

Old Testament Survey
Lesson 20 – Proverbs
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School
www.valleybible.net

Introduction

The Book of Proverbs challenges the young and inexperienced, as well as the old and mature to seek wisdom through its study. John MacArthur condenses the thrust of Proverbs very well:

"The two major themes which are interwoven and overlapping throughout Proverbs are wisdom and folly. Wisdom, which includes knowledge, understanding, instruction, discretion, and obedience, is built on the fear of the Lord and the Word of God. Folly is everything opposite of wisdom."

If you were to go to a Christian living seminar, you might receive a syllabus listing workshops on various areas of study such as: personal finances; self-esteem; common problems; dealing with adversities; personal relationships; human sexuality; life purposes; etc. The goal of this seminar would be to change your life. The goal of the Book of Proverbs is also to change the lifestyle of the reader.

¹The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel:

²To know wisdom and instruction, To discern the sayings of understanding,

³To receive instruction in *wise behavior, Righteousness, justice and equity*;

⁴To give prudence to the naive, To the youth knowledge and discretion,

⁵A wise man will hear and increase in learning, And a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel,

⁶To understand a proverb and a figure, The words of the wise and their riddles.

⁷The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction. Prov 1:1-7

Author

Following the Book of Psalms, of which David was the primary lyricist, we find three books credited to his son, Solomon: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. We do not know for sure the order in which they were written. But it is logical that Solomon wrote the Song of Solomon when he was young and in love, Proverbs when he was at the peak of his mental prowess, and Ecclesiastes when he was old and disillusioned after a long life of "striving for the wind." There is, however, no question who wrote and compiled Proverbs. Verse 1 states that these are, "*The proverbs of Solomon, the son of David, king of Israel.*" According to 1 Kings 4:32, he wrote 3,000 proverbs and 1005 songs. We also know that he collected "*sayings of the wise*" (Prov 22:17; 24:23) which were the traditional teachings handed down for generations from the "fathers." There were schools of scribes that also compiled and wrote wisdom literature. Agur and Lemuel are also noted as writing sections of Proverbs. Lemuel is generally considered to be Solomon according to ancient Jewish tradition. We already know much about Solomon from our study of 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles. Here is a quick review:

Solomon was healthy, wealthy, and wise.

1. He expanded David's kingdom to over 60,000 square miles.
2. He became a trading and shipping magnate: controlling camel caravans throughout his kingdom and running a fleet of cargo ships from Tarshish to Arabia, on to India.
3. He became world renowned for his (God given) wisdom, power, and leadership

As he grew older Solomon made some very bad choices and his relationship with God deteriorated:

1. He married the daughters of many pagan princes in order to expand his kingdom.
2. He allowed his wives and concubines to import their pagan deities and worship them, even allowing them to build shrines in the palace.
3. He became a cruel dictator, much like the pagan kings around him. He became obsessed with his palace, gardens, and other building projects and increased both the number of slaves and the taxes on his subjects in order to complete them.

Finally, he lost his moral compass.

1. He lost his lofty view of the very God for whom he built the temple.
2. He became an idol worshipping heathen himself, following his wives into the worship of their many gods, including the sexually perverted worship of Asheroth, and even worshipping Moloch which included human (child) sacrifice.

Introduction to Proverb Literature

What is the difference between a parable and a proverb? A Parable is a story told to teach a lesson (earthly story, heavenly point). A proverb is a short statement that conveys moral truth in a concise and honest form. The Hebrew word, which was translated parable, means "a comparison" and was used for any short, wise, moralistic saying. The choice of this word makes sense since many actually are couplets or triplets arranged to be compared or contrasted against one another. Contrasts like: wisdom vs. foolishness; wise person vs. the foolish person; lover and fearer of God vs. the despiser and scorner of instruction; final end of the wise vs. the ultimate end of the fool.

