors of power. One of Aesop’s fables tells of the rain, wind and sun who saw a man bundled up in a hat and overcoat. The three elements decided on a competition to see which one could make the man remove his coat. The wind began, blowing furiously in an effort to rip the coat off, but the man simply bundled his coat tighter and walked on. Next the rain tried, pelting the unfortunate man with a downpour. The harder it rained, the more the man hunched under his coat. Finally the sun took its turn. He beamed his warm rays on the man’s head. It took a little while, but inevitably the sun’s warmth was such that the man grew hot, and removed his coat. In the same way the gentle warmth of patient, well-chosen words can have a profound effect, on kings, teenagers and even our enemies if we use them wisely.

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, and he will hate you.

Proverbs 25:16,17

The reference to “honey” in these verses probably refers to our use of anything that is pleasurable. It is best when enjoyed in moderation. The principle is carried over to that of friendships. In nourishing a friendship, too, it is best not to overstay your welcome. One is reminded of the English proverb that speaks of what happens to fish and relatives after three days! “After three days, both fish and relatives begin to smell bad.”

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat;
if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.
In doing this, you will heap coals of fire on his head,
and the Lord will reward you.
Proverbs 25:21,22

These lines are quoted, of course, by Paul in Romans 12:17-21. The first part of the couplet is fairly clear, if startling. When an enemy does you harm, feed him! Instead of seeking revenge, give him the means to live. The second part is more difficult. What does it mean to “heap coals of fire on his head”? In light of the already stated urging not to exact revenge, it cannot mean to cause some harm to him. The best explanation may be that the act of kindness in the face of cruelty will make him burn sufficient with shame to make him change his ways.

It is not good to eat too much honey,
nor is it honorable to seek one's own honor.
Proverbs 25:27

Solomon has already pointed out that eating too much honey results in stomach upset (Proverbs 25:16). It might taste sweet to sing one's own praises, but it is a sweet and sticky confection that becomes overpowering in too great a quantity.

Do not answer a fool according to his folly,
or you will be like him yourself.

Answer a fool according to his folly,
or he will be wise in his own eyes.

Proverbs 26:4,5

These seemingly contradictory statements show that we must use good judgment according to the conditions in each case. There are no “canned” answers to every situation. There is no instruction manual, applicable in every case, because people and relationships are more complex than machinery. Compare, for instance, these two English proverbs: “Look before you leap,” and “He who hesitates is lost.” There is truth in both statements, and it is the nature of a proverb that it cannot say everything! Sometimes an angry response to a fool will simply lower our behavior to their level, especially if we are angry and not thinking clearly ourselves; in other cases it may be necessary to correct a fool, or he may forever think he was right.

Like tying a stone in a sling
is the giving of honor to a fool.

Proverbs 26:8

A stone in a sling is a potentially dangerous weapon. In the hands of the wrong person, perhaps an irresponsible or angry individual, it could cause great harm. In the same way, Solomon tells us, honoring the wrong person can be very harmful. If he lacks wisdom, he could become arrogant and harm a lot of people with his newly exalted position.

Like a thorn bush in a drunkard's hand,
is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.
Proverbs 26:9

This serves as a warning to the reader to interpret and apply the book of Proverbs carefully (this is good advice in the application of *any* scripture). When one makes a declaration based on scripture, it carries the authority of Almighty God. Students might take a proverb, misapplied, as if God himself had said it that way. This places a heavy responsibility on the teacher of children, for instance, to present God's word in its purity. Children are innocents, who assume that the teacher's motives and study-habits have been good.

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

With classic humor Solomon describes the life of a lazy person as if he were a door, hinged to a wall, occasionally turning over to get a more comfortable position.

The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes
than seven men who answer discretely.
Proverbs 26:16

The lazy person's indolence extends even to his thinking patterns. He already knows it all; why make the effort to consider new ideas, or to evaluate his own actions with an eye to improvement?

Without wood, a fire goes out,
without gossip, a quarrel dies down.
Proverbs 26:20

No fire can burn without “wood” and fuel, and the same is true with a quarrel. Gossip provides the oxygen with which a quarrel can burn hot and dangerous. One thinks of the warning seen often at the zoo: “Don’t feed the animals.” By the same token, we should not feed a quarrel.

