

Living Wisely, Living Well: Lessons from The Proverbs

Students 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.

Living Wisely, Living Well Student Guide

Table of Contents

Preface	2
Listen, Learn and Live	4
Invigorating Fear	7
In Search of the Good Life	10
The Pursuit of Happiness	13
Marriage Matters	16
Working Wisely	19
Think Before You Speak!	22
Anger? Danger!	25
When Much Is Too Much	28
Justice for All	31
Avoiding the Fall	34
Healthy Living	37
Walking With the Wise	40

A *Living Wisely, Living Well* Leaders Guide is also available from Acacia Resources (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).

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

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

Introduction

A presidential historian sat at the guest's microphone of a talk-radio program. Several callers directed the discussion toward "wisdom." Some praised presidents they believed had acted wisely. Some argued against those selections, championing others.

Before the break, a gravel-voiced caller offered an explanation for the collective wisdom of U.S. presidents. His mama taught him a man must attain age 65 to obtain wisdom. Since most presidents were older, he theorized, we should expect they would be wise. The historian skewered that theory. If it were true, he noted, only two of the nation's 43 presidents even had a chance of entering office as wise men.

What is wisdom? Like art, we know it when we see it—or think we do. And like art, people will pay to obtain it. Visit your bookstore. You'll find yards of self-help, philosophy, psychology, inspiration, nutrition and exercise books. Most of these books offer understanding, so people can lead happier, fulfilled lives. They peddle "wisdom," some sort of applied knowledge that makes life better.

Twenty-first century Americans didn't launch this search for wisdom. Almost 3,000 years ago, when Solomon succeeded his father, David, as king of Israel, God offered to grant one wish. Solomon didn't ask for long life, wealth or even death of his enemies. He asked for wisdom (1 Kings 3:9). Impressed, God granted Solomon's request, along with blessings he didn't seek, such as riches and honor. Modeling their wise king, the Hebrews valued wisdom. A section of Hebrew scripture—Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and some Psalms—is called wisdom literature.

The Hebrews weren't the first to seek wisdom, either. Long before Solomon, Ancient Near Eastern cultures sought to make their young people wise by teaching them proverbs. Their goal was an eternal quest, ventured by every generation, my parents included.

Four decades ago, Mother served a daily dose of wisdom by reading Proverbs to me before bedtime. I learned a harlot—King James' term—was a "bad lady" long before I understood exactly how she could be bad. Daddy took a practical approach, urging me to use common sense. (Have you ever wondered why, if common sense is common, so few people actually have it?)

I learned common sense implements thinking before speaking, observing before acting and learning before deciding. As you might guess, all this Proverbs-reading and lecturing often annoyed me. But later, when challenges and temptations blocked my path, I remembered my parents' wise counsel. Now, I pray my own children will grow in wisdom.

The Biblical Witness

Proverbs 1:1

The opening sentence of Proverbs states the contents of the book and credits King Solomon with its collection. Neither part of the statement is as simple as it appears.

The Hebrew word translated "proverb" in this verse also is translated "taunt" (Isa 14:4), "oracle" (Num 23:7, 18), "riddle" and "allegory" (Ezek 17:2) elsewhere in Hebrew scripture. So, its meaning is broader than the loose English understanding of a proverb as a short moralistic statement. That helps explain the content of chapters 1-9, comprised of instructional poems. However, the latter part of the book, particularly 10:1-22:16, features a series of two-line statements, the pithy aphorisms we tend to think of as proverbs. Some of them offer straightforward observations about the nature of the world, but the majority evaluate human action and describe consequences of both wise and foolish choices.

Proverbs' tone is instructional. In fact, many times the reader/listener is referred to as "my son." We understand these teachings are being handed down for the edification of the young and the

development of people who would be mature, steadfast and faithful.

Solomon receives credit for Proverbs. Biblical study and the text itself lead us to understand the authorship is much broader. For example, 22:17 references the “words of the wise,” and the 30 teachings in 22:17-24 parallel the “Wisdom of Amenemope,” which was written in Egypt at about the same time as Solomon, the 10th century B.C. Chapter 30 is credited to “Agur son of Jakeh,” and chapter 31 cites the mother of “King Lemuel.” Many scholars date chapters 1-9 later than the Babylonian exile, centuries after Solomon’s death. Still, Solomon’s reputation for wisdom provides inspiration for this collection, which he may have started.

