

# ***Living Wisely, Living Well: Lessons from The Proverbs***

## **Leaders Guide**



**13 online adult Sunday school lessons**

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### **About Acacia Resources**

The biblical witness singles out acacia wood for its uniqueness. The only wood mentioned in the building of the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle and the altar is acacia. Acacia wood is listed with other precious objects—gold, silver, fragrant incense, onyx stones—given to honor God.

Today's acacia tree is known for its value, diversity and durability. Some acacia trees have fragrant flowers used in making perfume. The seeds are edible. The bark is rich in tannin, a substance used in tanning, dyes, inks and pharmaceuticals. Furniture, oars, tools and gunstocks are made of the hard lumber from the acacia tree.

Some 1,200 species of acacia trees and shrubs exist throughout much of the world, including Africa, Australia and North America. The acacia species is tough enough to survive the semiarid regions of Africa where its roots sink deep to capture the rare water which runs quickly into the soil.

The name *acacia* symbolically ties BCE's publishing initiative to our biblical heritage. The acacia tree represents the wise value attached to educational resources, the diversity of needs within churches and the durability demanded for growing healthy Christians, whether they are singles, couples with children or senior adults.

Acacia Resources will guide Christians and draw them godward, as the ark of acacia wood guided the people of Israel in their journey and represented the presence of God in their midst.

For more information about Acacia Resources, call 615-383-3192 or visit our Web site at [www.acaciaresources.com](http://www.acaciaresources.com).

# Living Wisely, Living Well Leaders Guide

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A *Living Wisely, Living Well* Students Guide is also available from Acacia Resources ([www.acaciaresources.com](http://www.acaciaresources.com)).

## Preface

A 44-year-old man in the southern city of Goteborg, Sweden, came up with an unusual way to get a little extra pocket money. According to Associated Press, he used a vacuum cleaner to retrieve coins from a parking meter.

With a pilfered set of keys, Mikael Perrson opened the fronts of two meters and first tried to remove the 1-, 5- and 10-kronor coins with his hands. When that didn't work, he plugged his vacuum cleaner into an electrical socket located conveniently for his thieving pleasure on the meter itself.

He had emptied one meter and was well on his way with a second when police caught him and subsequently charged him with theft. The evidence was stacked against him—literally. His pockets held more than 2,220 worth of kronor (US\$260).

The same week Persson's story appeared, Religion News Service reported that 16-year-old Steven Downey, diagnosed in July 2002 with Hodgkin's disease, was granted a wish through the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

His wish? To provide study Bibles to African pastors and ministry leaders.

Downey learned about this need through his Plano, Texas, church. He said he chose this particular wish because he believed it "was going to have the most impact for God's kingdom for eternity."

Two stories. Two extremes. Adult. Youth. Greed. Generosity. Foolishness. Wisdom.

News stories every week feature people like Persson who habitually make foolish choices. We have to dig a little deeper to find stories of people like Downey.

Already, he shows evidence of living a wise life. Evidently, he has been schooled in clear thinking, balanced decision-making and good character. Beyond that, he seems to possess wisdom apart from the teaching of others. In this case, he demonstrated the kind

of wisdom that is a gift from God. His wise choice made him happy and blessed the lives of others.

Exactly what is wisdom?

We know it when we see it, or more often, notice when it is absent.

Living a wise and consequently happy life according to the Bible involves many things: knowing how to do certain tasks skillfully; understanding life; solving problems; getting along with others; avoiding pitfalls and temptations. Wisdom is nothing if not practical. But it is more.

Spiritual wisdom, that intangible gift from God, extends and expresses God's presence and will in the world.

Key to gaining this wisdom is the understanding that God created the world and established an order within which we must learn to live. As a result of the kind of wisdom God wants to give us, we can cope with the ups and downs of life and live contently and successfully.

So how do we get wisdom?

Unfortunately, we can't always look to Christian leaders for examples. According to a recent study, they do not rate very high when it comes to displaying godly wisdom.

The Barna Research Group evaluated 13 "character clusters" associated with a leader's character. Surprisingly, Christian leaders did not rate high when it came to using appropriate speech, controlling their temper and teaching ability.

"Wisdom ranked lowest of all 13 character traits evaluated," according to the study. "Among the key difficulties related to that attribute were reliance on personal ability and insight rather than godly guidance, struggles balancing spiritual and worldly forms of wisdom, and inconsistently listening to God" ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=2038](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=2038)).

While learning from others is important, if we want wisdom, The Proverbs say, we must go to its source. Only God can give us the kind of wisdom we need to live content and productive lives.

Wise living results from our recognition that we can't live life effectively apart from our inviting God's personal involvement with us.

We tend to find in life whatever we seek. When we ask, God will give us wisdom and enable us to live wisely and well.

*Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor for Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics*

# Listen, Learn and Live

## Proverbs 1:1-6

<sup>1</sup>The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: <sup>2</sup>For learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, <sup>3</sup>for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity; <sup>4</sup>to teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young—<sup>5</sup>Let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill, <sup>6</sup>to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles.

**Theme: We seek wisdom because we want to improve the quality of our lives.**

## Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the *Students Guide* and the following teaching suggestions.
- Go to [www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1897](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1897) and read the book review “Living on Purpose: Finding God’s Best for Your Life.” Use insights from this column and the suggestions below to help your class apply the truths of this scripture.
- If possible, obtain copies of *Life’s Little Instruction Book* and/or *Life’s Little Instruction Book, Volume II*. Select several entries to read aloud to your class, or use the suggestions below.

## As You Teach

### Introduce the Lesson

- Ask volunteers to describe the best advice they ever received. Follow with questions such as: *Who gave you this advice? Did you follow it? In what context? What were the results?*

Then ask those who are parents: *What advice have you tried to give your children? What has been their response?*

Comment that people throughout history have both sought and offered advice in efforts to improve their own lives and the lives of others. Various cultures centuries before the time of Christ took great care to record the wisdom their forebears had acquired.

We are no different today. We are interested in people, books, television shows and other sources that promise keys to more successful living.

We join support groups, hire personal trainers and sign contracts with consultants. We take pilgrimages and go on retreats. We buy desk calendars with pithy quotes. We read the catchy phrases on church and organizational signs.

Today, Internet access offers advice on anything we can think to ask, and even things we’d never think to ask. Over 25 million links pop up in response to a search request for “advice”; 8.35 million appear for “how-to” Web sites.

Amazon.com offers at least 32,000 links to resources for those who search for “how-to” books, everything from training dogs and raising children to operating computers and starting a business.

Several years ago as his son Adam left for college, H. Jackson Browne Jr. gave him 32 typed pages of advice. Those proverbs-style words of wisdom became the best-selling *Life’s Little Instruction Book*. Browne immediately thought of other things he wished he had included and wrote 512 more snippets. That list became *Life’s Little Instruction Book, Volume II*, subtitled “A few more suggestions, observations, and reminders on how to live a happy and rewarding life.”

Included in that volume are such gems as:

“Talk slow but think quick.”

“When you lose, don’t lose the lesson.”

“Don’t confuse comfort with happiness.”

“Don’t confuse wealth with success.”

“Remember that silence is sometimes the best answer.”

“Remember that a good example is the best sermon.”

“In a verbal confrontation, lower your voice to the degree that the other person raises his or hers.”

“Remember that ignorance is expensive.”

Clearly, people want to know how to live the best possible lives.

- Call for a show of hands among class members who have read the book *Tuesdays with Morrie* or seen the movie by the same title. Ask someone to summarize the story that chronicles the last days of Morrie Schwartz.

Remind the class that Schwartz was a Brandeis University sociology professor who was diagnosed with ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease). The book, from which the movie was adapted, was written by Mitch Albom, a former student of Schwartz.

Supplement class discussion with the following information:

Schwartz first grabbed the nation’s attention with an appearance on ABC’s *Nightline* with his “bite-sized philosophies about living with death’s shadow.”

“People see me as a bridge. I’m not as alive as I used to be, but I’m not yet dead. I’m sort of . . . in-between,” he said. “I’m on the last great journey here—and people want me to tell them what to pack.”

Morrie taught us that when we learn how to die, we know how to live.

## Explore the Bible

- Explain that while wisdom may be hard to define, we almost always notice when it is absent. In spite of the proliferation of how-to books and advice columns, human wisdom has limitations. There is wisdom beyond what others can offer and what we can gain on our own through personal experience. This wisdom comes only from God. In spite of what other sources may promise, it is only this wisdom that results in our understanding life and improving its quality at the deepest levels.

Note that in the Bible, wisdom is an object of constant reflection. Hebrew scripture including Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and certain Psalms comprise some of Israel’s wisdom literature.

- Ask someone to read aloud Proverbs 1:1-6. Note that while Solomon here receives credit for The Proverbs, others also contributed. Often a collection of materials into one category was assigned to a dominant personality, and Solomon certainly was that in his day. While the Proverbs are linked to Solomon as a personality and because of his reign as king, not all are the result of his authorship.

Also point out that what most people tend to think of as “proverbs”—those witty, concise sayings—are found primarily in the latter half of the book, 10:1-22:16. Chapters 1-9 are comprised largely of instructional poems.

- Explain that Proverbs is particularly concerned with all aspects of living well and teaches that true wisdom is not possible apart from God. Lead adults to examine the passage more closely by asking such questions as:

► *What qualities of the book of Proverbs make it good for learning about and understanding wisdom?*

► *What is the significance of linking “wisdom” with “instruction” and “understanding” in verse 2?*

► *Based on these verses, how would you define wisdom?*

- ▶ *When we apply knowledge and understanding, what is the result? What is an example of this in your life?*
- ▶ *Wisdom is more than just knowing how to get things done. What are some broader benefits of wisdom according to these verses?*
- ▶ *What effect does making wise choices have on our relationship with God? with others?*
- ▶ *Who can become wise?*
- ▶ *Does a person ever become “wise enough”?*
- ▶ *What does attaining wisdom require of us?*

Note that while Proverbs carefully connects wisdom to God and is clear that God is the source of wisdom, these verses indicate that we can learn wisdom. In seeking God’s way for us to live, making the right choices and working for fairness, we will not only improve the quality of our own lives but also benefit the lives of others. Most importantly, we will establish a right relationship with God. Those qualities, say The Proverbs, indicate wisdom.

### **Apply Biblical Truth**

- Point out the way television and movies reflect people’s efforts at improving their lives. Ask adults to suggest recent examples.

Roger Thomas, a pastor and movie reviewer for EthicsDaily.com, observed, “If one theme occurred most often in 2002’s best films, it was desperation. Over and over again, filmgoers were treated to stories of people living desperate lives and seeking change, affirmation and meaning. *The Good Girl, Lovely and Amazing, 8 Mile, Igby Goes Down, One Hour Photo, Changing Lanes* and *Far From Heaven* all dealt with characters living desperate lives” (see “About Schmidt,” [www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=2037](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=2037)).

Ask adults who have seen some of those films to comment on their characters’ lives and efforts at finding meaning and purpose.

- Suggest that as long as people exist, so will their efforts to understand life and improve its quality. Christine and Tom Sine, consultants on purposeful living for Christian and secular organizations around the world, recently wrote a book called *Living on Purpose: Finding God’s Best for Your Life*. In it, they contend that “if Christians do not define their life purpose according to Scripture and God’s purposes, then their life goals and lifestyles will be defined by the dominant culture of competition and consumerism,” (see “Living on Purpose: Finding God’s Best for Your Life,” [www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1897](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1897)).

We must ask, the Sines say, “What kind of people does God want us to be, and how does God want us to be involved both as individuals and families in the work of God’s kingdom?”

- Close with prayer, asking God to direct your search for wisdom and help you understand life and how to live it most fully and effectively.

# Invigorating Fear

## Proverbs 1:7

<sup>7</sup>The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

**Theme: God is the source of wisdom.**

## Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the *Students Guide* and the following teaching suggestions.
- To help introduce the lesson, read the column “Do Faiths Play a Trump Card of Science,” [www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=2259](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=2259).
- For more information on the illustration suggested as a conclusion to the lesson, read the column “Science and Religion Can’t Touch Matters of the Soul,” [www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=2347](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=2347).

## As You Teach

### Introduce the Lesson

- Recall for the class the recent furor created within the Mormon church when Thomas Murphy, an anthropologist and himself a Mormon, disputed one of the central claims in the Book of Mormon.