If a man digs a pit, he will fall into it;
if a man rolls a stone, it will roll back on him.
Proverbs 26:27

This is the “what goes around comes around” principle. A life based on deceit, cheating or revenge will carry its own “reward.”

Questions

1. “A word aptly spoken” (25:11). Saying the right thing at the right time is a skill we could all use. Can you suggest some ways to do this?
2. What does the Wise Man mean by “heaping coals of fire” on an enemy’s head (25:21,22)?
3. Consider the apparent contradiction in 26:4,5 as to whether we should answer a fool. Can you suggest some ways in which each scenario might be the correct course of action?
4. Can you suggest some ways that we can douse the fires of gossip in our church and community (26:20)?

Weathering the Future

Proverbs 27,28

“Weather forecasting,” someone has said, “is still a few hours behind arthritis.” Weathermen get a lot of ribbing about the accuracy of their forecasts. One wonders what weathermen save for a rainy day...an alibi perhaps?

Of course the reason weathermen have such trouble predicting the future is because, like all human beings, they don't know what the morrow holds!

God alone knows the future, but it is a human characteristic to forget just how little we really control it. When we “boast about tomorrow” we arrogantly predict our future achievements. The Wise Man warns us against this:

Do not boast about tomorrow,
for you do not know what a day may bring forth.
Proverbs 27:1

If anything is certain, it is that human beings are ignorant of the future! In contrast to arrogant “boast”, the wise person should demonstrate humility. Reading future events is best left to God. Compare these words with the conclusion of the “rich fool” (Luke 12:19,20).

Stone is heavy, and sand a burden,
but provocation by a fool is heavier than both.
Proverbs 27:3

Lifting “stone” and “sand” is backbreaking work, but if we must choose, Solomon advises, we would be better to choose “both” of them rather than deal with a fool’s anger. He cannot control his emotions, so he insists on dumping it on others. He will listen neither to sound reasoning nor to the other side of the story; explanations will only make him angrier!

Anger is cruel, and fury overwhelming,
but who can stand before jealousy?
Proverbs 27:4

Solomon is trying to impress the reader with the destructive potential of jealousy, one that is greater even than “anger” and “fury”. We know that these are powerful emotions, but “envy” is more powerful still! “Anger” is an emotion out in the open, but the damage from “envy” comes from its normally hidden nature. Remember that “it was for envy” that the rulers crucified Jesus (Mark 15:10).

Better is open rebuke than hidden love,
wounds from a friend can be trusted,
but an enemy multiplies kisses.
Proverbs 27:5,6

This saying takes on the form of a paradox: can a “rebuke” be a sign of “love”? Can “kisses” hide betrayal? Who can read these words and not think of Judas repeatedly kissing the Lord in the garden (Matthew 26:49)? This is not intended to invite an “open season” on unkind remarks, an effort to be “brutally honest” with everyone we see. Rather, it is advising us to value the gentle and wise honesty of a friend who cares enough to point out our wrong when we really need it.

He who is full loathes honey,
but to the hungry even what is bitter tastes sweet.
Proverbs 27:7

“Honey” probably stands for anything in life normally considered pleasurable. This proverb expresses the idea that when something good becomes easily attainable, people begin to take it for granted. On the other hand, a starving man will be glad to eat even something that is “bitter.”

Be wise, my son and bring joy to my heart;
then I can answer anyone who treats me with
contempt.

Proverbs 27:11

The most effective reply to those who would criticize a father is to show the good behavior of his children. Their good character is the ultimate vindication. This is why the elder is to be the father of children “who believe” (Titus 1:6), an acknowledgment, most certainly, of the importance of a man’s Christianity being lived in the home.

The prudent see danger and take refuge,
but the simple keep going, and suffer for it.
Proverbs 27:12

In other words, “the wise get wiser.” The “prudent” see danger signs and heed them; the foolish isn’t looking for any signs of danger, for he already knows it all!

If a man loudly blesses his neighbor early in the morning,

it will be taken as a curse.

Proverbs 27:14

Calling out blessings to a friend is well and good if the conditions are right, but timing and consideration for the other is important.