Proverbs 1:2-3

The word *wisdom*, which appears 41 times in Proverbs, takes a couple of forms. Throughout most of the book, it is understood to reside in a body of teachings. Remember these sayings, and you will be wise. But in other places, wisdom is animated, as if it were a living being. It has its own voice and calls out (1:20-33, 8:1-5).

Wisdom also takes various meanings in Hebrew scripture. Skilled craftspeople were called wise because they developed technical ability (temple artisans, Ex 28:3, 35:25; goldsmiths, Jer 10:9; sailors, Ezek 27:8). Shrewd, pragmatic, effective people were regarded as wise, regardless of the morality of their deeds (Ammon’s rape of Tamar, 2 Sam 13:3). Intellectual understanding turned to the service of a cause or task also was known as wisdom (Solomon impressed the Queen of Sheba with his knowledge, 1 Kings 10:6-7).

However, Proverbs particularly concerns itself with developing techniques for living well. It offers insight for daily living, for making decisions that positively impact the full spectrum of life. This involves moral comprehension and ethical action. It also involves theological wisdom—understanding one’s life in relationship with God. Several times, Proverbs links wisdom to the “fear (respect or reverence for) of the Lord” (1:7, 9:10, 15:33). True wisdom is not possible apart from God.

By coupling *wisdom* with *instruction* in verse 2, the author indicates wisdom can be taught. An alternate translation of *instruction* is

“discipline” (NASV), which evokes the rigid, drilling nature of such instruction. The style of much of this book—a catalog of easy-to-memorize, simple-to-recall two-line statements of practical knowledge—illustrates the belief that repeated instruction may produce wisdom when taken to heart. Proverbs collects teachings so that people may live wisely.

Collectively, the interpretations of the word *wisdom* help us understand wisdom is to knowledge as technology is to science. Application makes the difference. Wisdom helps us integrate basic facts, moral comprehension and theological discernment so we may both “know” and “understand” (v. 2).

The application of knowledge and understanding results in “wise dealing” (v. 3). Some interpreters take this to mean common sense, a pragmatic way of looking at life and all its circumstances. Similarly, the phrase echoes the definition of *wisdom* as shrewdness or effectiveness set apart from morality. If you know how to get things done, you are wise.

However, the second half of this verse modifies the meaning. “Wise dealing” or common sense is not merely pragmatic and self-serving. It produces “righteousness, justice and equity.” The writer stands with the prophets: Actions that are truly wise will place a person in right relationship with God. They will produce results that benefit all God’s creatures. A theme sounded early and often is the importance of concern for seeking God’s way, for doing the right thing and for securing fairness. A wise person will uplift and strengthen others, never degrading or demeaning others for self-promotion or self-gratification.

Proverbs 1:4-6

An internal illustration of equity is the author’s assertion that wisdom is readily available, even to unlikely candidates.

Verse 4 promises prudence to the simple and discretion to the youth. Isn’t this an optimistic verse? *Simple* is used 15 times in Proverbs and indicates people who are immature or unprepared for decision-making. This verse insists the people whom we don’t expect to have the ability to make correct choices can be taught good judgment. They can understand the consequences of actions, learn how to weigh those consequences and choose well.

Perhaps more invitingly—especially for parents—the writer also insists young people can be taught not only knowledge but also discretion. This implies ripening maturity, the ability to evaluate subtle nuances of right and wrong, the ability to place the weight of moral certitude on legs of social awareness and walk upright.

But this introduction to Proverbs insists wisdom exists on a spectrum. Not only can the simple and the young discern the rudiments of wisdom, but the wise may “increase in learning” and people who already understand may “acquire skill” to learn even more (v. 5). No one ever “maxes out” with wisdom. Some scholars see verse 5 as a parenthetical expression, since the other verses address the unwise. Nevertheless, it invites all people to read and heed.

The going won't be easy. Discipline will be required to discern “a proverb,” “a figure,” “the words of the wise” and “their riddles” that follow. But the reward is wisdom, applied knowledge that shapes a well-lived life.