“Mormons believe that a group of Hebrews left the Holy Land about 2,600 years ago and wandered into North America,” writes pastor and EthicsDaily.com columnist Jim Evans. “These Hebrew nomads are described in the Book of Mormon as one of the lost tribes of Israel and as ‘the principal ancestors of the American Indians’” (see “Do Faiths Play a Trump Card of Science,” [www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=2259](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=2259)).

After extensive testing, Murphy concluded that “DNA research lends no support to traditional Mormon beliefs about the origins of Native Americans.”

What was he saying? If science is right, then the Book of Mormon is wrong.

Certain elements of the evangelical Christian community jumped on Murphy’s conclusion as a way to discredit the Mormon religion.

“Of course,” writes Evans, “Christians might want to play that card gingerly. We’ve had our own problems with claims of faith being disputed by science. One of the earliest struggles erupted over the discovery that Earth revolved around the sun. The official church position at the time, based on statements from the Bible, was that the sun and everything else revolved around Earth.

“Church leaders were convinced that giving any ground to science would forever discredit the Scriptures. As a result, severe penalties were imposed on anyone who affirmed scientific claims in opposition to biblical teaching. The Italian scientist Galileo spent the last 10 years of his life under house arrest for his scientific beliefs.”

We don’t know if it is true, but legend has it that Galileo urged church leaders to look through his telescope at the moons of Jupiter in an attempt to defend himself and his claims. One man reportedly declined the invitation by saying, “I may see something there I am not allowed to believe.”

The church was eventually forced to admit its error, and in 1992, the Catholic Church issued a posthumous apology to Galileo.

“The fact that the Bible asserts an Earth-centered universe is simply an indication that biblical writers were human and therefore subject to the limitations of knowledge imposed on all humans,” Evans writes.

The Christian faithful haven’t yet surrendered on other issues, he continues, noting the bitter struggle in this

country over evolution. “Rather than capitulate, the evangelical faithful have attempted to make science out of Christian dogma. They call this strange hybrid ‘creationism.’”

- Engage the class in discussion by asking such questions as:
  - ▶ *What is your response to the idea that faith and science are irreconcilable?*
  - ▶ *Can a person embrace both faith and logic or reason?*
  - ▶ *In addition to the evolution/creation debate, what other scientific issues and advances cause many in the Christian community to squirm? What is your response to these issues?*
- Suggest that our society has often pitted religion and science against one another. For example, evolution and creation have been framed as polar opposites, with many asserting that if you accept one, you must oppose the other. For some, to embrace evolution means to be anti-Christian. For others, to accept creation means to be anti-science.

Others see faith and reason in a face-off. Dogma is seen as unrelated to the modern world; reason is believed to be contrary to the Bible.

Stress that the biblical witness offers the perspective that God is the source of wisdom and expects believers to engage in learning, the practice of thinking and discernment.

### Explore the Bible

- Read aloud Proverbs 1:7. Note that this single verse encapsulates the underlying theme of Proverbs: those who live a wise life can do so because of their authentic relationship with God.
- Lead your class to adjust their thinking about the word *fear*. Ask volunteers to suggest things people are afraid of. List their suggestions on a chalkboard.

Note the negative connotations of the word *fear* and suggest its other, more positive definitions: care; concern; awe; reverence. Point out that *fear* is probably the best word we have in English to describe the original Hebrew meaning, but it is not completely adequate.

Remind the class that godly fear is not terror but is instead is a combination of understanding God’s mystery, power and nature and responding to God in reverence, awe, obedience, commitment and love.

- Ask volunteers to read aloud other references from Proverbs to “fear of the Lord”: 10:27; 14:26; 14:27; 16:6. Then ask:
  - ▶ *What are the results or benefits of “fear of the Lord”?*
  - ▶ *What is the connection between fear and wisdom?*
  - ▶ *How is “fear of the Lord” expressed today?*
  - ▶ *What does the writer mean by the “beginning” of knowledge?*
- Call attention to the last half of 1:7—“fools despise wisdom and instruction.” Ask the class to scan all the chapters of Proverbs for references to “fools” and try to categorize those individuals. Note the explanation of the four designations for “fool” in the *Students Guide*. Then ask: *Based on your understanding of Proverbs, how would you define a fool?*

### Apply Biblical Truth

- Relate the following reflections from EthicsDaily.com columnist Dwight Moody in response to a play he saw:

“Science and theology. Both struck me powerfully as I sat in a theater on opening night of ‘The Twilight of the Golds.’

“It is a play that raises these same topics and adds another, namely sexual orientation. Science and religion aren’t explosive enough, I suppose, so why not throw in a little sex!



“The family of four consists of a father, a mother, and two grown children. The son is gay and happily attached; the daughter is straight and uneasily married—to a genetic researcher, as fate would have it.

“The daughter finds herself with child. When her husband returns from the lab with the genetic code of their unborn son, she hears the disturbing news: ‘There is a ninety percent chance the baby will be like your brother.’

“It is a scenario I had long imagined—genetic analysis offering information early enough to address troublesome issues like autism, homosexuality and mental illness of all sorts.

“It is a scenario I had never seen enacted, neither on the stage nor in real life. So I was not prepared for the explosion of emotion ignited by the complex human elements of such a situation.

“The daughter and her husband consider aborting the baby. They wish to avoid the very different struggles of her parents and brother brought on by the sexual orientation of the latter. And the brother, understandably enough, takes very personally the possibility that his sister might end the life of her unborn boy because the baby may be too much like his homosexual uncle.

“I cannot divulge the sad and stunning end to this powerful play,” Moody concludes. “I do not wish to ruin it for many who may yet have opportunity to see it performed.

“But I can say what we already know: The latest science and the deepest theology do not suffice to address the existential elements of the human experience, such as love and loneliness, hope and despair, guilt and grace, even life and death itself.

“These are matters of the soul—not only the soul of a person, but also of a family, of a nation, and perhaps of the whole human race” (see “Science and Religion Can’t Touch Matters of the Soul,” [www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=2347](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=2347)).

- Pray for each member of your class to find the wisdom to obey God’s instruction; make the right decisions; live justly, equitably, shrewdly and prudently. Ask God to grant you wisdom in all areas of your life so that your consideration of what God wants will motivate and drive every dimension of your life.

## In Search of the Good Life

### Proverbs 2:1-15

<sup>1</sup>My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you, <sup>2</sup>making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; <sup>3</sup>if you indeed cry out for insight, and raise your voice for understanding; <sup>4</sup>if you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures—<sup>5</sup>then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. <sup>6</sup>For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; <sup>7</sup>he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly, <sup>8</sup>guarding the paths of justice and preserving the way of his faithful ones. <sup>9</sup>Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; <sup>10</sup>for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; <sup>11</sup>prudence will watch over you; and understanding will guard you. <sup>12</sup>It will save you from the way of evil, from those who speak perversely, <sup>13</sup>who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness, <sup>14</sup>who rejoice in doing evil and delight in the perverseness of evil; <sup>15</sup>those whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways.

**Theme: The Lord gives wisdom.**

### Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the *Students Guide* and the following teaching suggestions.
- Read the column “Future of Faith and Culture Depends on Understanding Past,” [www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=2010](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=2010). Use ideas from this column to supplement your teaching and class discussion.
- Also go to EthicsDaily.com and read the review of the movie, “About a Boy,” [www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1035](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1035).

- Ahead of time, enlist someone from the class who is a teacher or professor to talk to the class briefly about the roles of teacher and student in the learning process.

### As You Teach

#### Introduce the Lesson

- Ask class members to recall the premise of the ABC television show *Fantasy Island*, which ran for six seasons in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The show actually achieved somewhat of a cult following around the world, and one producer even attempted an updated remake in 1998, which was short-lived. The original series starred Ricardo Montalban as Mr. Roarke, a seemingly all-knowing and wealthy man with incredible powers who somehow enabled people to live their fantasies when they paid to visit his island.

The hour-long show paraded a series of characters across the screen each week, people in search of something they felt had always been missing from their lives. They wanted to see what might have been had their lives followed a different path, and Mr. Roarke always delivered. From reuniting divorced parents to meeting the man or woman of one’s dreams to fitting in with the cool high-school crowd, Mr. Roarke’s guests always saw their wishes come true. Sometimes they faced a little danger or unexpected twist along the way, but in the end, everything always turned out great. All this in under one hour.

Suggest that this show and others that have come along since are good examples of art imitating life: they reflect the reality that many people are dissatisfied with their lives and are on an endless pursuit for ways to make it better.

Call for other examples from television and movies that offer good examples of people in search of “the good life,” such as the character Will in “About a Boy.”

- State that both entertainment television and commercial advertising capitalize on this search. Ask class members to recall slogans from advertising campaigns that promise us

a better life if we use certain products or services. Prompt them with some of your favorites or lines such as these:

“Think what we can do for you” (Bank of America).

“We bring good things to life” (General Electric).

“Just what the doctor ordered” (L&M Cigarettes, ironically).

“The Power to Be Your Best” (Apple Computers).

“Better things for better living through chemistry” (E.I. Dupont deNemours).

“The best a man can get” (Gillette).

“Be All that You Can Be” (United States Army).

Ask the class to rate the slogans on their truthfulness and reliability in delivering what they promise.

Note how modern advertising has conditioned us to cleverly-turned phrases, double entendres and short but packed messages that claim that a better life is quickly ours with a single purchase or decision.

Suggest that one of the best and earliest life lessons we can learn is that the key to a good life is not something we can purchase or obtain quickly. Neither is the good life a fantasy, something that we might have realized had different people and events come into our lives. Instead, the good life is found in wisdom that comes from God and is a life-long process, with parents and teachers playing a significant but not exclusive role. With the choices we make, we determine whether we live “the good life.” As long as we look for the good life apart from God and God’s wisdom, we will face disappointment.

### Explore the Bible

- Read aloud Proverbs 2:1-4. Then ask the teacher or professor you enlisted to talk briefly about his or her role in the learning process, as well as the responsibilities of students. Engage him or her and the rest of the class in

discussion in light of these verses by asking such questions as:

▶ *What do you think teachers should actually teach? facts? thinking skills? something else?*

▶ *Can teachers or parents actually impart wisdom? How?*

▶ *What is the role or responsibility of the student in the learning process?*

▶ *When is a teacher’s or parent’s job complete?*

▶ *Whose responsibility is the student’s success or failure?*

- Emphasize the importance of wisdom passed from one generation to the next. Then refer to information from the column “Future of Faith and Culture Depends on Understanding Past” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=2010](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=2010)). Note the statistics concerning students’ lack of historical knowledge or perspective:

“The 2001 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) demonstrated that significantly less than half of all high school seniors achieved the most basic level of historical knowledge. A consequence is that ‘historical thinking’ is nearly absent among American students. One reason for this startling reality may be found in currently established educational priorities.”

Read aloud the statements from the history teacher as quoted in the column: “History is lost. It must consistently defer to math, science and languages. When it is taught, it is shaped by a curriculum designed to satisfy the hunger for measurable facts and hard information. The result is a total lack of historical thinking. Students don’t see how one thing leads to another, and are oblivious to the context in which decisions are made.”

- Lead your class to discuss the implications of these findings for Christians. Note the questions our faith experiences seek to answer, such as: *Where do we come*

*from? Why do we exist? What experiences have shaped us? How do we fulfill our purpose?*

Ask class members to explain how they answer these questions for themselves from the perspectives of Christianity and history and/or the wisdom of others.

- *Ask: If we don't achieve biblical wisdom simply through interaction with parents and teachers or as a result of some divine revelation, how do we get it?*

Ask someone to read aloud Proverbs 2:5-11. Lead the class to discuss these verses by asking such questions as:

- ▶ *What is God's role in providing us wisdom?*
- ▶ *What does the phrase "knowledge of God" mean?*
- ▶ *What is the result of our understanding "the knowledge of God"?*
- ▶ *What does the presence of wisdom in our lives indicate?*

- Read aloud Proverbs 2:12-15 and ask: *Why does God want to provide us with wisdom?*

Point out the individual's responsibility in choosing whether to pursue wisdom from God or follow other paths. Note that one reason God grants us wisdom is to help us recognize what is involved in right living and know the dangers of wrong living.