The Book of Proverbs also includes several lengthy lectures (i.e. chapters 1-9), and a beautiful praise poem (chapter 31), but is mainly made up of short moral teachings. This style is not unique to the Jews or the Bible, but one of the major ways of teaching in ancient and modern literature, especially in the nations of the East (i.e. Confucius). Collections of Proverbs were found in many ancient libraries including wisdom sayings from Mesopotamia, Sumeria, Egypt, etc. In fact, the Egyptians used this genre to perfection as far back as 2700 BC.

The study of these sayings or proverbs seem to have been a favorite pastime of the scribes of many lands. In most cases these collections were textbooks for educating young aristocrats. When it says, "my son" it usually means student. One thing all wisdom writing has in common is the very practical, day-to-day, hands on approach to living. Parallel structure, repetition, and comparison are all calculated to help a student learn and remember.

The great distinction between the Hebrew wisdom literature and others is an important one, the existence of God. This is made clear in 1:7, "*The fear of God is the beginning of knowledge; ...*". Like any good teacher, Solomon varied his teaching styles using many creative methods to drive his lessons home:

1. Proverb (14:1)
2. Command (16:3)
3. List (30:24-31)
4. Comparison (21:19)
5. Rhetorical question (30:4)
6. Illustration (7:6-27)
7. Riddle (question without an obvious answer) (30:15)

Ancient Hebrew wisdom literature begins with several assumptions:

1. God is the designer/creator!

Everything – "*The Lord by wisdom founded the earth.*" (3:19)

Everybody – "*The Lord possessed me at the beginning of its way, before His worlds of old.*" (8:22)

2. God is the just judge!

Observes – "*...God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.*" (1 Sam 16:7)

Acts – "*The judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether.*" (Psa 19:9)

3. God speaks to His people

Through His leaders--"the Fathers"

Through His Law--"the Writings"-- *"For the commandment is a lamp, and the teaching a light, and reproofs for discipline are a way of life."* (5:23)

Ancient Hebrew wisdom was practical:

1. It came from experience.

Chapter 31, for example contains, *"the words of king Lemuel, the oracle (message or lesson from God) which his mother taught him,"* and, 1:8 says, *"Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and do not forsake your mother's teaching."* Where do you think dad and mom learned it?

2. It came from observation.

Proverbs 6:6 is famous. *"Go to the ant, O sluggard, observe her ways and be wise."*

3. It came from God.

In the Torah, the word we have translated teaching is rendered law or commands. *"Great is our Lord, and abundant in strength; His understanding (wisdom) is infinite."* (Psa 147:5)

Wisdom teachers viewed life through the lens or grid of God's teachings (the Law and the prophets). We could call it being "God consciousness" or a Biblical world-view. The wise, motivated by a healthy fear of God, will accept His revealed moral order and His objective standard for wisdom. With this attitude, God's people find strength to face even the toughest problems: tongue, immorality, death, ... whatever.

Guidelines for Interpreting and Applying Proverbs

A difficult challenge when seeking to understand Proverbs is to realize that nature of wisdom literature.

...proverbs are divine guidelines and wise observations, i.e., teachings underlying principles which are not always inflexible laws or absolute promises. These expressions of general truth generally do have "exceptions," due to the uncertainty of life and unpredictable behavior of fallen men. God does not guarantee uniform outcome or application for each proverb, but in studying them and applying them, one comes to contemplate the mind of God, His character, His attributes, His works, and His blessings.
MacArthur Bible Handbook

Another important guideline is to recognize who is being addressed.

²²"How long, O naive ones, will you love being simple-minded? And scoffers delight themselves in scoffing And fools hate knowledge? Prov 1:22

Like the Book of Psalms, the Book of Proverbs is a rough book to organize or outline.

I. Prologue to Wisdom (Chapter 1:1-7)

Proverbs is unusual because it gives you its author, purpose, and theme in the first paragraph.

A. Purpose – To Know

To know what? Wisdom, instruction, understanding, instruction in wise behavior, righteousness, justice, equity, prudence, knowledge, discretion, learning, and counsel.