Wisdom for Today

While knowledge has expanded exponentially in the past century, wisdom remains in as short supply and high demand as it was when Solomon asked God for it 3,000 years ago. Just think about situations today that demand wisdom:

- Popular culture—TV, movies and music especially—tells our young people “everybody's doin' it” when “it” has to do with sex. Kids today might not know what a harlot is, but they need to recognize the physical, spiritual and emotional dangers of sex outside of marriage. They're more likely to walk on hot coals and escape unscorched than to survive illicit sex unscathed (Prov 6:25-29).
- Society is no less soft on adults, although its approach is perhaps a bit more sophisticated. Every form of advertising insists the acquisition of things provides the path to happiness. Millions find themselves lost on a winding road. Millions more find they always need one more thing and cannot quite reach their destination. Americans need to learn that people who trust in wealth set themselves up for

a fall (Prov 11:28) and that riches can sprout wings and fly away (Prov 23:5).

- In business, politics, education and just about any endeavor, self-promoters seem to blast out of the starting blocks. Self-confidence and ambition may have their place, but how many times have we seen that pride leads to disgrace (Prov 11:2)?
- We all have people who “get our goat.” They seem to know which buttons to push to annoy us and apparently take delight in pushing them. We need to remember that the foolish get annoyed, while the prudent overlook insults (Prov 12:16). And we would benefit by recalling that a gentle answer avoids a fight (Prov 15:1).
- The pressures of business tempt people to cut ethical corners. In Sunday school one morning, a class member who owned a small business declared: “In business, there's no such thing as black and white. If you don't live in a gray world, you won't survive.” He turned his back on the Proverbs' teachings that the Lord judges motives, no matter how they are rationalized (Prov 16:2), and the Lord detests unfair business practices (Prov 20:10).
- America seems to be dumbing down. Consider the utter banality of such “reality” shows as *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, *Fear Factor* and *I'm a Celebrity: Get Me Out of Here*, just to name a few. Many of the most popular sites on the Internet are dedicated to pornography. At the same time, the reach of newspapers, magazines and serious current-events television programs is suffering. Never mind that wisdom teaches that those who stray from understanding will reside with “the assembly of the dead” (Prov 21:16).

“Let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill to understand a proverb” (Prov 1:5-6a).

Written by Marv Knox, editor, Baptist Standard, Dallas, Texas

Invigorating Fear

Proverbs 1:7

Theme: God is the source of wisdom.

Introduction

“Dad, do you think that God put fossils in the ground to fool us?”

I was startled when my son Japheth, then a ninth-grader, asked the question. “Why would you ask that?” I responded.

“Well, that’s what the man said at the Bible study after school. He said that God made the fossils appear old to see if we would trust the Bible or if we would trust science. He said you can’t believe in God and evolution.”

I asked my son if he thought that God would do something like that. His answer was important. He said he did not believe that God would try to trick us into doing something wrong. More than that, he had never thought of God and science as being on different sides. He had always liked what he had learned at home: evolution was an explanation of how God had created the world.

I must admit, I was shocked by Japheth’s question. I had never heard of anyone thinking that God intentionally put us to the test by making fossils. It reminded me of the days when I was in high school and a man in our church said that men had never been on the moon. Everything had been staged somewhere in Arizona because “God would not allow people to go up there,” he said.

Even today I am reminded of the many times that the church has taken a stand against science, and how many times it has lost. From Galileo to space travel, from Darwin to cloning, the immediate reaction of some Christians has been “denounce and deny.”

Does God not require a more creative, thoughtful approach? I know it occurs in a different theological context, but somehow the saying of Jesus applies here, “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (Jn 8:32). I tried to teach my children, as my father

had taught me: the Christian does not have to be afraid of the quest for knowledge or wisdom. It is of God and comes from God. In fact, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov 1:7).

The Biblical Witness

The words of Proverbs 1:7 are the final words in the introduction to the book, and they form a kind of motto that encapsulates the theme of Proverbs. The whole of the introduction has built up to this climax by the accumulation of fourteen nouns and seven verb forms to describe the life of the wise. These different verbs (*learning, understanding, gaining, to teach, etc.*) and nouns (*wisdom, instruction, insight, wise dealing, righteousness, shrewdness, knowledge, prudence, etc.*) are not so much to be differentiated and explained in detail as they are to be understood as synonyms that together signify the whole of biblical wisdom. Their power lies in the cumulative effect of their presence, declaring that the life which is wise, successful, right and complete must have an authentic relationship with God as its foundation.