### **Apply Biblical Truth**

- Lead your class to further thinking and discussion about their personal responsibility both as learners pursuing wisdom and living a wise life and as teachers and mentors for children, their own and other people's. Ask such questions as:
  - ▶ *How have other people helped you grow in your understanding of the Bible and its message? How has your understanding of the Bible evolved over the years?*

▶ *Which historical figures, biblical or otherwise, have significantly influenced you? In what ways? How have their experiences taught you and/or prevented you from making mistakes?*

▶ *How do you try to teach children, your own or those of others, lessons of life both as a Christian and from the perspective of history? What lessons or bits of wisdom are most important for you to impart? Why?*

- Close with prayer, asking God to guide your thoughts and actions so that your life reflects God's wisdom.

# The Pursuit of Happiness

## Proverbs 3:13-18

<sup>13</sup>Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding, <sup>14</sup>for her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold. <sup>15</sup>She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. <sup>16</sup>Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. <sup>17</sup>Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. <sup>18</sup>She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy.

## Proverbs 8:32-36

<sup>32</sup>And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways. <sup>33</sup>Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. <sup>34</sup>Happy is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. <sup>35</sup>For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord; <sup>36</sup>but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death.

## Proverbs 17:22

A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.

**Theme: Wisdom provides happiness.**

## Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the *Students Guide* and the following teaching suggestions.
- For additional thoughts and insights into teaching this lesson, go to EthicsDaily.com and read the column “Has Pleasure Become an American Idol?” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1336](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1336)).

## As You Teach

### Introduce the Lesson

- Ask class members to recall facts about the philosopher Epicurus. Supplement their discussion with the following information:

Epicurus was a Greek philosopher and teacher who believed that the purpose of life was the pursuit of personal happiness in the form of sensuous pleasure.

“Epicurus did not believe in afterlife,” pastor and EthicsDaily.com columnist Michael Helms writes. “Since we are going around only once, he thought, we might as well grab all the gusto we can get” (“Has Pleasure Become an American Idol?” [www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1336](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1336)).

Among Epicurus’ ideas: “We recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good” (from a letter to Menoeceus).

He believed that pleasure is the beginning and the end of living happily and warned his followers against assuming heavy responsibilities, as these would interfere with their personal pleasure.

Epicurus’ philosophy sounds amazingly similar to the philosophy espoused by many Americans today. Epicurus lived from 341-270 B.C.

Although Epicurus is dead, his ideas, unfortunately, are not. “In the search for happiness,” Helms writes, “the path of pleasure is as wide as ever. People still use pleasure as the standard to judge every good.

“Barna Research Group Online reports that in 2001 the most common basis for moral decision-making was doing whatever feels right or doing what is comfortable in a given situation. Nearly four out of 10 teens (38 percent) and three

out of 10 adults (31 percent) described this as their primary consideration in decision-making.”

That, writes Helms, is the source of many of our problems. “As citizens, we learn that every American has the right to pursue happiness. However, many of us are turning the pursuit of happiness into the god of pleasure. . . .

“Long before Epicurus lived, Solomon created gardens and parks, amassed wealth, and kept a harem of beautiful women. He wrote in Ecclesiastes that he decided to test life with pleasure to find out what was good. But every pleasure proved to be meaningless” (see Eccl 2:10-11).

Solomon, credited with writing many of the Proverbs, pursued pleasure until it exhausted him and left him completely dissatisfied, a scene many Americans replay every day.

“Without being connected to God through Jesus—whom the New Testament calls the True Vine,” writes Helms, “our ability to discern holy pleasure from unholy pleasure is diminished.”

In spite of what many in our culture seem to believe, Epicurus was wrong. “Pleasure is not the first good innate in us. The first good innate in us is the desire to connect with the Highest Good, who grants us the wisdom to know when pleasure is profitable and when pleasure is vain,” Helms concludes.

### Explore the Bible

- Ask someone to read aloud Proverbs 3:13-18. Note that the pursuit of happiness is as old as humanity, and people throughout time have looked for happiness in every conceivable place. In spite of the fact that others throughout history have looked to wealth and material possessions for happiness and found them lacking, many people continue to pursue them. But as one modern-day pundit quipped, “He who dies with the most toys is still dead.”

Lead your class to discuss these verses by asking the following questions:

- ▶ *What does this passage say about wealth and material things? Does it condemn them?*
- ▶ *What does it identify as the source of happiness?*
- ▶ *How do you define happiness?*
- ▶ *How does your understanding of scripture color your thinking about what it means to be happy and how we achieve happiness?*
- ▶ *What other scriptures can you recall that speak to our misguided searches for happiness?*
- ▶ *What is the difference between happiness and joy? To which does this scripture refer?*
- Read aloud Proverbs 8:32-36. Then ask: *What is the relationship between wisdom, life and God’s favor?*

Note the personification of wisdom here and the focus of these verses: happiness comes with following the way of wisdom. In other words, happiness comes from following the way of God.

- Read aloud Proverbs 17:22 and ask:
  - ▶ *What is the relationship between health and happiness?*
  - ▶ *If you are healthy, does your happiness increase? If you are unhappy, does it affect you physically?*

### Apply Biblical Truth

- Ask:
  - ▶ *Of all the people you know, how many would you classify as very happy? To what do you think they attribute their happiness?*

► *How many people do you know whom you would classify as unhappy? What do you think contributes to this?*

- Suggest that much of our unhappiness comes when we compare ourselves with others we perceive to be “better off.” Conversely, we sometimes feel more content when we compare ourselves with those we believe are less well off than we are. Neither is a biblical gauge for happiness.

We also often use the short-term influence of events and circumstances as an explanation for happiness or unhappiness. But researchers tell us that humans have a tremendous ability to adapt both to positive events like wealth and success and negative events such as tragedy and disability.

Richard Kammann, a late researcher from New Zealand, asserted, “Objective life circumstances have a negligible role to play in the theory of happiness” (“Does Economic Growth Improve Human Morale?” [www.newdream.org/newsletter/myers.html](http://www.newdream.org/newsletter/myers.html)).

The meaning? Our happiness isn’t ultimately determined by what happens to us.

- Note the concluding paragraphs of this lesson in the *Students Guide*, and ask someone to read aloud the “happy are” statements found there.
- Pray, asking God to grant you the happiness that comes from living a wise life.

## Marriage Matters

### Proverbs 5:1-14

<sup>1</sup>My child, be attentive to my wisdom; incline your ear to my understanding, <sup>2</sup>so that you may hold on to prudence, and your lips may guard knowledge. <sup>3</sup>For the lips of a loose woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; <sup>4</sup>but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. <sup>5</sup>Her feet go down to death; her steps follow the path to Sheol. <sup>6</sup>She does not keep straight to the path of life; her ways wander, and she does not know it. <sup>7</sup>And now, my child, listen to me, and do not depart from the words of my mouth. <sup>8</sup>Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house; <sup>9</sup>or you will give your honor to others, and your years to the merciless, <sup>10</sup>and strangers will take their fill of your wealth, and your labors will go to the house of an alien; <sup>11</sup>and at the end of your life you will groan, when your flesh and body are consumed, <sup>12</sup>and you say, “Oh, how I hated discipline, and my heart despised reproof! <sup>13</sup>I did not listen to the voice of my teachers or incline my ear to my instructors. <sup>14</sup>Now I am at the point of utter ruin in the public assembly.”

**Theme: Wisdom guards one from temptation.**

### Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the *Students Guide* and the following teaching suggestions.
- For additional resources related to marriage, visit [EthicsDaily.com](http://EthicsDaily.com) and read these articles:
  - “Research Shows Why Marriage Matters” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=421](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=421))
  - “Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1470](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1470))
  - “Nine Words of a Christian Marriage” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1268](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1268))

Use insights from these columns as you guide discussion in your class and help class members apply the truths of this scripture.

- During the week prior to this lesson, contact some couples who have been married 40 years or longer. Ask them to offer suggestions about maintaining a healthy marriage relationship and nurturing an environment for fidelity and longevity. Make certain you obtain input from both spouses in each relationship. If you prefer, assign these contacts to class members.

## As You Teach

### Introduce the Lesson

- Ask the class to identify memorable marriages portrayed in television and movies. Then ask follow-up questions such as:
  - ▶ *How would you classify this marriage? Good? Bad? Why?*
  - ▶ *What qualities characterized this marriage?*
  - ▶ *If there was infidelity portrayed in the marriage, what effects did it have?*
  - ▶ *Overall, how would you rate the way marriage is portrayed in American media? Positively? Negatively? How realistic is this portrayal?*
  - ▶ *To what degree do you think that American television and movies assume fidelity in marriage? Infidelity?*
  - ▶ *What degree of influence do you think media's portrayal of marriage has on the marriages of most Americans?*
  - ▶ *Do you think media portrayals of fidelity encourage fidelity? Do media portrayals of infidelity justify infidelity in some people's minds?*

▶ *Which statement represents truth to you: Fidelity is the product of a healthy marriage; or, a healthy marriage is a product of fidelity.*

## Explore the Bible

- Introduce the passage by pointing out that Proverbs 5:1-14 is written in the form of advice from a parent to a son who has recently or is about to marry. The parent provides perceptive observations on temptation and what happens when people give in to it, applicable to both men and women. Ask:

▶ *If you are married, what advice did your parent(s) give to you prior to your marriage?*

▶ *If you have children who are married or are contemplating marriage, what advice have you given them?*

Ask someone to read aloud verses 1-2; then say: *These verses contain at least four pieces of general advice. What are they?*

Point out the words *wisdom, understanding, prudence* and *knowledge*. Ask class members to offer synonyms and definitions of each of these words. Recall insights into the meanings of these words from previous lessons from The Proverbs. Spend adequate time developing the concept of *prudence*: care; carefulness; caution; discretion; good sense; forethought; judgment; heed; judiciousness; circumspection; common sense; self-discipline; knowing how to avoid embarrassment or distress.

- Ask someone to read aloud Proverbs 5:3-10. Lead the class to discuss these verses by asking such questions as:
  - ▶ *According to these verses, how can we recognize a dangerous situation in which we might be tempted to be unfaithful?*
  - ▶ *What tactics does a tempter use in trying to seduce someone?*



► *What does an adulterer promise? In the end, what does giving in to the temptation of infidelity bring?*

► *What is the surest way to avoid infidelity? Why is this difficult?*

► *What price does one pay for adultery?*

- Read aloud Proverbs 5:11-14 and point out the contrasts between the life of a person who listens to wisdom and the life of one who refuses.

### Apply Biblical Truth

- Summarize for the class the suggestions and advice you compiled from talking with couples who have enjoyed long and successful marriages. Then ask:

► *Who has the happiest or most successful marriage you know? To what would you attribute that happiness or success?*

- Ask your class to assume the role of someone advising a younger person who is about to be married. Lead them to paraphrase Proverbs 5:1-14 in contemporary language, either by verse or by main idea. Ask someone to record the paraphrase on the board; then read it aloud.
- Close with prayer, asking God to grant you the wisdom to hold on to prudence in marriage relationships.

## Working Wisely

### Proverbs 6:6-11

<sup>6</sup>Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways, and be wise. <sup>7</sup>Without having any chief or officer or ruler, <sup>8</sup>it prepares its food in summer, and gathers its sustenance in harvest. <sup>9</sup>How long will you lie there, O lazybones? When will you rise from your sleep? <sup>10</sup>A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, <sup>11</sup>and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want, like an armed warrior.

**Theme: Wisdom leads to a good work ethic.**

### Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the *Students Guide* and the following teaching suggestions.
- Visit EthicsDaily.com and read “Blurring Work and Leisure” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=111](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=111)) and “Shine Faith’s Light on Work This Labor Day” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1471](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1471)) for additional insights into the role of work in American culture.

### As You Teach

#### Introduce the Lesson

- Begin by asking class members, one by one, to identify their career or occupation. List these on the board.

Without singling out individuals, note the number of people who expressed their identity through their vocation by statements such as, “I am a loan officer,” or “I am a teacher,” versus those who said, “I work at a bank,” or “I teach second-graders.” Ask: *Do you think most Americans consider their vocations a source of identity as well as a source of income?*

Give each person a blank piece of paper and ask them to draw a circle. Suggest that the circle represents an average workweek in their lives. Ask them to divide their circles proportionately into sections to indicate the amount of time they spend at work, at church, at home, in leisure, in community or social activities, etc. Remind them to include in their work allotment the amount of time they spend in work-related matters away from the office, such as at home and during their commute. Ask them to label each section in the circle according to the area of life it represents.