As iron sharpens iron,

so one man sharpens another.

Proverbs 27:17

There are those who feel that they can live their Christianity in isolation from others, that in fact their Christianity might be the better for living outside of “organized religion” (other Christians?). Yet when Christians gather for Bible study, when they talk about spiritual things, they are helping each other to see God’s will more clearly. For the same reason a young minister should do what he can to receive a formal Bible education, benefiting from the discussion of his colleagues and the learning of his instructors. While the exceptional man may become a good preacher without a “college education,” most of us benefit from hearing other’s ideas, and sharpening our own perceptions.

The crucible for silver, and the furnace for gold,

but a man is tested by the praise he receives.

Proverbs 27:21

We might have expected Solomon to declare that “a man is tested by the trials he receives.” This is, no doubt, true. But praise and recognition brings a character test all its own, and many a person who passes the test of hard times may fail the test of pride.

Though you grind a fool in a mortar,
grinding him like grain in with pestle,
you will not remove his folly from him.

Proverbs 27:22

This vivid image depicts the “fool” being pulverized and pounded with a “pestle” in a “mortar,” yet learning nothing. One would think that something would be learned from the experience, but this fool simply becomes more foolish.

Be sure you know the condition of your flocks,
give careful attention to your herds.

Proverbs 27:23

This, and the following verses speak of the attitude one should have toward his work. Whether it is flocks of sheep in rural Israel or work in the modern cities of today, the godly person will give careful attention to his responsibility. Whatever our hands find to do, we should “do it with all our might” (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

The wicked man flees, though no one pursues,
but the righteous are as bold as a lion.

Proverbs 28:1

It is amazing how a guilty conscience weakens a person's resolve. I remember entering a bus terminal in Harare, Zimbabwe one afternoon to pick up a friend. There were scores of busses, and hundreds of people there. A police car entered the area, and two young fellows took one look at the car, and fled. The police duly gave chase. It is highly doubtful that the police were looking specifically for those two young men, but their action in running

away testified to their guilt; honest people had no reason to fear the police.

A ruler that oppresses the poor
is like driving rain that leaves no crops.
Proverbs 28:3

This proverb seems to be saying something about motivating people. “Rain”, which is generally considered beneficial to crops can become an agent of destruction when in a storm it comes in “driving” harshness. An oppressive ruler, too, is like “driving rain” that “leaves no crops.” While strong leadership is a good thing, discouraging vandalism and theft, oppressive rule can beat the populace to the ground, broken and stripped of their spirit.

Evil men do not understand justice,
but those who seek the Lord understand it fully.
Proverbs 28:5

Sometimes God is merciful, much to our surprise, as was the elder brother in the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:28). On other occasions He exacts righteous judgment, and witnesses are shocked, as were those who saw Uzzah die for touching the Ark of the Covenant (2 Samuel 6:7). There is no doubt that many of God’s ways will be perplexing to us, but we should not put our perplexity down to an error on God’s part. It is, instead, the result of our own ignorance of all the factors, and God’s nature. It is up to us in these instances, to better learn the heart of God.

Better a poor man whose walk is blameless,
than a rich man whose ways are perverse.
Proverbs 28:6

Here is a statement that delves a little deeper on the subject of natural reward for righteous living. Normally one might expect a “blameless” person to be rewarded with riches, and a “perverse” person to be poor. Of course life is a little more complicated than that, as simple observation could attest. Despite everything, a poor but blameless man is better off than a rich and perverse man. This is the conclusion of faith.

He who conceals his sins does not prosper,
but whoever confesses and renounces them prospers.
Proverbs 28:13

This is another way of saying that honesty is the best policy. Often we cover over our mistakes fearing that their unveiling will hurt and embarrass us. In fact, admitting our error will “clear the air,” and open the way for others, and God most of all, to help us.

He who *works his land* will have abundant food,
but the one who *chases fantasies* will have his fill of
poverty.

Proverbs 28:19

The contrast here is between “working” and “chasing fantasies.” Steady and consistent toil is always better than “get rich quick schemes.” The same is true of building a reputation or a church. It does not take place overnight. It is built over years of loving, patient labor in partnership with others.