The Fear of the Lord

Fear when used in relation to God has never been a satisfactory translation of the Hebrew, but the alternatives of *reverence* and *awe* also leave much to be desired. Perhaps it is best to begin with a negative explanation.

The “fear of the Lord” is not a terrified flinching before God. If we saw a child who flinched and cowed behind an object every time her parent moved, we would suspect the possibility of the presence of child abuse in the home. God is not a child abuser who brandishes overwhelming superior power in order to force obedience. The biblical concept of godly “fear” is not terror.

God is other and powerful. A true understanding of God’s nature does leave us in “awe,” incapable of fully appreciating all that God is. “Reverence” is certainly an attitude that we express toward God through worship. Nevertheless, “fear of the Lord” is more than the awareness of mystery and the adoration of glory found in worship. It includes obedience, commitment and love (see Deut 10:12).

As significant as the word *fear* is the modifying phrase *of the Lord*. A personal relationship with God lies at the heart of word *fear*. The

book of Proverbs consistently points to the benefits of this relationship with God as it speaks of the results of “the fear of the Lord”:

“The fear of the Lord prolongs life” (Prov 10:27).
“In the fear of the Lord one has strong confidence”
(Prov 14:26).
“The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life” (Prov 14:27).
“By the fear of the Lord a man avoids evil” (Prov 16:6).

We might easily miss just how personal that relationship is because of the English translation “the Lord.” The original text in the Hebrew Bible has the “fear of YHVH,” where the four letters *YHVH* represent the personal name of God (probably pronounced Yahveh). Very early within the Jewish tradition, people stopped speaking this name aloud as a sign of profound reverence and respect. When reading the Hebrew scripture, therefore, wherever the name YHVH was written, the title *Lord* (^ʾ*donay*) was pronounced. When the Masoretic notes (including vowels) were added to the consonantal text of the Hebrew Bible, the name YHVH was present in the consonants, but the vowels of ^ʾ*donay* were placed under them to indicate the substitution.

A misunderstanding of this custom during the Reformation in Germany led to the formation of the word *Jehovah* (remember the *J* of German has a *Y* sound). Most modern English translations have dropped the word *Jehovah* and have adopted the ancient practice of substituting *Lord* for *YHVH*. Such a practice is understandable, but we lose the idea of it being the proper name of God.

The Beginning of Knowledge

The starting point for true, effective and satisfying knowledge, therefore, is a personal relationship with the living God expressed through reverence, awe, obedience, commitment and love.

This “beginning” is not, however, like the starting point of a race: a place the runner leaves behind, moving on toward something else. The Hebrew word *beginning* may not only mean “first” but may also carry the idea of “best.” The very best which knowledge or wisdom has to offer is to be found within one’s relationship with God. The “fear of the Lord,” then, is the foundation upon which every other aspect of knowledge/wisdom rests. It is the first part of the edifice

of a complete life, the most important part upon which everything else depends.

I have often heard a distinction made between the English concepts of knowledge and wisdom that goes something like this: knowledge is the accumulation of true facts and wisdom is the practical ability of understanding what to do with that knowledge. Such a concept is not at home in the Hebrew Bible, especially in the book of Proverbs. The biblical concept of “knowledge” is more than the intellectual accumulation of facts. The verb *to know* carries the idea of an intimate reality that comes through experience rather than a mental activity.

The most obvious example of this is found in Genesis 4:1, “Now the man *knew* his wife, Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain.” The intimate, personal and experiential elements of “knowledge” are especially evident in the phrase “the knowledge of God” (see, for example, the book of Hosea).

The book of Proverbs also emphasizes the experiential and personal dimensions of knowledge so that knowledge becomes synonymous with wisdom. It is instructive that while Proverbs 1:7 reads: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of *knowledge*,” Proverbs 9:10 and Psalm 111:10 read: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of *wisdom*.”