Poll the class and arrive at an average number of hours class members spend working each day and each week. Then ask class members to rate their degree of job satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 representing the lowest level of satisfaction and 10 representing the highest level. If some class members express reservations about revealing this aloud, distribute strips of paper and ask each person to write the number representing their satisfaction level. Average the individual ratings to determine the overall level of job satisfaction of those in your class.

Ask:

► *Does the amount of time we spend on the job reflect our level of satisfaction with the job? In other words, do we work longer hours because we enjoy what we do, or are other factors involved? If other factors are involved, what are they?*

► *How does the amount of time we spend on the job affect our ability to make leisure time meaningful?*

- Initiate further discussion among class members by pointing out the following insights from a recent Aurora Forum sponsored by Stanford University (see “U.S. Culture’s Focus on Work Leaves Americans in a Quandary Over Leisure Time,” by John Sanford, <http://news-service.stanford.edu/news/2003/february19/work-219.html>):

► America is both a land of dreams where anyone can succeed if they work hard enough and a land where many people let their work define them and render them incapable of enjoying meaningful leisure time.

► Forum moderator Debra Satz, associate professor of philosophy and director of the Ethics in Society Program, said, “We work more than we did in the 1950s despite the advent of many time-saving technologies. Americans work longer hours—350 additional hours a year—than their European counterparts. We work even more than medieval peasants did.”

► Joanne Ciulla, a professor of leadership and ethics at the University of Richmond and author of *The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work*, noted that Americans’ famed “work ethic,” which gave work a kind of moral value, has “gone bananas.” Many people today rely on work as the primary source of their identity—“the mainspring of individual self-esteem and happiness,” she said. The danger, she pointed out, is that instead of finding fulfillment with family, friends, community and religion as they once did, people try to find it in their work.

“This is an era when life should be filled with all sorts of rewarding activities. Yet many find themselves caught up in long hours of work, debt, stress, loneliness and crumbling families and relationships,” Ciulla said. “We think we are entitled to have it all—a great job, a large income, plenty of leisure and security. With so many desires and so many choices, some can’t or don’t choose how they want to live. Instead they let advertisers, employers or the opinions of others choose for them.”

Work dominates the lives of many Americans, Ciulla stated, because they let their work organize their lives for them.

- Note the generational differences toward work as described in the *Students Guide*, and ask class members to identify the attitude which best reflects their own. Stress that in spite of Americans’ work-centered identity, many people have ambivalent feelings toward work, ranging from drudgery and dread to excitement and fulfillment.

### Explore the Bible

- Point out some of the references Christian scripture makes to work, as noted in the *Students Guide*, such as:

- ~ Work has always been an integral part of human life.
- ~ God offers balance between work and Sabbath rest.
- ~ Work is a gift from God that can bring pleasure.
- ~ Jesus recognized the role of work in our lives and told parables related to the world of work.

Remind the class that wisdom is the ability to live life well. The wise person follows God's precepts and in so doing develops a positive work ethic that achieves balance and fosters healthy attitudes. The Book of Proverbs addresses work and warns against distractions from work such as waywardness (1:32), wickedness (4:14-17), foolishness (1:7) and self-reliance (3:5-9).

- Note that Proverbs 6:6-11 uses the ant as an example of self-discipline and productive work, describes working wisely and contrasts it with laziness. Read the verses aloud, pointing out their emphasis on each person's individual responsibility to achieve wisdom and work wisely. Lead the class to discuss these verses by asking such questions as:
  - ▶ *What qualities characterize an ant's work and make the ant a model of wise work for us?*
  - ▶ *What can we learn about collaborative efforts from observing ants at work?*
  - ▶ *What characterizes the "sluggard" or "lazybones"? What results can he or she expect?*
  - ▶ *What can we expect if we ignore the ant's example of wise work?*
  - ▶ *What do our attitudes toward work reveal about us and our character?*
  - ▶ *How are work and wisdom connected?*

▶ *How do you achieve balance among work; home, family and church responsibilities; leisure activities; community and social obligations, etc.?*

▶ *Do you sometimes struggle with laziness or lethargy? What contributes to these feelings, and what do you do to overcome them?*

▶ *To what degree are you prone to workaholism? What do you do to avoid it and its negative effects on your physical, mental and emotional health?*

### Apply Biblical Truth

- Call for a show of hands from class members who devotedly watch the NBC drama "The West Wing." Ask: *What is it about that show that sustains your interest?*

Introduce the theory espoused by Susan J. Douglas in a column titled "The West Wing's Workaholics" ([www.alternet.org/story.html?StoryID=12774](http://www.alternet.org/story.html?StoryID=12774)). She writes that the show appeals to people whose jobs demand more and more of their time and energy and eat away at their leisure time. She believes the show not only promotes workaholism; it glamorizes and celebrates it. She points to the way the camera moves, the fast-paced actions of the characters, the snappy dialogue, the constantly ringing telephones in the background, even the commercial advertisers, as indicators of its hard-driving message that individual hard work and determination lead to success.

Ask:

- ▶ *How many of you have, over the course of your careers, been asked to increase your productivity or output with the same amount or less time and fewer resources?*
- ▶ *What price do we personally pay when we succumb to overwork? What price do our families pay?*
- ▶ *How does a work imbalance, either sluggishness or workaholism, affect us spiritually?*

- Close with prayer, asking God to give you wisdom to work wisely and achieve a healthy balance among work, family, church, community and leisure.

## Think Before You Speak!

### Proverbs 12:14-22

<sup>14</sup>From the fruit of the mouth one is filled with good things, and manual labor has its reward. <sup>15</sup>Fools think their own way is right, but the wise listen to advice. <sup>16</sup>Fools show their anger at once, but the prudent ignore an insult. <sup>17</sup>Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence, but a false witness speaks deceitfully. <sup>18</sup>Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. <sup>19</sup>Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment. <sup>20</sup>Deceit is in the mind of those who plan evil, but those who counsel peace have joy. <sup>21</sup>No harm happens to the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble. <sup>22</sup>Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight.

### Proverbs 13:2-3

<sup>2</sup>From the fruit of their words good persons eat good things, but the desire of the treacherous is for wrongdoing. <sup>3</sup>Those who guard their mouths preserve their lives; those who open wide their lips come to ruin.

### Proverbs 15:1-2

<sup>1</sup>A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. <sup>2</sup>The tongue of the wise dispenses knowledge, but the mouths of fools pour out folly.

**Theme: Wisdom helps us control our speech.**

## Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the *Students Guide* and the following teaching suggestions.
- Visit [EthicsDaily.com](http://www.ethicsdaily.com) and read the column "Holding Your Tongue" ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1018](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1018)) by Barry Howard. Use ideas from this column to supplement either your introductory or concluding comments.

- Also at EthicsDaily.com, read the article “Americans Talk Trashy” ([http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1224](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1224)) for additional information about the use of language in our culture.
- Visit the Web site [www.cusscontrol.com](http://www.cusscontrol.com) and click on some of the links. Apply some of the suggestions and insights from this site more broadly to all speech in light of teachings from Proverbs. See Apply Bible Truth for ideas.

## As You Teach

### Introduce the Lesson

- Guide your class to talk about the power of speech by asking them to recall the CBS television sitcom “All in the Family.” Help them relate the use of speech in that series to this lesson by introducing the following facts:

“All in the Family” (1971-1983) was the top-rated show on American television for five years and won four consecutive Emmy Awards as Outstanding Comedy Series. Critics and culture-watchers alike have hailed it not only as one of the most successful sitcoms in history but also as one of the most important and influential for the way it addressed controversial and socially relevant subject matters.

It centered on the Bunker family household: patriarch Archie, a blue-collar worker; his wife Edith; their daughter Gloria; and Gloria’s husband Michael. Archie Bunker was uneducated, bigoted, opinionated, irreverent and foul-mouthed. He used derogatory slurs to refer to people of other races, religions and ethnic groups. He referred to his wife not primarily by her name but by the term *dingbat*. He seldom if ever called his son-in-law Michael; instead, he referred to him as Meathead. No one was exempt from Archie’s acid tongue.

While the series did break ground by addressing issues television had avoided up till then, it also ushered in an entirely different level of language that was just the beginning of an alarming downhill slide, one that continues to this day.

Profane language on television increased more than 500 percent from 1989 to 1999, according to the Parents Television Council. “Even during the family hour you’ll find obscenities and profanities that 10 years ago would have been unacceptable,” Mary Caldwell, PTC director of research, was quoted as saying (see “Americans Talk Trashy,” [www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1224](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1224)).

The profane language used on television unquestionably affects the speech habits of many Americans.

In an interview with the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, James O’Connor, president of the Chicago-based Cuss Control Academy, said, “There’s too much swearing in public places, and it’s contributing to a decline in civility and contributing to the dumbing down of America. We don’t have much sense of shame anymore” (see “Americans Talk Trashy”).

Sadly, language is losing its effectiveness overall, according to David Orr in the July-August 2000 issue of *Utne Reader*. “In the past 50 years, by one reckoning, the working vocabulary of the average 14-year-old has declined from 25,000 words to 10,000. This is a decline not merely in words, but also in the capacity to think. We are losing the capacity to say what we mean, and ultimately to think about what we mean.

“We are never better than when we use words clearly, eloquently, and civilly,” Orr wrote. “If we intend to protect and enhance our humanity, we must first protect and enhance language and fight anything that undermines and cheapens it.”

- Ask the class to respond to the ideas you presented about Americans, their speech habits and the effects of television programming on speech. Suggest that they offer other examples, both positive and negative, of the impact of various media on speech.

Stress the tremendous power our speech carries, and remind the class that with our mouths we can choose whether to offer words of healing or harm, clarity or confusion, strife or peace. The Book of Proverbs teaches

that we need wisdom to use words in the best possible way. Further, wise use of speech results in personal benefits.

## Explore the Bible

- Ask a volunteer to read aloud Proverbs 12:14-22. Note the contrast between one who is *wise* and one who is considered a *fool*. Ask: *In contemporary parlance, how would you define a fool? How do you think the Proverbs writer would define a fool?*

Note that in Proverbs, the classification of fool has nothing to do with intelligence; instead, it designates an approach to life that ignores God's ways. Also note that according to Proverbs, our speech is as powerful as our actions when it comes to rewards or benefits in life. Positive and productive speech brings personal benefits.

- Lead the class to discuss Proverbs 12:14-22 further by asking such questions as:
  - ▶ *How do the wise and the foolish differ in terms of their speech?*
  - ▶ *How does a foolish person respond to someone who offers a different point of view? What about a wise person?*
  - ▶ *How does a wise person respond in the face of an insult? What about a foolish person?*
  - ▶ *How are speech and justice connected?*
  - ▶ *How does our speech affect our reputations?*
  - ▶ *How does our speech affect us?*
  - ▶ *How does our speech affect our relationship with God?*
- Read aloud Proverbs 13:2-3 and 15:1-2. Note that not only can the person who uses speech wisely expect to be blessed, the one who is unwise in speech can expect to face violence and ruin. Proverbs teaches that we can actually protect our lives by the way we use words.

Point out that controlling our speech is more than just a matter of self-preservation. It also keeps us from causing harm to others. Further, wisdom can give us the insight to say the right thing in particular situations.

## Apply Biblical Truth

- Call attention again to the Cuss Control Academy and remind class members of its purpose as stated in the *Students Guide*. Note that while it and its Web site focus specifically on reducing profanity, vulgarity and offensive slang, many of the speech principles touted by its founder, James V. O'Connor, can be more broadly applied to improving the overall quality of speech in our culture.

Point out some of O'Connor's observations and suggestions as found on the Web site [www.cusscontrol.com](http://www.cusscontrol.com), and further apply them to speech in general, such as:

~The way we speak reflects our attitude and can hurt our image and our reputation. Poor judgment in speech can cause others to perceive us as lacking in "character, maturity, intelligence, manners and emotional control."

~Rather than simply asking what *harm* our words can do, O'Connor suggests also asking what *good* they will do. Will our choice of words earn us respect, build up our reputation, cause others to want to be around us, display our intellect or vocabulary, show respect toward others, set a positive example?

~The wise person takes note of how he or she speaks when angry or frustrated. O'Connor believes one reason the use of profanity has increased is because people expect everything always to go right in their lives. "We aren't coping," he says. "We are cussing." Things do not always go perfectly 100 percent of the time for anyone. Wisdom allows us to navigate these less-than-perfect times with skill, perspective and grace.