B. Process – To Fear

Whom? The LORD because He is the Creator, so we should have a HIGH VIEW OF GOD. If we study the attributes of God in Psalms we are forced to our knees before Him in awe (fear). Fear here is reverential fear, awe, and admiration.

The fear of the Lord is a state of mind in which one's own attitudes, will, feelings, deeds, and goals are exchanged for God's. MacArthur Study Bible

II. Precepts of Wisdom (Chapter 1:8-9:18)

Now comes a series of lectures (sons and students love those) that are packed with wisdom.

A. Lesson 1: Avoid Bad Company (1:8-33)

This is nothing new coming from mom and dad, or teacher. Verse 8 starts it off, "Hear oh my son, your father's instruction, and do not forsake your mother's teaching . . ." (v20) "wisdom shouts in the street,..."

1. Bad company corrupts good morals. (1 Cor 15:33) (1:8-19) If you give in to peer pressure, it leads to tragedy.
2. Listen to wisdom. "He who listens to me shall live securely and shall be at ease from the dread of evil." (1:33)

B. Lesson 2: Avoid Adulterers (2)

The best reason for listening to wisdom is for your own protection. You can be saved from:

1. Crafty men (2:11-15) and
2. Immoral women (2:16-19)
...walk in the way of good men and keep to the paths of the righteous (2:20)

C. Lesson 3: Seek God (3)

Wisdom is not just avoiding evil, it is knowing God.

1. Trust Him (3:5-6)

Accept the fact that He knows more than you do and wants what's best for you.

⁵Trust in the LORD with all your heart And do not lean on your own understanding. ⁶In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight. ⁷Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and turn away from evil. Prov 3:5-7

2. Honor Him (3:7-35)

Accept His principles and discipline (Heb 12:5-11) and act them out in your life.

D. Lesson 4: Seek Wisdom (4)

The first step in the process is, "just do it !" Next, understand what you've got.

⁷"The beginning of wisdom is: Acquire wisdom; And with all your acquiring, get understanding. Prov 4:7

1. Learn right from wrong (according to God's word) and turn from evil (1-19)
2. Watch your heart attitude (20-27)

²³**Watch over your heart with all diligence,** For from it flow the springs of life.

²⁴Put away from you a deceitful mouth And put devious speech far from you.

²⁵Let your eyes look directly ahead And let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you.

²⁶Watch the path of your feet And all your ways will be established.

²⁷**Do not turn to the right nor to the left; Turn your foot from evil.** Prov 4:23-27

E. Lesson 5: Avoid Lust (5)

Our society seems to be preoccupied with sexual immorality, lust, adultery, prostitution, etc. The message here is simple:

1. Keep yourself pure before marriage for your own good.
2. Keep yourself pure for your marriage partner. Lest you think the writer thinks sex is dirty he describes it in beautiful poetic terms, as God intended it, in verses 15-19.

And rejoice in the wife of your youth. ... Be exhilarated always with her love. Prov 5:18b, 19c

F. Lesson 6: Avoid Debt (6)

This passage gives two financial principles:

1. Don't sign for others' debts (1-5) and
2. Work hard (6-11)

The chapter ends with another warning about crafty men (12-19) and immoral women (20-35). Some think that is because these people often bring financial ruin to their victims.

In the middle there are the seven things that the Lord hates:

¹⁶There are six things which the LORD hates, Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him:
¹⁷Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, And hands that shed innocent blood,
¹⁸A heart that devises wicked plans, Feet that run rapidly to evil,
¹⁹A false witness who utters lies, And one who spreads strife among brothers. Prov 6:16-19

G. Lesson 7: Avoid Prostitutes (7)

This chapter continues the lesson from chapter 6:

³²The one who commits adultery with a woman is lacking sense; He who would destroy himself does it. Prov 6:32

The one who walks into adultery is as: an ox goes to the slaughter (v22) or a bird hastens to the snare (v23). Ultimately "*it will cost him his life.*" (v23)

H. Lesson 8: Seek Wisdom (8)

This chapter contrasts the previous chapter of lust seeking a man to wisdom being out there, "in the streets" seeking with the same vigor as a professional prostitute lures a mark, but the result is infinitely different.