Knowledge is wisdom, and wisdom is knowledge. In fact, wisdom is defined by the abundant accumulation of near synonyms throughout Proverbs 1:1-7. Wisdom is obedience to the instruction that God provides; it is making right decisions (righteousness); it is being just and equitable; it is living shrewdly and prudently. Wisdom is the ability to be whole and complete in all areas of life: religious, moral, ethical and practical. The book of Proverbs moves our relationship to God beyond what may happen within temple walls to a consideration of what God wants of our whole life. “The fear of the Lord,” that personal, respectful, obedient, loving relationship with God, motivates and drives all dimensions of our lives.

Fools Despise Wisdom

The book of Proverbs contains a rich vocabulary not only for the description of wisdom, but also for the definition of foolishness. At

least four words can be used to designate “fools.” One word, *petî*, refers to the “simple fool.” This person is naive, gullible and lacking instruction in the world of knowledge. At times (such as Prov 1:4) it can be neutral in tone, but elsewhere (Prov 7:7) it is a rather negative characterization.

The “churlish fool,” *nabal*, is one who is profane, unwilling to trust in God or make moral distinctions and is scornful of those who do. The *nabal* is anything but noble, lives on the outside of society and is a picture of misery (Prov 17:7, 30:22).

Proverbs also speaks of the “stupid fool,” *kesîl*. This type of fool is unteachable. He is an embarrassment to his parents (Prov 10:1) and seems to enjoy doing wrong (Prov 10:23). This fool is a danger to others and a social disgrace.

The other word for *fool*, *‘vîl*, is a “brash fool.” This is one of those “persons wise in their own eyes” of Proverbs 26:12. They are different from the “stupid fool” as the verse indicates, but they are just as foolish. They do not listen to advice (Prov 12:15), cannot control their feelings (Prov 12:16) and babble too much (Prov 17:28). These people are reckless, impetuous and quick-tempered. It is this type of fool to which Proverbs 1:7 refers.

These “fools” reject instruction and wisdom because they are too opinionated to listen to others. Because they are “wise in their own eyes,” they see no need to submit to the discipline of learning. They are so impulsive that they fail to learn the value of prudence, composure or restraint. They do not possess an inner drive directed by a relationship with God as much as they are driven to and fro by external circumstances with few productive results. In the quest for a well-rounded life, they are failures because they started with themselves instead of beginning with a reverent, relevant relationship with the Lord.

Wisdom for Today

What does invigorating fear look like? How can we picture a “fear of the Lord” that moves beyond terror to respect, and therefore, leads to knowledge?

The experience of a young woman in our church offers a good illustration. She was a brilliant high school graduate who went to a

well-known university outside our state. She made all A’s in her first semester. During the second semester she was well on her way to doing the same thing in every class but organic chemistry. In that class, she failed the first test, studied hard and failed the second test. Her parents finally convinced her to drop the class and take it again later.

She hesitated to drop the class because she was afraid of what the professor would think of her. Actually, she was just plain afraid of the professor. When she did tell the professor that she was dropping the class, she asked for permission to keep attending. She promised to complete all the assignments and take all the tests, only without credit. The professor thought, “Right, that’s what they all say,” but gave her the needed permission.

This young woman did continue to go to class and meet all the requirements. The next semester, she enrolled in the same course with the same professor! She made an A. He noticed. The next summer, she did a special project in chemistry at another university. The professor asked for a copy of her work when she returned to school that fall. Unknown to her, this professor shared her work with a friend of his at Harvard University. This led to the young woman receiving an internship to work at Harvard and later an opportunity to do graduate work there.

Four years earlier, this young woman would never have thought anything good could have come from her dealings with a certain professor. His class was hard; she was failing and she was afraid of him. Within that fear, however, was respect. With perseverance a deep and meaningful relationship developed, resulting in a learning experience of a lifetime.

In a similar way, our relationship with God can usher in learning experiences of a lifetime. In spite of our failures and difficulties, God is willing to guide and mentor us by means of a relationship of respect, reverence, commitment, obedience and love in such a way that we can experience a well-rounded life in its religious, moral, ethical and practical dimensions. We would be fools not to try.

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov 1:7).

Written by Gary Light, pastor, Winfree Memorial Baptist Church, Midlothian, Virginia

In Search of the Good Life

Proverbs 2:1-15

Theme: The Lord gives wisdom.