~"We want to do and say whatever we please," O'Connor says. "Our reluctance to retrain our impulses and to make the effort to be polite is contributing to a coarser, less civil society."

~The way we speak gives evidence of our degree of self-control and self-discipline. It can reflect hostility and can lead to violence.

~Unwise speech and poor word selection can result in arguments rather than discussions.

~Vulgarity, profanity and offensive language in particular are abrasive, do not communicate clearly and neglect the use of more meaningful words.

- Lead class members to reflect on their personal speech habits and evaluate the effect of their speech by taking a mental quiz. Explain that you will read aloud a series of statements, and ask them to note silently whether the statement applies to them *always, sometimes, rarely* or *never*. Pause briefly after reading aloud each statement, and periodically re-state the application words: *always, sometimes, rarely, never*.

~My conversations with my spouse are uplifting and redemptive.

~I speak to my children in encouraging and affirming ways.

~My conversations with coworkers are positive and healthy.

~My verbal exchanges with neighbors are friendly and pleasant.

~My speech is preceded by careful, critical thinking.

~My speech is free from profanity, swearing and offensive slang.

~My speech reflects a positive outlook on life.

~In conversations with others, I am patient and relaxed.

~My statements are honest and unexaggerated.

~Before I open my mouth, I think carefully about my motivation for speaking.

~My attempts at teasing others are good-natured, harmless and free from sarcasm.

~When someone disagrees with something I say, I listen carefully to his or her point of view before responding.

~When someone insults me verbally, I wait before responding and measure my words and their potential impact carefully.

~When situations are difficult or messy, I try to find a redemptive and helpful thing to say.

~My choice of words reflects my desire to live wisely and follow God's ways.

~My words provide a positive witness for the Christian faith.

- Close with prayer, asking God to give you wisdom to guard your lips from foolish and harmful speech and speak thoughtfully and carefully.

# Anger? Danger!

## Proverbs 12:16

Fools show their anger at once, but the prudent ignore an insult.

## Proverbs 14:17

One who is quick-tempered acts foolishly, and the schemer is hated.

## Proverbs 14:29

Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but one who has a hasty temper exalts folly.

## Proverbs 15:1

A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

## Proverbs 15:18

Those who are hot-tempered stir up strife, but those who are slow to anger calm contention.

## Proverbs 29:11

A fool gives full vent to anger, but the wise quietly holds it back.

**Theme: Wisdom controls temper.**

## Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the *Students Guide* and the following teaching suggestions.

- Visit [EthicsDaily.com](http://EthicsDaily.com) and read the review of the movie, “Anger Management” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=2501](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=2501)).

## As You Teach

### Introduce the Lesson

- Ask class members who have seen the 2003 movie “Anger Management” to provide a synopsis and their reactions to it. Supplement their summaries with the following information as necessary:

“Anger Management” is the story of Dave Buznik (played by Adam Sandler), a usually mild-mannered businessman who, after an altercation aboard an airplane, is forced to see an anger management therapist, Dr. Buddy Rydell (Jack Nicholson). The problem is, Dr. Rydell is a volatile individual who seems to be in need of some anger management himself. His own anger is clearly out of control, and in his attempts to calm Dave, he drives him crazy and essentially turns his life upside down.

The movie seems to have struck a chord among many Americans. In its debut weekend, it was ranked number 1 and took in around \$44.5 million dollars, grossing more than the rest of the top 12 movies combined. It had the highest gross ever for a movie opening in April.

Ask the class to recall other movies and television series in which anger was a dominant or recurring theme, such as:

“The Great Santini,” starring Robert Duvall as a military man with a temper.

“Falling Down,” starring Michael Douglas and Robert Duvall.

“The Apostle,” starring Robert Duvall, whose character beats a man into a coma after learning about an affair his wife had.



“12 Angry Men,” a classic from 1957 about 12 men on a jury who debate the accused’s guilt. It stars Henry Fonda and several other well-knowns from that generation. Their tempers flare and get out of control as the day progresses and they can’t reach a resolution.

“Seinfeld” (Jason Alexander’s character, George Costanza, on this long-running TV series was known for going nuts and screaming whenever things went badly).

- Lead the class to suggest theories on why these movies and TV series enjoyed such popularity and success. Ask them to reflect on what their dominant anger themes say about American culture. Then ask them to respond to questions such as these:

▶ *How would you rank Americans overall in their anger management skills?*

▶ *In general, have you noticed an increase in the frequency or intensity of angry outbursts by individuals? To what do you attribute this? Are there a few places in particular where you have noticed an increase in out-of-control anger? Where?*

▶ *What incidents of out-of-control anger and resulting violence have made recent news headlines? What were the circumstances? How do you think you would have responded in a similar situation?*

▶ *Have you ever been the target of someone’s uncontrolled, angry outburst? What were the circumstances? How did you respond?*

▶ *Have you ever been tempted to respond to a situation or a person with an uncontrolled outburst of anger?*

▶ *How do you manage anger? What techniques have you found personally helpful?*

▶ *Is there a difference between “a person who gets angry” and “an angry person”? What is it? Which do you think is more prevalent in our culture?*

- Point out that anger is a reality in each person’s life. It is a valid emotion. Christians are neither immune from anger nor from difficulty in managing it. A person who seeks to live a wise life learns to manage anger in healthy, productive ways. The Proverbs offer warnings against out-of-control anger, advice for managing anger and options for ways to respond when provoked.

### Explore the Bible

- Ask someone to read aloud the following verses in succession: Proverbs 12:16; 14:17, 29; 15:1, 18; 29:11. Point out that from these six verses, four characteristics of anger emerge: *speed; texture; temperature; quantity*. Each of the four characteristics offers options with regard to anger. Lead class members to discuss these by asking such questions as:

▶ *What are our options in terms of our reaction speed to anger?*

▶ *What is the usual result of a hair-trigger angry reaction?*

▶ *What are the benefits of a gradual approach in responding to anger?*

▶ *What are our options in terms of the texture of our anger response?*

▶ *What does a “soft answer” in an angry situation imply?*

▶ *What are our options in terms of the temperature of our anger response?*

▶ *What does a “hot” anger response do to us physically? Emotionally? Spiritually?*

▶ *What outward, physical signs do angry persons often display?*

► How can we sometimes use humor effectively in defusing someone's anger?

► What are our options in terms of the quantity of our anger response?

► How can we effectively express an opposing point of view without appearing angry or confrontational?

► What results do our angry outbursts have on our family members? Friends? Co-workers?

► How does our mismanaged anger affect our relationship with God?

► How does our uncontrolled anger affect our Christian witness?

► If you had to summarize the teachings of Proverbs related to anger in four statements or less, what would you say?

► How did Jesus manage anger? What techniques did he use?

- Read aloud this description of anger by Frederick Buechner: "Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you" (*Wishful Thinking*, 1973).

Remind the class of the real wisdom from these texts about anger from Proverbs: we may actually save our lives by the way we manage our anger. By dealing with our anger in appropriate ways, we grow deeper in our faith. Emotional upheavals no longer trap us in the shallow end of the spiritual pool. That is one thing Jesus likely meant by his call to us to live the "abundant life" (Jn 10:10).

## Apply Biblical Truth

- Poll the class to see how many recall the TV show "The Incredible Hulk," popular in the 1980s (a movie version is scheduled for release soon). Ask them to summarize the premise of the show, and supplement their discussion with the following facts:

"The Incredible Hulk" starred Bill Bixby as Bruce Banner, a mild-mannered man whose gamma-ray experiment went awry. This malfunction meant that whenever Bruce got angry, he turned into "the incredible hulk" (basically a green giant played by pro body builder Lou Ferrigno).

Each episode followed the same format: Bruce was a drifter because of his "secret." So he'd wander to a new town in each new episode where he'd make a friend and get involved in something or other. But he would encounter wrongdoing and grow angry. He would plead with people not to do wrong by saying, "Don't make me angry. You won't like me when I'm angry." Of course they wouldn't listen, he'd turn into the hulk, right the wrongs, then have to leave town (see [www.incrediblehulktvseries.com](http://www.incrediblehulktvseries.com)).

Suggest that we probably all have something in common with the Incredible Hulk: people probably don't like us too much when our anger is out of control. Fortunately we, unlike the Hulk, have a choice about how we respond when we are angry. We don't have to turn into monsters. The applied wisdom of Proverbs when we are angry can calm us and others who might be caught in the middle of a potentially volatile situation.

Stress that anger is a completely normal and usually healthy emotion. When we allow our anger to get out of control and become destructive, however, we can expect problems in personal relationships, on the job and in the overall quality of life.

Humans seem to have a natural instinct to express anger aggressively. A certain amount of this instinct is necessary to our survival, because it allows us to defend ourselves when we are threatened or attacked. But we can't physically lash out at every irritating person or annoying

situation. Laws, customs and common sense dictate to what degree we can express our anger much of the time. However, we still need to learn how to manage our angry feelings when no laws or social norms will do it for us, and when our common sense seems to have disappeared.

- Ask volunteers to suggest how they learned their anger management styles. For example, if a child's parents get angry first and then resolve the issue later, that child is more likely to use this same approach in managing anger. If parents tend to raise their voices in anger, children assume that is an appropriate response when they are angry. If parents seldom raise their voices when angry, children will more than likely adopt that model for anger management.

Next, lead the class to discuss how factors such as fatigue, overall health, personality, job stresses, aging parents, financial difficulties, problems with children, etc., contribute to the way we handle anger.

Lead class members to evaluate their personal anger management styles by asking them to answer the following questions silently:

- ▶ *Does someone often say to you, "You need to calm down!"?*
- ▶ *Do you feel misunderstood or ignored much of the time, or do you frequently misunderstand or ignore others?*
- ▶ *Do you sometimes attempt to control or dominate other people, or do you sometimes feel that others try to control or dominate you?*
- ▶ *Do you sometimes feel attacked, unfairly criticized or shamed, or do you often feel the need to shame others?*
- ▶ *Do you ever feel a sense of uncontrollable rage?*
- Close with prayer, asking God to give you wisdom in controlling your temper and managing anger.

## When Much Is Too Much

### Proverbs 1:8-19

<sup>8</sup>Hear, my child, your father's instruction, and do not reject your mother's teaching; <sup>9</sup>for they are a fair garland for your head, and pendants for your neck. <sup>10</sup>My child, if sinners entice you, do not consent. <sup>11</sup>If they say, "Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood; let us wantonly ambush the innocent; like Sheol let us swallow them alive and whole, like those who go down to the Pit. <sup>13</sup>We shall find all kinds of costly things; we shall fill our houses with booty. <sup>14</sup>Throw in your lot among us; we will all have one purse"—<sup>15</sup>my child, do not walk in their way, keep your foot from their paths; <sup>16</sup>for their feet run to evil, and they hurry to shed blood. <sup>17</sup>For in vain is the net baited while the bird is looking on; <sup>18</sup>yet they lie in wait—to kill themselves! and set an ambush—for their own lives! <sup>19</sup>Such is the end of all who are greedy for gain; it takes away the life of its possessors.

### Proverbs 15:27

Those who are greedy for unjust gain make trouble for their households, but those who hate bribes will live.

### Proverbs 16:8

Better is a little with righteousness than large income with injustice.

### Proverbs 22:1-2

<sup>1</sup>A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold. <sup>2</sup>The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.

### Proverbs 23:4

Do not wear yourself out to get rich; be wise enough to desist.

### Proverbs 28:25

The greedy person stirs up strife, but whoever trusts in the Lord will be enriched.

**Theme: Wisdom warns about greed.**

## Before You Teach

- Read the focal passages, the lesson from the *Students Guide* and the following teaching suggestions.
- Visit EthicsDaily.com and read the column “Greed Results in Idolatry” by James Evans ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1612](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1612)).
- Also visit [www.newdream.org](http://www.newdream.org) and read the article “CNAD Asks America: ‘How Much is Enough?’”.

## As You Teach

### Introduce the Lesson

- Introduce the lesson by recalling the following story:

“Motivated by sheer greed.” That was the conclusion of the judge presiding over the trial of British army officer Charles Ingram and two others convicted of fraud in an elaborate scheme on the British version of the popular television show “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire” (NBC Nightly News, April 24, 2003).