1. The harlot leads to death (7:27), Wisdom leads to life (8:35).
2. Wisdom is more valuable than any stuff. (v10-11)
3. God's Moral absolutes were established by Him and are built into the very fabric of creation.

²²"The LORD possessed me at the beginning of His way, Before His works of old. ²³"From everlasting I was established, Prov 8:22-23a

I. Lesson 9: Avoid Folly (9)

The lady of wisdom is contrasted with the lady of folly.

1. Romance wisdom, you live.
2. Romance folly, you die

A passage on "scoffing" is placed in the middle of this lesson (v7-12).

III. Proverbs of Solomon (Chapters 10-24)

This section begins with a great verse, "*A wise son makes his father glad, but a foolish son is a grief to his mother.*" (10:1) Why doesn't it say the foolish son is a grief to his dad and a wise son makes his mom glad? It's because men and women are different. To understand it you need to switch, not the parents, but the son. If you do that it might read, "*A foolish son makes his father mad, but a wise son is a relief to his mother.*"

This section is a potpourri of proverbs on every conceivable subject and difficult to outline. The primary thrust of this section is to contrast the upright with the wicked.

A. Godly Living (10-15)

1. Right attitude toward stuff (10)
Earn money honestly, rely on God for needs, don't be lazy, work hard, plan ahead, be honest, watch your mouth, save money, etc. The bottom line (v16), "*the wages of the righteous is life, the income of the wicked, punishment.*"
2. Right attitude toward people (11-13)
Be honest, humble, righteous, tactful, careful, merciful, generous, smart, faithful, discerning, truthful, and good.
3. Right attitude toward the difficult (14)
This chapter presents a number of difficult situations and how to respond and deal with them: home, fools, backsliding, gullibility, temperamental people, the poor, etc.
4. Right attitude toward teaching (15)
When you teach you should be: gentle, accurate, joyous, correctable, prayerful, able to answer, humility, etc.

B. Godly Knowledge (16-24)

1. Know about God in Your Planning (16)
God is sovereign and critiques all our plans.

³Commit your works to the LORD And your plans will be established.
⁹The mind of man plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps. Prov 16:3, 9
2. Know about family (17-19)
Discipline, blessing, peacemaking, love, joy, wisdom, and restraint are all traits of a happy home.
3. Know about choices (20-22:16)
Drinking, anger, laziness, disloyalty, dishonesty, greed, lying, slander, cursing, revenge, and cheating are all choices that will "*not be blessed in the end.*" (v21)
4. Know about everything else (22:16-24)
These chapters seem to tie up lots of the loose ends.

IV. Proverbs of Solomon (Chapters 25-29)

as copied by Hezekiah's men, Isaiah, Hosea, and Micah

A. Interactions (25-26)

1. With kings (25:11-7)
2. With neighbors (25:8-20)
3. With enemies (25:21-24)
4. With yourself (25:25-26:2)
5. With fools (26:3-12)
6. With lazy (26:13-16)
7. With gossips (26:17-28)

B. Actions (27-29)

1. Selfishness (27)
2. Servitude (28:1-10)
3. Stewardship (28:11-28)
4. Stubbornness (29)

V. Proverbs of Others (Chapters 30-31)

These are the only two chapters of Proverbs that were not written or compiled "wise sayings" of Solomon. There is much speculation as to the identities of these two men are. The bottom line is that we do not know and it is better to just admit, we don't know.

A. Agar (30)

1. Presentation (1-9)

In presenting himself to us, Agar seems to overdo his humility (v2), "*I am more stupid than any man.*" But, as we read on to his description of God and then to his prayer, in verses 7-9, we see his true heart.