To show partiality is not good,
yet a man will do wrong for a piece of bread.
Proverbs 28:21

Solomon is showing a measure of understanding for the plight of the desperately poor. While stealing is wrong in every instance, he sees a difference in degree between the thief who breaks into a house to steal video equipment, and the one who snatches bread for his hungry wife and children.

He who rebukes a man will *in the end* gain more favor
than he who has a flattering tongue.

Proverbs 28:23

The Sage speaks often of the value in an honestly offered rebuke. Usually its value is not, however, immediately appreciated. Only “in the end” will many see its wisdom and the spirit in which it was given. The contrast with the smooth or “flattering” tongue is a warning not to take flattering remarks at face value.

He who robs his father or mother
and says, “It’s not wrong” —
he is partner to him who destroys.

Proverbs 28:24

The exact nature of this robbery is not given. Perhaps the son was involved in maneuvering so as to obtain the property of his parents prior to their death. When this evil action is so blandly denied it becomes even more despicable. To the Sage’s way of thinking, such a son is worse than “him who destroys.”

He who trusts in himself is a fool,
but he who walks in wisdom is kept safe.

Proverbs 28:26

The contrast here is between the one who “trusts in himself,” and the one who “walks in wisdom” (that is, fears God and keeps His commandments). It is the contrast between living according to man’s highly dubious wisdom, and God’s supremely wise guidance.

Questions

1. “Wounds from a friend can be trusted” (27:5,6). Suggest some ways to strike the delicate balance between destroying a friend by criticism and giving him the honest, loving evaluation he needs.
2. “If a man loudly blesses his neighbor in the morning...” (27:14). If “timing is everything,” can you think of some occasions where an otherwise good thing to say might be inappropriate?
3. In what ways are we “tested” by the “praise” we receive (27:21)?
4. “A ruler that oppresses the poor is like driving rain that leaves no crops” (28:3). How does this principle of motivation help parents and church leaders?
5. “Evil men do not understand justice” (28:5). Why would evil men find it hard to understand God’s justice?

Without Any Liberty and Justice At All

Proverbs 29-31

I remember standing on the street corner of an African capitol when the nation's "President for Life" came by in his motorcade. Uniformed policemen on motorbikes preceded several armored vehicles bristling with weapons. Finally three Mercedes Benz limousines with tinted windows, presumably selected to keep the exact location of the president a secret, came by. I turned to a friend and said, "There goes a man who is well guarded." His response was quick and apt. "No," he said. "There goes a man who is afraid." When a ruler's decisions are unjust and violent, he has good reason to fear for his life. The Wise Man understood this:

When the righteous thrive, the people rejoice;
when the wicked rule, the people groan.
Proverbs 29:2

By justice a king gives a country stability,
But one who is greedy for bribes tears it down.
Proverbs 29:4

Many rulers feel that the stability of their rule is the result of an effective secret police force, or a strong militia whose purpose is to keep the ruler's position intact. Solomon recognized that it was more effective to ruler fairly and justly. Under these conditions

the population would be content, and a KGB-like force rendered unnecessary.

The righteous care about justice for the poor,
but the wicked have no such concern.

Proverbs 29:7

There are many supposedly “righteous” people who care nothing for the poor. In fact, they are the harshest critics of the poor of all! It is interesting to recall Matthew’s observation that because Joseph “was a righteous man,” he did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace and proposed to sever their relationship “quietly” (Matthew 1:19). In scripture’s eyes, Joseph’s “righteousness” consisted of a willingness to show compassion, in spite of what must have been a great deal of hurt and disappointment on his part. True righteousness involves an element of mercy.

A fool gives full vent to his anger,
but a wise man keeps himself under control.

Proverbs 29:11

Some of us can’t afford to give someone else a “piece of our mind” — we would have little left for ourselves! Giving “full vent” to our anger — “losing it”, we might say — indicates that we have lost complete control of ourselves.

If a king judges the poor with fairness,
his throne will always be secure.

Proverbs 29:14

This verse deals with the duty of a ruler to ensure the well being

of those parts of society least able to speak for themselves. The promise for such a ruler is the security of his throne. Certainly a ruler who cares for the masses of the poor will not have to fear their uprising, but this may also be a promise from God Himself. He will ensure that such a king is rewarded with longevity on the throne.