Prosecutors charged that Ingram was able to answer questions correctly leading him to the top prize of 1 million pounds (approximately \$1.58 million) due to “coded coughs” provided by Tecwen Whittock, who was waiting in the audience for his chance to be a contestant.

Ingram, Whittock and Ingram’s wife, Diana, allegedly came up with the scheme. Diana Ingram had earlier been a contestant on the show and had won a significant sum of money, though not the top prize.

Tapes of the show reveal the host, Chris Tarrant, repeatedly expressing surprise at Ingram’s behavior and his ability to come up with the correct answer seemingly out of nowhere. Ingram appeared unsure about most of the answers he gave and often selected as his final answer one he had earlier dismissed as being wrong.

Following each question Tarrant posed, Ingram repeated aloud each of the four possible answers. Whittock can be heard in the background on the tape coughing after each correct answer. At one point he coughed once, then whispered the word *no*, followed by another cough. He then blew his nose, signaling Ingram to try to answer the question again. When Ingram selected an answer, Whittock coughed once to indicate he had chosen correctly.

Producers became suspicious during the show’s taping but gave Ingram the check at the conclusion anyway. Before he could cash it, however, an investigation into the cheating allegations resulted in police involvement and later a trial.

Ingram, his wife and Whittock got suspended sentences of 1 year to 18 months and also were ordered to pay thousands of dollars in court costs and fines.

Following his guilty conviction, Ingram struck back at what he called the show’s “greedy” makers, claiming a company which produced a documentary about the scheme would themselves realize a huge profit from it. The documentary, showing previously unseen clips from the TV show and explaining how the cheating scam worked, attracted millions of viewers in Britain.

There appears to be enough blame of greed to go around, however. NBC Nightly News reported a movie being planned based on the incident, as well as an offer to the Ingrams from a company that makes cough medicine.

- Guide your class to apply this story to American culture and talk about the degree to which materialism and greed dominate it. Point to research conducted by the Harwood Group for the Merck Family Fund, which found that people feel the material side of “the American Dream” is spinning out of control and that efforts to keep up with neighbors in terms of spending is increasingly unhealthy, even destructive. Ask them to respond to such questions as:

► *How much pressure do you feel to keep up with others in terms of money and material possessions?*

► *Where do you feel this pressure most strongly? In your neighborhood? At work? At civic clubs or social organizations? At church?*

► *Do you think the downturn of the stock market in recent years has further fueled Americans' constant thoughts about money and possessions?*

► *How are churches affected by greed and our culture's emphasis on money and material possessions?*

► *Do you think greed and materialism are problems only for Americans and American Christians? How do you think Christians in other cultures view money and things?*

Suggest that the news is not all bad concerning Americans and their feelings about money and possessions. Relate the following information, also from the research cited above:

"Americans believe our priorities are out of whack. People of all backgrounds share certain fundamental concerns about the values they see driving our society. They believe materialism, greed, and selfishness . . . [are] crowding out a more meaningful set of values centered on family, responsibility, and community. People express a strong desire for a greater sense of balance in their lives—not to repudiate material gain, but to bring it more into proportion with the non-material rewards of life" ([www.newdream.org](http://www.newdream.org), "CNAD Asks America: 'How Much Is Enough?'").

Ask:

► *What is your response to these ideas? Have you seen mounting evidence that leads you to similar conclusions?*

► *How do you counter the pressure to acquire money and things with the desire you feel for balance in your life?*

► *Do you ever feel that you sacrifice family, church and community time for time spent earning more money, rationalizing it by saying you are trying to provide more adequately for your family, give more to the church or create a better financial base in the community?*

- Suggest that though the attitudes of some Americans may be changing, our culture, beyond tolerating greed, seems to celebrate it. Even some within the Christian faith claim that material wealth is a sign of God's favor. Some televangelists promise financial rewards to those who support their ministries with contributions.

Point out that numerous biblical passages warn against greed—that consuming lust for possessions—and indicate that greed is the seed leading to a full-blown obsession that replaces worship of God with worship of money and things. Several significant warnings against greed emerge in the book of Proverbs.

### Explore the Bible

- Ask someone to read aloud Proverbs 1:8-19. Point out that this is the first long teaching poem in the book of Proverbs, and it strongly suggests that greed places us squarely in the midst of the wrong crowd. Lead your class to examine it by asking such questions as:

► *How does this passage suggest that the young, in particular, are enticed?*

► *What is the price of such greed?*

- Next, read aloud Proverbs 23:4 and ask: *What irony does this verse reveal?*

Stress the futility of working extra hours to obtain things that we are too tired to enjoy.

- Read aloud Proverbs 15:27 and lead the class to discuss it by asking such questions as:

► *What kind of greed does this verse address? What forms does it take?*

► *Greed for unjust gain has repercussions beyond the individual. What are they?*

► *What is the common thread running through all forms of unjust gain?*

- Ask class members to read aloud Proverbs 16:8, 22:1-2 and 28:25. Follow with questions such as:

▶ *With what does Proverbs 16:8 associate greed? How do you see this evidenced in our culture?*

▶ *What makes a person valuable, according to scripture? Rather than accumulating possessions, on what does the wise person focus?*

▶ *What does greed reveal about a person spiritually?*

▶ *How do you know where to draw the line when it comes to accumulating material possessions?*

▶ *How do you teach children the biblical perspective on money and things?*

### Apply Biblical Truth

- Direct class members' attention to some observations of pastor and EthicsDaily.com columnist James Evans, such as these:

“Obviously we cannot survive in our culture without money. But necessity is different from obsession. And since the 1980s, we have been obsessed with money.

“The ‘80s gave us the popular wisdom ‘Greed is good,’” Evans writes. “Greed drives the economy. Greed creates wealth. Greed creates jobs. Greed produces products and also purchases them. . . . But greed has another effect. Greed makes us less human.”

When our “stuff” becomes for us the source of life, Evans says, we have allowed greed to move something else into God’s place. And that is idolatry.

- Close with prayer, asking God to give you the wisdom to view money and possessions from God’s perspective. Pray that God will show you what is most valuable in life.

## Justice for All

### Proverbs 8:18-21; 21:3, 21; 22:8, 16; 28:5; 31:8-9

**8**<sup>18</sup>Riches and honor are with me, enduring wealth and prosperity. <sup>19</sup>My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold, and my yield than choice silver. <sup>20</sup>I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice, <sup>21</sup>endowing with wealth those who love me, and filling their treasuries.

**21**<sup>3</sup>To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice. . . . <sup>21</sup>Whoever pursues righteousness and kindness will find life and honor.

**22**<sup>8</sup>Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail. . . . <sup>16</sup>Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself, and giving to the rich, will lead only to loss.

**28**<sup>5</sup>The evil do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it completely.

**31**<sup>8</sup>Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. <sup>9</sup>Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

**Theme: Wisdom pursues justice.**

### Before You Teach

- Read the focal passages, the lesson from the *Students Guide* and the following teaching suggestions.
- Visit EthicsDaily.com for a number of columns, news articles and opinion pieces related to the subject of justice. Type the word *justice* into EthicsDaily.com’s search engine for a complete listing of resources you may find helpful as you prepare introductory and closing comments and formulate discussion questions for this lesson. Remember that this Web site is updated daily each weekday, so fresh

and timely material is always available as you prepare to teach on this and other topics.

Consider especially the following from EthicsDaily.com:

“Liberty and Justice for All” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1052](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1052));

“Ending Terrorism Means Promoting Justice” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1351](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1351));

“Social Justice: A Baptist View” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=183](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=183));

“Beyond False Choices: Towards a New Way of Thinking” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=262](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=262));

“Juvenile Justice: Finding Solutions That Work” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1124](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1124));

“Is Bigger Really Better?” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1653](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1653)).

If you prefer, select one or more of the above columns and make photocopies to distribute to class members to generate discussion.

## As You Teach

### Introduce the Lesson

- Begin with a lighthearted look at the role of television in our growing interest in justice. Challenge your class to name at least 15 TV shows, both current and past, based on themes of crime, law or justice. List each on the board.

Supplement the list with these or other names, as necessary: “Adam-12,” “Baretta,” “Cagney and Lacey,” “CHiPs,” “Columbo,” “The Commish,” “CSI,” “CSI-Miami,” “The District,” “Dragnet,” “Hawaii Five-O,” “Hill Street Blues,” “Homicide—Life on the Street,” “Hunter,” “Judging Amy,” “LA Law,” “Law & Order,” “Law & Order—Criminal

Intent,” “Law & Order—Special Victims Unit,” “Magnum P.I.,” “The Marshall,” “Martial Law,” “Matlock,” “Miami Vice,” “Murder, She Wrote,” “Nash Bridges,” “NYPD Blue,” “Police Woman,” “The Practice,” “The Rockford Files,” “The Rookies,” “The Sentinel,” “Silk Stalkings,” “Starsky and Hutch” and “The X-Files.”

Also point out the proliferation of reality-based courtroom TV shows, such as “The People’s Court,” “Divorce Court,” “Judge Judy,” “Judge Hatchett,” “Judge Mills Lane,” “Judge Mathis” and “Judge Joe Brown.” List these and others on the board.

Ask class members who are familiar with it to overview Court TV, a cable TV network. Note that it offers forensic coverage; investigative reporting; original documentaries, movies, series and specials; popular off-network series such as “NYPD Blue” and “Cops”; trial coverage of America’s most noteworthy and controversial legal proceedings; and an on-air team of veteran, award-winning journalists.

Finally, challenge class members to move beyond the medium of television and cite evidence of our culture’s interest in things legal by naming books and movies based on themes of crime, law, justice and/or injustice. List movie and book titles on the board, and supplement the list as necessary (John Grisham’s novels; the movies “Dead Man Walking,” “The Green Mile,” etc.).

- Ask questions such as these:
  - ▶ *What does this extensive list reveal to you about American culture? Is this a case of art imitating life, or life imitating art?*
  - ▶ *While some of these shows are clearly more for entertainment than for enlightenment, how do you think TV shows, movies and books related to law and its enforcement have affected our views of justice?*
  - ▶ *When do you think our culture moved from a general interest in law and justice to an obsession? What has contributed to this shift?*

► *What are some specific legal proceedings that have captured your attention during the last 10 years? Why?*

► *Have your opinions about a particular judicial issue changed as a result of watching a television show or movie or reading a book?*

- Suggest that the events of September 11, 2001, have caused most of us to look at the idea of justice in a different way. Unfortunately for some people, justice no longer means fairness, impartiality, righteousness, evenhandedness and fair dealing. Some people have instead reduced justice to nothing more than revenge.

Stress that to seek revenge and call it justice is to show misunderstanding of our nation's ideals as well as an incomplete understanding of our God and what God requires of us.

Point out the following ideas from pastor and EthicsDaily.com columnist Barry Howard: "Justice is much more than being affirmed for right behavior or punished for bad behavior. Justice strives to create viable opportunities for all people to succeed economically, vocationally and socially. Real justice seeks to create opportunities for the disadvantaged. The Bible gives us many examples of the disadvantaged: the poor, widows, orphans, the sick, strangers, the hungry, the homeless and those in prison" ("Liberty and Justice for All" [www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1052](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1052)).

Suggest that for Christians, justice is more than a national ideal. But God's kind of justice is hard to sell and even harder to pursue. Read aloud the following from pastor and EthicsDaily.com columnist Jim Evans: "In our culture, there's not much demand for a God whose interests are for the poor and needy, or who sends rain on the just and the unjust. It's hard to market a God who calls for sacrificial service and for loving our neighbor and our enemy. A God like this simply doesn't garner the big crowds" ("Is Bigger Really Better?" [www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1653](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1653)).

Ask:

► *How have your ideas about justice changed since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001?*

► *How do you think your views of justice reflect the teachings of scripture?*

► *What do you understand the Bible to say about justice and our role in pursuing it?*

- Note that the Bible gives careful and sustained attention to the matter of justice. From the patriarchs to the prophets to Jesus, we find references to impartiality, morality, kindness, mercy, restitution, equity, generosity and the pursuit of an environment in which justice prevails and grace rules.