2. Proverbs (10-33)

These proverbs are written about a number of subjects, but it is the style that is really interesting. Starting with verse 15 begins a series in a numerical or list style, i.e. each is a unit beginning with the words, "three thing ... no four." It is a very common Hebrew poetry even today.

B. Lemuel (31)

1. Presentation (1-9)

Lemuel's mother seems to have observed the habit of kings to womanize, get drunk, and forget the poor in their kingdoms. The kings should be characterized by holiness, sobriety, and compassion. She wants him to "open his mouth for the mute, the unfortunate, afflicted and needy, and judge righteously." (v 8-9)

2. This chapter ends with a poem. If there are "few good men", there are fewer good women. This section is often studied at women's bible studies as what women should strive for in their families. However, the real thrust of this passage is instruction in finding a good wife. A good woman is hard to find and worth more than a fortune.

Homework

- Take a stab at researching a particular character trait or flaw from Proverbs.
- Read Ecclesiastes.

Adultery / Lust

Proverbs 4:23

²³Watch over your heart with all diligence,
For from it flow the springs of life.

Proverbs 6:27-28

²⁷Can a man take fire in his bosom
And his clothes not be burned?
²⁸Or can a man walk on hot coals
And his feet not be scorched?

Anger

Proverbs 10:12

¹²Hatred stirs up strife,
But love covers all transgressions.

Proverbs 12:16

¹⁶A fool's anger is known at once,
But a prudent man conceals dishonor.

Proverbs 14:16-17

¹⁶A wise man is cautious and turns away from evil,
But a fool is arrogant and careless.
¹⁷A quick-tempered man acts foolishly,
And a man of evil devices is hated.

Proverbs 19:11

¹¹A man's discretion makes him slow to anger,
And it is his glory to overlook a transgression.

The Mouth

Proverbs 10:19

¹⁹When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable,
But he who restrains his lips is wise.

Proverbs 12:18

¹⁸There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword,
But the tongue of the wise brings healing.

Proverbs 13:3

³The one who guards his mouth preserves his life;
The one who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.

Proverbs 15:28

²⁸The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer,
But the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.

Proverbs 17:27-28

²⁷He who restrains his words has knowledge,
And he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.
²⁸Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise;
When he closes his lips, he is considered prudent.

Proverbs 13:10

¹⁰Through insolence comes nothing but strife,
But wisdom is with those who receive counsel.

Decision Making

Proverbs 3:5-7

⁵Trust in the LORD with all your heart And do not lean on your own understanding.

⁶In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight.

⁷Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and turn away from evil.

Depression

Proverbs 28:13

¹³He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper,

But he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion.

Godly Fellowship/Friendship

Proverbs 27:17

¹⁷Iron sharpens iron,

So one man sharpens another.

Finances

Proverbs 17:18

¹⁸A man lacking in sense pledges

And becomes guarantor in the presence of his neighbor.

Proverbs 21:20

²⁰There is precious treasure and oil in the dwelling of the wise,

But a foolish man swallows it up.

Proverbs 22:7

⁷The rich rules over the poor,

And the borrower becomes the lender's slave.

Proverbs 23:4

⁴Do not weary yourself to gain wealth,

Cease from your consideration of it.

Pride / Humility

Proverbs 11:2

²When pride comes, then comes dishonor,

But with the humble is wisdom.

Proverbs 15:33

³³The fear of the LORD is the instruction for wisdom,

And before honor comes humility.

Proverbs 16:5

⁵Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD;

Assuredly, he will not be unpunished.

Proverbs 18:12

¹²Before destruction the heart of man is haughty,

But humility goes before honor.

Proverbs 22:4

⁴The reward of humility and the fear of the LORD

Are riches, honor and life.

Proverbs 25:27

²⁷It is not good to eat much honey,

Nor is it glory to search out one's own glory.