The rod of correction imparts wisdom,
but a child *left to himself* disgraces his mother.
Proverbs 29:15

The fascinating part of this verse is the phrase that describes the child as “left to himself.” There are those who feel that a child’s moral and spiritual training should be left to himself to discover. But parents do not have the option of allowing their children to “grow wild.” Most children, when left to their own devices, will choose the path of least resistance, which is to say, selfishly. They won’t of their own accord choose hard work and integrity unless guided to do so.

Discipline your son and he will give you peace,
he will bring delight to your soul.
Proverbs 29:17

A child who is disciplined will bring his parents “peace,” the sort of relief from worry that many parents face. We cannot assume that our children will innately learn God’s ways. These principles must be taught, which by the way is the assumption that lies behind the book of Proverbs!

Where there is no *revelation* the people cast off restraint,
but blessed is he who keeps the *law*.

Proverbs 29:18

The King James Version gives the familiar reading, "Where there is no vision the people perish." Apparently the translators were thinking of "vision" in the sense of a dream sent by God to a prophet. "Vision" in this verse is synonymous with "law." In other words, the nation that does not have God's law (given by inspiration of the prophets) is a nation that will live "without restraint." One thinks of the "famine for the word of God" prophesied in Amos 8:11-12. Here is a description of society, loosed from God's law and run amok. If ever a description fit our Age with its violence and greed, this is it.

Do you see a man who speaks in haste?
there is more hope for a fool than for him.

Proverbs 29:20

One who "speaks in haste" is one who generally speaks without thinking. His words are inconsiderate and angry. Solomon has given ample evidence of his disdain for the "fool" in Proverbs, which gives real force to his opinion of the hasty speaker: "There is more hope for a fool than for him."

Fear of man will prove to be a snare,
But whoever trusts in the Lord will be kept safe.

Proverbs 29:25

The contrast here lies in the difference between the one who demonstrates a "fear of man," that is, a fear of their mockery and

opposition, and an insufficient degree of “trust in the Lord.” This is the ailment that afflicted some Jewish leaders in Jesus’ time. They believed in Him, but did not make their faith known “for fear they would be put out of the synagogue” (John 12:42). Had they feared God more, they would have feared men less.

The sayings of Agur, son of Jakeh — an oracle.
Proverbs 30:1

Chapters 30 and 31 form a kind of appendix to the book of Proverbs. The names “Agur” (Proverbs 30:1) and “Lemuel” (31:1) are found nowhere else in scripture. Some scholars feel that these are assumed names, and the real author is Solomon himself.

I am the most ignorant of men;
I do not have a man’s understanding,
I have not learned wisdom,
nor do I have knowledge of the Holy One.
Proverbs 30:2,3

One of “Agur’s” favorite techniques is to use the first few lines of his saying to “build up” the main point that he is making, the “punch line” that will come in the final clause. So in this case he reveals the secret to attaining wisdom by first proclaiming that he lacks it. “I am,” he insists, “the most ignorant of men.” Does this mean his case is hopeless? Certainly not! What he possesses is a humble, “teach me” attitude that enables him to learn. Only one who is impressed with all that he has yet to learn will listen expectantly and reverently to what God has to say.

Who has gone up to heaven and come down?
Who has gathered up the wind in the hollow of his
hand?
Who has wrapped up the waters in his cloak?
Who has established the ends of the earth?
What is his name, and the name of his son?
Tell me if you know!
Proverbs 30:4

This verse proceeds in thought from the previous two. By means of a series of rhetorical questions Agur draws the contrast between man's ignorance and God, who knows everything. It brings to mind the deluge of questions the Lord poured out on Job and his friends, eliciting Job's humble reply: "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know" (Job 42:2). In terms of this study, Job was wise, and ready to become wiser still.

Give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.
Otherwise I may have too much and disown you,
and say, "Who is the Lord?"
Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonor the name of my God.
Proverbs 30:8,9

These words seem to express the principle of "moderation in all things." Moses warned the Israelites that too much wealth might distract them from an absolute dependence on God (Deuteronomy 8:12-17; 31:20). It is also important to note that although Jesus promises to provide us with "food and clothing" (Matthew 6:25-33), He does not promise us great wealth.