### Explore the Bible

- Ask a volunteer to read aloud Proverbs 8:12-21 and ask:

► *How are wisdom and justice related?*

Then read aloud Proverbs 21:3 and stress that doing justice is what God requires of us. Ask:

► *How can our worship of God lead us to pursue justice?*

► *If our worship does not inspire us to pursue justice and righteousness, have we really worshiped?*

► *How would you evaluate our church's worship in terms of the ways it challenges us to pursue justice?*

- Note that throughout the Proverbs and the entire Bible we find not only practical ways to do justice but also definite practices to avoid. Read aloud Proverbs 21:21, 22:16, 28:5 and 31:8-9; then ask:

► *How can we know the best ways to pursue justice? What assurances does the Bible give us that we will know the right things to do?*

► *Who are the marginalized in our culture?*



- ▶ *How can we seek justice for them?*
- ▶ *What are some practical ways we can offer justice to the poor? newcomers to our country? the homeless? the elderly? the underinsured? others?*
- ▶ *Is there any group for whom we should not pursue justice? Why?*
- ▶ *What are some practices we should avoid if we are concerned about pursuing justice?*

- Ask someone to read aloud Proverbs 22:8 and ask:

- ▶ *What is the reward of justice?*
- ▶ *What can people expect when they choose to ignore the wisdom of justice?*

### **Apply Biblical Truth**

- Lead your class to apply the teachings of scripture related to justice both broadly and more specifically by asking them to respond to questions such as these:
  - ▶ *How do you think the growing gap between rich and poor contributes to injustice and instability in our nation and throughout the world?*
  - ▶ *Do you think social justice is or has historically been a priority in Baptist life? Why or why not?*
  - ▶ *How can we promote a social conscience in our church?*
  - ▶ *How can we counter terrorism and achieve justice for the victims of terrorist attacks without recreating cycles of violence?*
  - ▶ *How can we help foster understanding and reconciliation among the various cultures living in the United States?*

Engage your class in discussion about specific groups of people in your community for whom you need to speak up and speak out.

- Suggest that within the heart of the Christian gospel lies the call to social justice. Refer to the column “Social Justice: A Baptist View” by Ben Leslie, who writes:

“What is truly remarkable is how anyone could experience a serious encounter with the Bible and not walk away with a deep commitment to the poor, the hungry, the homeless and the marginalized. According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus inaugurated his public ministry in Nazareth by reading aloud the words of the prophet Isaiah: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor’ (Is 4:18f, NIV)” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=183](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=183)).

Remind the class that a large part of Jesus’ ministry found him showing compassion for the blind, the lame, the sick, the hungry, and the marginalized of his day. “If the ministries of the church are to reflect the Scripture on which they stand,” Leslie writes, “then they should integrate evangelism with works of righteousness and discipleship.”

- Close with prayer, asking God to give you the courage to pursue justice for all, even when it is inconvenient, dangerous, unpopular and costly.

## Avoiding the Fall

### Proverbs 3:34-35; 11:2; 16:5a, 18-19; 18:12

**3**<sup>34</sup>Toward the scorners he is scornful, but to the humble he shows favor. **35**The wise will inherit honor, but stubborn fools, disgrace.

**11**<sup>2</sup>When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but wisdom is with the humble.

**16**<sup>5</sup>All those who are arrogant are an abomination to the Lord; . . . **18**Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. **19**It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud.

**18**<sup>12</sup>Before destruction one's heart is haughty, humility goes before honor.

**Theme: Wisdom keeps pride at bay.**

### Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the *Students Guide* and the following teaching suggestions.
- Go to EthicsDaily.com and read the column "Confidence: A Key for Successful Living" by Michael Helms ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1744](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1744)). Consider making photocopies of this column to distribute to class members.

### As You Teach

#### Introduce the Lesson

- Read aloud the following quotes from sports figures and ask class members to try to identify who said them:

"It aint braggin' if you can do it." (Dizzy Dean)

"As simple as it sounds, we all must try to be the best person we can: by making the best choices, by making the most of the talents we've been given." (Mary Lou Retton)

"I am the greatest. Not only do I knock 'em out, I pick the round!" (Muhammad Ali)

"When you're as great as I am, it's hard to be humble." (Muhammad Ali)

"I don't even know if I have an aura, man. I just try to win." (Tiger Woods)

"My dad has always taught me these words: care and share. That's why we put on clinics. The only thing I can do is try to give back." (Tiger Woods)

"I don't care what people think. People are stupid." (Charles Barkley)

"These are my new shoes. They're good shoes. They won't make you rich like me, they won't make you rebound like me, they definitely won't make you handsome like me. They'll only make you have shoes like me. That's it." (Charles Barkley, in an ad for sports shoes)

After you have properly attributed the quotations to the various athletes, ask the class to identify the common thread and then identify other public examples of both excessive pride and proper humility.

Note that while Charles Barkley had formidable basketball skills, they were often obscured by controversy stemming both from things he said and things he did. Known throughout much of his career as "Sir Charles," his most recent book is titled *I May Be Wrong but I Doubt It*. While he and many other athletes often appear arrogant and boastful, others who are equally skilled in their respective sports seem to maintain a healthy self-esteem without appearing haughty.

Next, read aloud the following quotation and ask class members to identify who said it:

“If you are humble nothing will touch you, neither praise nor disgrace, because you know what you are.” (Mother Teresa)

- Lead the class to discuss achieving the proper balance between confidence and arrogance by asking such questions as:
  - ▶ *Do you think excessive pride is a problem in our culture? What evidence do you find?*
  - ▶ *Are some people more prone to excessive pride than others?*
  - ▶ *At what point does self-confidence and appropriate pride turn to conceit and arrogance?*
  - ▶ *How is humility different from poor self-esteem? How is pride different from healthy self-esteem?*
  - ▶ *Does humility seem to come more easily for some people than for others? Why?*
  - ▶ *In which areas are you most confident? Why?*
  - ▶ *Does your confidence ever border on arrogance?*
  - ▶ *In which area does your confidence lag?*
  - ▶ *How do you show proper humility while remaining self-confident?*

Refer to the column “Confidence: A Key for Successful Living” and read aloud these statements:

“All of us have confidence in some areas and are lacking in others. A proper balance is important. Confidence run amuck leads to arrogance. No confidence leads to a poor self-esteem. The key is to learn to embrace our strengths, acknowledge our weaknesses and in every case remember

that God is the force that enables us to accomplish anything at all.”

Suggest that excessive pride and its consequences are familiar to all of us. The wisdom of Proverbs offers us both warnings against pride and options for a better way of living.

### Explore the Bible

- Point out that Proverbs often contrasts pride and humility. Pride is the disposition of the foolish, which leads to harm, while humility is a product of wisdom. Call attention to Proverbs 11:2, which says, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.”

Suggest that pride, haughtiness and arrogance are marks of a spiritual life that has taken a wrong turn. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Proverbs 16:18-19 and ask class members to name some specific ways pride is evident in our lives.

Reinforce the following ideas as you lead your class to discuss these verses:

- ▶ Those who exhibit excessive pride can expect punishment. Some will be self-inflicted based on the choices they make; other punishment will be part of God’s active judgment.
- ▶ People who are overly proud and arrogant trust themselves more than they trust God.
- ▶ Our attitude in life affects much of its outcome.
- ▶ Pride colors everything: our worldview, our vision of God, the way we see ourselves and those around us.
- ▶ While warning strongly against excessive pride, The Proverbs do not stop there. They also offer an antidote for the kind of arrogance and pride they warn against. It is humility—living life close to the ground so that we have nowhere to fall—or, as Richard Foster wrote, “to live as close to the truth as possible: the truth about ourselves, the

truth about others, the truth about the world in which we live.”

▶Just as excessive pride colors and distorts our vision, humility gives us clear vision, allowing us to see ourselves and others as God sees us.

▶Eliminating excessive pride can happen when we begin to cultivate humility. We do this when we focus on Christ, learn to cultivate silence, avoid needless chatter, learn to be content in all circumstances and do small things for the love of God, all practices espoused by writers of classic devotional literature.

- Ask volunteers to read aloud other Proverbs related to pride, including 3:34-35, 8:12-13, 15:33, 16:5a, 21:4 and 29:23. As you ask class members for their interpretations of these verses, reinforce these ideas:

▶Excessive pride leads only to negative consequences.

▶God hates pride.

▶God wants humility from us. In response to our humility, God gives honor. God shows favor to those who are humble.

### **Apply Biblical Truth**

- Challenge class members to consider how pride prevents us from a right relationship with God and others. Read aloud the following quotation attributed to Mother Teresa:

“People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered; forgive them anyway. If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives; be kind anyway. If you are successful you will win some false friends and true enemies; succeed anyway. If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you; be honest and frank anyway. What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight; build anyway. If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous; be happy anyway. The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow; do good anyway. Give the world the best you have, and it may never be

enough; give the world the best you’ve got anyway. You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God; it was never between you and them anyway.”

- Close with prayer, asking God to give you the wisdom to keep pride at bay.

## Healthy Living

### Proverbs 23:29-35

<sup>29</sup>Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? <sup>30</sup>Those who linger late over wine, those who keep trying mixed wines. <sup>31</sup>Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. <sup>32</sup>At the last it bites like a serpent, and stings like an adder. <sup>33</sup>Your eyes will see strange things, and your mind utter perverse things. <sup>34</sup>You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, like one who lies on the top of a mast. <sup>35</sup>They struck me," you will say, "but I was not hurt; they beat me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake? I will seek another drink."

**Theme: Wisdom knows the dangers of alcohol.**

### Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the *Students Guide* and the following teaching suggestions.
- Visit EthicsDaily.com and read the articles "Youth See More Alcohol Ads Than Adults," ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1633](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1633)) and "Alcohol-related Traffic Deaths on the Rise" ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=2521](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=2521)).
- Also at EthicsDaily.com, read "Addiction: Science, Faith Communities Must Choose Words Carefully" ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=899](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=899)). Make photocopies of this article available to members of your class.

### As You Teach

#### Introduce the Lesson

- Lead class members to discuss television's evolving treatment of alcohol use and abuse. Begin by recalling the

character Otis Campbell from the 1960s hit series, "The Andy Griffith Show."

Otis Campbell was Mayberry's notorious, unrepentant town drunk, as much at home in his cell in the Mayberry jail as anywhere else. So regular were his drinking binges that he was trained to let himself in and out of the cell on an as-needed basis.

In spite of having what seemed to be a serious case of alcoholism, all of Otis's drinking exploits on the show were comedic. In one episode, he trips and falls while leaving his jail cell and decides to sue the county. Another episode chronicles the other characters' failed attempts at his rehabilitation. Apart from an occasional mild scolding from Andy or Aunt Bee, Otis and his drinking problem were never really taken seriously on the show.

Note that other TV shows in that era also poked lighthearted fun at characters who became intoxicated. Many people remember Lucille Ball's character on "I Love Lucy" when she became the spokesperson for Vitameat-avegamin Vitamins. In the process of numerous film takes of a commercial for the product, Lucy drinks so much of the tonic that she becomes inebriated, slurring her words and losing her ability to stand up straight.

Ask class members to recall specific television comedies or dramas that dealt realistically with alcohol abuse and alcoholism. Lead them to consider the role of television programming in our culture's views on alcohol.

- Next, read aloud the following statements and ask class members to indicate whether they think the statements are true or false. (All of the statements are true.)
  - ▶ About 40 percent of deaths in the workplace are caused by alcohol abuse.
  - ▶ Alcohol and drug abuse costs industry about \$100 billion a year.
  - ▶ Current estimates show that over 15 million Americans abuse alcohol and/or drugs.

- ▶Alcoholism causes loss of about 500 million workdays per year.
- ▶About 50 percent of employment problems are traceable to alcohol and abuse of drugs.
- ▶Alcohol abuse ranks among the top causes of preventable deaths every year in the US.
- ▶The yearly cost of alcohol abuse to every man, woman and child in the nation is roughly \$1050 per person.

Also note the following:

- ▶Statistics continue to show that alcohol involvement (drunk driving) remains the leading factor in motor vehicle deaths.
- ▶The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimates that alcohol was involved in 40 percent of fatal crashes and in 8 percent of all crashes in 2000.
- ▶All states and the District of Columbia now have 21-year-old minimum drinking age laws. The NHTSA estimates that these laws have reduced traffic fatalities involving drivers 18 to 20 years old by 13 percent and have saved an estimated 20,043 lives since 1975.
- Ask class members to suggest examples of ways our culture glamorizes alcohol consumption with sexual, athletic and financial images of success. Note particularly how these images put youth at risk:

“American youth, aged 12 to 20, saw more alcoholic beverage ads in 2001 than did people of legal drinking age, according to a recent study by the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth. ... The consequences of underage drinking are real and tragic. Alcohol use plays a substantial role in all three leading causes of death among youth—unintentional injuries (including motor vehicle fatalities and drownings), suicides and homicides” (“Youth See More Alcohol Ads Than Adults,” [www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1633](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1633)).

The report also indicated that children who begin drinking prior to age 15 are four times more likely to become dependent upon alcohol than those who wait until age 21.

Clearly, we need wisdom not only to protect children from the dangers of underage drinking but also to avoid alcohol abuse ourselves.

### Explore the Bible

- Acknowledge that while the Bible does not speak with one voice on the use of alcohol, it does send a universal message of condemnation on drinking to excess and getting drunk.

Ask someone to read aloud Proverbs 23:29-35. Note that this particular passage points to the addictive nature of alcohol, and suggest that wisdom is what allows us to understand that alcohol consumption can move stealthily from controlled use to addictive abuse.

Point out the six-question riddle in verse 29 and its answer in verse 30. These verses convey significant information about the consequences of drinking too much wine. Lead the class to review these verses by asking such questions as:

- ▶ *What words does the writer use to describe the emotional baggage of addicts?*
- ▶ *What physical consequences of drinking too much alcohol does this passage describe?*
- ▶ *What singular answer does verse 30 give in response to the questions of verse 29?*

- Call attention to the seductive and glamorous appeal of alcohol according to verse 31. Encourage class members to give examples from current advertising that further enhance alcohol’s glamorous image.

Relate facts about the dangers of this kind of advertising, particularly for youth, by noting statistics such as these (see “Youth See More Alcohol Ads Than Adults”):

- ▶ Nearly one-third of all alcohol advertising appears in ten magazines with a youth readership of 25 percent.
- ▶ Alcohol advertisements in *Sports Illustrated* alone brought in nearly \$40 million in 2001.
- ▶ Youth saw 45 percent more beer and ale ads and 27 percent more distilled spirits ads than adults in 2001.
- ▶ A federal survey revealed that 16.6 percent of eighth-graders reported having been drunk at least once during the year.

Note the fearful image of verse 31 which shows how alcohol can strike a person unaware.

- Lead class members to consider the effects of drunkenness on the mind according to verses 33-34. Point out that alcohol abuse diminishes our ability to perceive clearly what God wants us to experience and reduces our ability to think plainly, thereby blocking our relationship with God. In short, alcohol abuse separates us from God’s wisdom and interferes with our capacity to seek and know God’s wisdom.

Finally, call attention to the voice of the alcoholic himself in verse 35. Note again the addictive nature of alcohol by pointing out the alcoholic’s own words: “I will seek another drink” (v. 35).

### Apply Biblical Truth

- Acknowledge that virtually every family has experienced the effects of alcohol abuse, whether in the immediate household or in the extended family unit. Church members and their families struggle with alcohol and other addictions both openly and privately.

Call attention to the article “Addiction: Science, Faith Communities Must Choose Words Carefully” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=899](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=899)). Note particularly these ideas:

“The complexity of addiction creates a false perception that one must choose a scientific or spiritual understanding of it. However, as clearly as there are clinical manifestations of addiction, there are profound spiritual insights that give meaning to the physical human condition. Therefore, science and faith are not in competition for truth but complement each other’s perspective on reality.”

Stress the importance of all disciplines working together to seek solutions for the consequences of addiction. Then lead class members to suggest ways the church can help its members and the larger community better understand and deal with addiction. Note particularly the suggestions in “Wisdom for Today” in the *Students Guide*.

- Close with prayer, asking God to guide you to make wise choices about alcohol. Pray especially that parents will have wisdom to guide their children when they are tempted by alcohol’s glamour and appeal.

# Walking with the Wise

## Proverbs 13:20

Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools suffers harm.

**Theme: Wisdom encourages us to associate with wise people.**

### Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the *Students Guide* and the following teaching suggestions.

### As You Teach

#### Introduce the Lesson

- Ask if anyone can recall the circumstances surrounding the beginning of Alcoholics Anonymous or some other well-established support group. Supplement their examples with the following information:

Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) was founded in 1935 by Bill Wilson and Dr. Robert Holbrook Smith. Wilson, a recovering alcoholic, had entered a New York City hospital for detoxification but shortly after fell into a severe depression. After asking for God's help and intervention and encountering God personally, he shared his experience with Smith.

The two men supported each other's decision to quit drinking and further believed that alcoholics could help each other recover from what until then had been a virtually irreversible disease.

Wilson and Smith began meeting with other alcoholics one by one for support and encouragement. Soon similar groups popped up across the country. Today, estimates

indicate more than 100,000 autonomous Alcoholics Anonymous groups and over 2 million members in 150 countries.

A.A. membership is completely voluntary. The only membership requirement is a desire to stop drinking. Members maintain sobriety through sharing their experiences, strength and hope during group meetings and through the suggested "twelve steps" for recovery.

A.A. is a "society of peers," according to its Web site ([www.alcoholics-anonymous.org](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org)). Anyone is invited to attend open meetings, which generally consist of talks by a leader and two or three speakers who relate their personal experiences of alcoholism and recovery. Groups host some meetings specifically for the purpose of informing the non-alcoholic public about A.A. At other times, alcoholics meet together in closed meetings for discussion.

- Ask class members to suggest other groups that have followed A.A.'s basic pattern. Note that there are support groups for people with virtually every physical health challenge, including cancer, diabetes and stroke. Other support groups exist related to weight loss and control, anger management, anorexia and bulimia, codependency, crisis pregnancy, domestic violence and a variety of other issues with which people struggle.

Foundational for each of these groups are the members, their shared experiences, their accountability to each other and their willingness to support each other. Groups like these recognize the wisdom of The Proverbs: the people with whom we associate strongly influence us, either positively or negatively.

When we associate with people who are wise, we become wiser. When we choose as companions those who are foolish, not only do we become like them, we also can expect trouble.

### Explore the Bible

- Read aloud Proverbs 13:20, the verse which forms the basis of this lesson. State that this one verse encapsulates



in broad form the teaching of many of the more specific proverbs. It reinforces that wisdom involves both actively engaging with certain kinds of people (usually “the wise” or “the righteous”), and avoiding other kinds of people (often “fools” or “the wicked”). We enhance the quality of our lives when we make wise choices about those with whom we associate. Likewise, we bring trouble on ourselves when we associate with people who live according to their own desires rather than God’s ways.

Note that The Proverbs often contrast “the wise” and “the foolish.” Challenge class members to scan their Bibles and read aloud some of the many verses that refer to the wise, the foolish, the righteous, the wicked and the different paths these individuals pursue.

- Call attention to the section in the *Students Guide* that lists characteristics of “fools.” Review each of the characteristics and the supporting verses, and ask a volunteer to transfer the characteristics list to a board or flip chart under the heading “fool.”

Next, challenge class members to scan the Book of Proverbs and develop a similar list of characteristics for a “wise” or “righteous” person. Record their observations on a board or flip chart under the heading “wise.”

Include in your list such qualities of a wise person as these:

- ▶ is grateful when someone corrects or disciplines him/her (9:8)
- ▶ shares what he/she knows with others (15:2)
- ▶ knows the value of hard work (10:4)
- ▶ knows when to keep quiet, withhold speech; thinks before speaking (10:19, 11:12, 15:28)
- ▶ knows the appropriate thing to say when he/she does speak (10:32)
- ▶ knows how to keep a confidence (11:13)

- ▶ gives good advice (12:26)
- ▶ knows how to take advice (13:10)
- ▶ is diligent in disciplining his/her children (13:24)
- ▶ is not gullible (14:15)
- ▶ is cautious, turns away from evil (14:16)
- ▶ actively seeks to do the right things (15:9)
- ▶ seeks additional knowledge (15:14)
- ▶ withholds anger (29:11)

- Call attention to the striking differences between the characteristics of the wise and the foolish. Then ask:
  - ▶ *If it is so easy to distinguish between those who are wise and those who are foolish, why do we so often choose the company and influence of those who in the end will only lead us to trouble?*
  - ▶ *On what basis do you make decisions about the company you keep?*
  - ▶ *How do/did you try to teach and influence your children concerning their choice of friends?*
  - ▶ *What personal examples can you give related to the truth of this verse: “Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools suffers harm”?*
- Recall for the class the following story by Henri Nouwen from in his book *Reaching Out*, which illustrates the priceless value of friendships among the wise. A former student had returned for a visit. He and Nouwen sat on the ground facing each other, talking about what life had been for them both within the last year, about their work, their common friends and about the restlessness in their hearts. Nouwen writes:

“Then slowly as the minutes passed by we became silent. Not an embarrassing silence but a silence that could bring us closer together than the many small and big events of the last year. We would hear a few cars pass and the noise of someone who was emptying a trash can somewhere. But that did not hurt. The silence which grew between us was warm, gentle and vibrant. Once in a while we looked at each other with the beginning of a smile pushing away the last remnants of fear and suspicion. It seemed that while the silence grew deeper around us we became more and more aware of a presence embracing both of us. Then he said, ‘It is good to be here’ and I said, ‘Yes, it is good to be together again,’ and after that we were silent again for a long period. And as a deep peace filled the empty space between us he said hesitantly, ‘When I look at you it is as if I am in presence of Christ.’ I did not feel startled, surprised or in need of protesting, but I could only say, ‘It is the Christ in you, who recognizes the Christ in me.’ ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘He indeed is in our midst,’ and then he spoke the words which entered into my soul as the most healing words I had heard in many years. ‘From now on, wherever you go, or wherever I go, all the ground between us will be holy ground.’”

### Apply Biblical Truth

- Relate the following story, based on an article in March 2002 *Reader’s Digest*.

In the mid-1980s, Rameck Hunt was a young teenager in Plainfield, New Jersey, a city high in crime and poverty. By the time most boys in his neighborhood were his age, they were involved in selling drugs and committing other crimes just to get by. He was determined that his life would take a different direction.

The odds seemed stacked against him. His mother had battled a drug problem; his father was seldom around and had spent time in jail. He lived with seven relatives in a small, crowded house owned by his grandmother. He shared a bed with his mother, uncle and sister.

He was a good student and enjoyed studying, but by the age of 10 he had developed an attitude and had begun to

get into trouble stealing and bullying other children. “I wasn’t a bully inside,” he says. “It was me trying to emulate my friends.”

Fortunately, Hunt’s mother saw that he had tremendous potential and arranged for him to be admitted into Newark’s University High, a magnet school for gifted students. On his first day of school, he met George Jenkins and Sampson Davis, two boys much like him, both growing up in homes led by mothers who wanted more for their sons.

The boys quickly bonded and became close friends. After one brief setback, which landed Hunt in juvenile detention, he poured himself into his studies and spent more time with Jenkins and Davis. During their senior year, they made a pact to do whatever it took to see each other through so they could make it out of the environment into which they had been born.

Jenkins had always dreamed of becoming a dentist, and he encouraged Hunt and Davis to apply with him to Seton Hall University, which offered financial assistance to low-income pre-medical and dental students. In 1991, the three were among ten students awarded scholarships in the prestigious program.

When Hunt moved into his dorm room, for the first time in his life he had his own bed, desk and phone. He, Jenkins and Davis stuck close together at Seton Hall. Fewer than ten percent of its students were African American, and they often felt isolated and different.

They studied together, looked out for each other and took jobs as tollbooth clerks to earn extra money. They all maintained grade point averages of 3.0 or higher. After graduation, Hunt and Davis went to Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in Piscataway. Jenkins stayed in Newark for dental school. Each weekend, however, the three continued to get together. “It was important to have that link, to walk this path together,” Davis says, “to have someone you could identify with.”

Today the three are doctors, and the pact that bound them throughout high school, college and medical school

remains strong. They have established the Three Doctors Foundation ([www.threedoctorsfoundation.org](http://www.threedoctorsfoundation.org)) to inspire and create opportunities for inner-city communities through education, mentoring and health awareness.

One of their key messages is: "Surround yourself with like-minded people who are in line with your aspirations."

- Close with prayer, asking God to give you wisdom in making choices about the company you keep. Pray for the children and teenagers in your congregation and community, that they will surround themselves with friends and others who will encourage them and influence them positively.