Do not slander a servant to his master,
or he will curse you, and you will pay for it.
Proverbs 30:10

The wealthy Israelite was not to assume that he could slander a servant simply because the latter was poor, and therefore helpless to retaliate. As Solomon notes elsewhere, God is the defender of the poor.

There are three things that are too amazing for me,
four that I do not understand.
The way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a snake on a rock.
The way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a maiden.
Proverbs 30:18,19

What all these “amazing” things have in common is that they leave no trace of their coming and going. At least a modern jet airplane will leave a vapor trail, but an eagle circling in the sky leaves nothing. A snake that moves across a rock leaves no trail (it might if it were on the sand); and although a ship might slice through the waves of the sea, its wake soon disappears, and there is no tracing its passage. All of these things, it is inferred, are part of the mysterious action of the Creator. In the same way, there is no explaining the logic of romance, of a “man with a maiden.” The Biblical view of romance is that it is God-given and right if enjoyed in the proper context (Hebrews 13:4). This is important, in light of the next verse:

This is the way of the adulteress:
she eats and wipes her mouth,
and says, "I've done nothing wrong."
Proverbs 30:20

This woman seems so hardened by her life-style of sin that she views her "love making" with the same emotional detachment that she does a meal. After completing either task, she "wipes her mouth" (with a dirty sleeve, one imagines!) and sees no moral or ethical importance to her actions.

Under three things the earth trembles,
under four it cannot bear up.
A servant who becomes king, a fool who is full of food,
an unloved woman who is married,
and a maidservant who replaces her mistress.
Proverbs 30:21-23

This saying is, admittedly difficult to interpret, especially for those who believe in the merits of an egalitarian, democratic society. For such a person the response might be to ask why could a servant not become king? It was Barry Goldwater who once declared that the United States is a "wonderful country, where anyone can grow up to be president.... except me." The common theme of these verses seems to be that the norms have been turned upside down; a former servant is made king, or a somewhat plain and "unloved" woman, an old maid perhaps, becomes unexpectedly married. Perhaps the danger lies in the formerly downtrodden person taking on "airs" in his new position.

There are three things that are stately in their stride,
four that move with stately bearing;
A lion, mighty among beasts, who retreats before
nothing,
a strutting rooster, a he-goat,
And a king with his army around him.
Proverbs 30:29-31

Notice that these figures are given in descending order of “stateliness.” A “lion” is statelier than a “rooster,” a “rooster” is more impressive than a he-goat, and (this is the point), even a “rooster” is more impressive than a “king” who is unwilling to lead his army from the front. These verses may be saying something about the nature of leadership.

The sayings of King Lemuel — an oracle his mother
taught him.
Proverbs 31:1

There is no record of a King Lemuel, either in Israel or one of her neighbors. We will never know for certain who he was. There is an intriguing possibility, however, that Lemuel was Solomon writing under an assumed name. If this is so, then his “mother” would have been Bathsheba, the wife of David. This possibility lends poignancy to his words on the “Worthy Woman” (Proverbs 31:10-31). When it is remembered that she was involved with David in an adulterous relationship, what we see in these verses are the thoughts of a sadder, wiser woman. We are reminded that the person who is forgiven by God can live a redeemed and worthy life once again.

Do not spend your strength on women,
your vigor on those who ruin kings.
Proverbs 31:3

The word “strength” probably has a sexual connotation, meaning “virility” or “sexual prowess.” One thinks instantly of Samson, a man whose potential was wasted on unworthy women. Also, movingly, of the heartbreak and chaos that occurred following David’s liaison with Bathsheba. Here we see the potential of such a woman to damage a career. In contrast, the ode to the “Worthy Woman” which follows describes a woman of such character that her partnership “makes” a man.

Proverbs 31:10-31 is a Hebrew acrostic (compare Psalm 119 for a rather longer acrostic!). Each line of the poem begins with a succeeding letter in the Hebrew alphabet.

A wife of noble character, who can find?
she is worth far more than rubies.
Proverbs 31:10

The description of the “Worthy Woman” brings the book of Proverbs to a climax. It is, of course, an idealized picture, one that cannot be completely attained, but an ideal for which a woman can strive. It is interesting to contrast this “worthy woman” with the woman described in the Song of Solomon. There her beauty is one of form, the singer lingering over parts of her body to extol her various physical attributes. For the worthy woman of Proverbs, the only body parts noted are hands, arms and palms, all seemingly in a frenzy of activity! There is a beauty that shines from deep within, flowing from a character that is warm and wise.

The term “wife of noble character” (or “worthy woman”) is found in only two other passages of scripture, and only once of a real person. It is interesting to see, out of the many undeniably godly women of the Bible, who she is. In Proverbs 12:4 we learn that “a wife of noble character is her husband’s crown.” But of all the godly women in the Bible, only Ruth the Moabite is so described. Boaz describes her as “a woman of noble character” (Ruth 3:11).

Like wisdom, this woman is worth “far more than rubies” (Proverbs 3:15; 8:11), that is to say, she is priceless. The woman described in these verse, it should be emphasized, is no “dumb blond,” lacking intelligence and talent. If ancient peoples had a poor impression of women, it certainly does not show up here! Words such as “talented,” “classy,” and even “formidable” come to mind as we read the description of this remarkable woman.

Her husband has full confidence in her,
and lacks nothing of value.

She brings him good, not harm,
all the days of her life.

Proverbs 31:12

These words are a reminder to husbands that a lack of trust in their wives displays a lack of respect for their abilities. She “brings him good, not harm.” The marriage relationship is about making the other a better person, about supporting and instilling confidence in the other.

She is like the merchant ships,
bringing her food from afar.

Proverbs 31:14

Solomon's era was a time of unprecedented prosperity and trade for the nation of Israel. His merchant fleet ventured to the far corners of the earth to bring goods back to Israel (2 Chronicles 8:17,18). This remarkable woman's enterprise reminds him of Israel's own economic activity; it was far-reaching and lucrative.

She considers a field and buys it;
out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.

Proverbs 31:16

So she is "into" real estate, too. One suspects that when she "considers" a piece of property to buy, that she does so with shrewdness and competence.

She sees that her trading is profitable,
and her lamp does not go out at night.

Proverbs 31:18

And she is also a trader! She owns and runs a business, in addition to her property. The fact that "her lamp does not go out at night" tells us that she is highly motivated and industrious. *This* business will succeed.

In her hands she holds the distaff,
and extends her hands to the needy.

Proverbs 31:20

It is notable that she uses a portion of her business earnings to help the needy. This is in contrast to the usual activity of her male counterparts. While "ruthless men" gain only "wealth," a "kind hearted woman gains respect" (Proverbs 11:16). While she might

be shrewd and competent as a businesswoman, she does not neglect the need for compassion and caring.

She is clothed in fine linen and purple.
Proverbs 31:22

She is tastefully fashion conscious. It is all right to enjoy the fruit of your labors, as long as it does not become the source of arrogance.

Her husband is respected at the city gates
where he takes his place among the elders of the
land.

Proverbs 31:23

Her husband is an “elder,” a man to whom the community defers, and it is implied that his status is largely the result of her qualities. Like Boaz (Ruth 4:1), he sits “at the city gates,” where his wisdom as a leader in the community is sought. He is a spiritual leader in Israel precisely because she is a wife of such rare character.

She makes linen garments and sells them,
and supplies the merchants with sashes.
Proverbs 31:24

As if this woman does not do enough, we find she is a wholesaler, too. One can almost imagine the merchants contacting her and saying: “Customers have been asking for the sashes you made last year. Will you be making more?”

She is clothed with strength and dignity
Proverbs 31:25

This is not, of course, a case of “clothes making a person.” The sense is metaphorical. Frequently in poetical Old Testament passages when one is said to have put on clothing, it meant in the sense of showing his true colors or displaying his true character. One can be clothed, for instance, with “honor and majesty” (Job 40:10). The worthy woman is therefore clothed with “strength and dignity,” abstract qualities set off by the splendor of the literal garments which she made with strong and skillful hands.

She speaks with wisdom,
and faithful instruction is on her tongue.
Proverbs 31:26

Some people's words may be sharp, bitter and sarcastic, but not so this woman! Her words are cultivated by the principles of God's way. We are not surprised to find the overall theme of Proverbs here. The worthy woman speaks “with wisdom” and “faithful instruction.” She fears God, and keeps His commands. Her words are a fountain of life (Proverbs 10:11) to her family, friends and those to whom she is mentor.

Her children arise and call her blessed,
her husband also, and he praises her.
Proverbs 31:28

Verse 29 contains the husband's words of praise:

Many women do noble things,
but you surpass them all!
Proverbs 31:29

He seems smitten by her, as well he should. Everyone needs to be praised — children, husbands and wives. Everyone needs to know that their efforts are appreciated.

Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting,
but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.
Proverbs 31:30

One wonders who is deceived by the charm of a woman's youthful beauty, men or women? Perhaps both are susceptible. A man might fail to look beyond a woman's outer beauty to seek what lies in her heart, and a woman might seek to develop only her physical beauty while neglecting her inner character. This woman's attraction is far more than skin deep, and it is the kind that will not fade with maturity. It is worth noting that amongst her traits of beauty there is the spiritual: she is a woman who "fears the Lord." So she is wise, too. From the book of Proverbs, there could be no higher praise!

This description of the worthy woman is a fitting end to the book, for she embodies so well the qualities the book of Proverbs values so highly, the compassionate and prudent ways of the wise. Unlike the "sluggard" (Proverbs 6:9), she is industrious and skillful. Unlike the foolish person whose lips "gush out folly" (Proverbs 15:2), she is a woman who "speaks with wisdom and faithful instruction is on her tongue" (31:26). How fortunate are her husband, children and friends, for they receive the intelligent and godly counsel of a wise woman! While "charm" may be

deceptive and beauty “fleeting,” this marvel of a woman “fears the Lord,” the unmistakable mark of wisdom. Proverbs, the book written by a “wise man” ends with the sweet words of a “wise” woman!

Questions

1. Discuss some practical ways to manage anger (29:11).
2. What does the Wise Man mean by a “child left to himself” (29:15)?
3. “Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint” (29:18). Are there signs that our society has cast off all restraint? How can we recover respect for God’s law?
4. How can the godly woman fulfill the need to have “faithful instruction” on her tongue (31:26)? What would be the opposite of “faithful instruction”?
5. “Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting” (31:30). Name some of the qualities that do not fade, that in fact grow brighter with maturity.

Scriptural Index

Genesis

18:19101

24:4745

48:14-2239

Exodus

28:3vii

31:3vii

34:685

Leviticus

19:3542

25:25106

Numbers

23:7,18xiv

Deuteronomy

5:16107

6:654

8:12-17137

25:13-1642

31:20137

Ruth

2:20106

3:11.....48,142

4:1.....110,144

1 Samuel

15:2263

2 Samuel

6:7128

11:229

1 Kings

4:28xv

4:32xv

8:63101

21:1104

2 Chronicles

8:17,18.....143

29:30116

Job

26:2664

28:1210

28:2264

28:28vii

40:10145

42:2137

42:311

Psalms

19:1ix

19:2ix

24:1111

24:423

35:15112

73:1323

78:454

111:10vi

Ecclesiastes

3:1-865

4:7,8.....71

9:10	127
12:12,13	vii
Isaiah	
3:21	45
14:4.....	xiv
38:1-8	115
Jeremiah	
10:23	68
31:11	106
Ezekiel	
17:2.....	xiv
Hosea	
6:6	95
Amos	
8:5	42
8:11,12.....	135
Malachi	
2:14	8
Matthew	
1:19	133
5:28	26
6:19-21	108
6:22	96
6:25-33	137
7:24-27	41
13:57.....	xiv
19:17	97
25:32	86
26:49	124

Mark	
7:14-23	16
15:10	124
Luke	
12:16-20 viii,123	
14:7-11	117
15:28	128
John	
12:42	136
Acts	
10:19	97
Romans	
10:2	84
12:17	119
12:19	91
1 Corinthians	
2:8	vi
Titus	
1:6	125
1:12.....	xiv
Hebrews	
4:12	95
12:5-6	10,73
13:3	19
13:4	138
James	
3:6	61
1 Peter	
5:7	68

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