Introduction

One Sunday, about 15 years ago, we arrived for Sunday school at our church in Trujillo, Peru, and were met by the pastor's son, Tito, who was wearing a T-shirt someone had given the family. There was nothing unusual about that, except that this T-shirt sported the rabbit head logo of *Playboy*!

I asked Tito if he knew what the symbol meant. He did not. After a little conversation with him and his mother, Tito went home and changed shirts. Today Tito is the pastor of that church. His life was not defined by the philosophy symbolized on that shirt. He had worn it, but he had no idea what it meant.

American culture has conditioned us to expect the meaning of everything to be condensed to a logo or symbol. If words are absolutely necessary, we expect them to be few and fast.

But wisdom, key to the good life, is not something we can summarize succinctly or acquire quickly. It requires a personal commitment that internalizes a process of discernment and obedience. Just as surely as Eve discovered it, we, too, come to realize that wisdom does not grow on trees!

The Biblical Witness

While some people are content to condense the totality of their wisdom into one or two catchy slogans they adopted somewhere along the way, the Bible advises a totally different approach.

Wisdom, according to The Proverbs, originates with God, comes to us because we seek it from God and helps us know how to make wise choices that lead to the best kind of life. The world and

everything in it make sense only when our thinking and our subsequent actions begin with God.

Proverbs 2:1-4

The quest for wisdom here begins with a teacher-student relationship that may be that of parent and child. Any good teacher-student relationship involves both responsibility and care from the teacher and obedience and respect from the student. The teacher shares "words" and "commandments."

In other biblical literature, the word *commandments* refers to the instruction God gave through Moses or one of the prophets or to an authoritative order of the king. In Proverbs, they are the authoritative instructions of teachers, resulting from generations of observations from nature and society.

Teachers initiate the quest for wisdom, but students by no means remain passive. Three "ifs" stack up in verses 1-4, mapping out the student's need for effort and desire.

Verses 1-2 call the student to give full attention to the teaching with both outward and inward responses. The outward demonstration of receiving wisdom is an attentive ear. But this is not enough. The student must value the lesson and inwardly process it so that it affects character.

The call to incline the heart expresses the student's inward responsibility to "treasure up" the lesson. We take the heart to mean the seat of our emotions, like love and fear. The Hebrews understood the heart as the center of the will where decisions are made, commitments are shaped and thinking takes place. In Hebrew scripture, the "heart" is the "mind." The heart must be open and receptive to teaching, because a closed mind shuts out wisdom.

Verse 3 instructs the student not only to listen to the words of a lesson but also to internalize their meaning. From that, follows a reciprocal outward movement: "Cry out ... and raise your voice," the student's public acknowledgment of the need and desire for wisdom.

Verse 4 illustrates how acutely the student feels this need and desire: it is like a treasure hunt. Like one seeking silver or precious

jewels, the student is actively perceiving, processing and proclaiming in an urgent search for wisdom. Both teacher and student do everything possible for success.

While we often get to know God and begin to learn wisdom through parents and others, we eventually must accept personal responsibility for our lives and the pursuit of wisdom. A parent or teacher can only do so much.

Although we are adults, we are just as often students as teachers, especially in the lifelong school of godly wisdom. Our search for wisdom and the resulting good life it brings is a part of daily living. It is not a one-time event. Often God gives us wisdom through ordinary experiences.

Even—perhaps especially—those who are parents and have the responsibility to teach their children regularly need additional wisdom.

The Proverbs assure us that God faithfully gives us what we actively seek.

Proverbs 2:5-8

We don't achieve biblical wisdom simply because of our interaction with a teacher or parent. Nor do we receive it completely and immediately because of some divine revelation.

Wisdom comes to us, The Proverbs say, through tradition, teaching and personal experiences and from our disciplined, practical understanding of how things work in the world God has created.

Key to finding wisdom is our openness to God's participation in life. We find wisdom in our relationship with God.

The "ifs" of verses 1, 3 and 4 find their resolution in two parallel "then" clauses (5-8 and 9-11). The first of these resolutions points to God's central role in the acquisition of wisdom without diminishing the role of the teacher or denying the role of the student. The successful student will "understand" and "find" "the fear of the Lord" and "the knowledge of God" (v. 5), but this result comes as much as a gift from God as it does from the effort of teacher and student (v. 6).

The two phrases "the fear of the Lord" and "the knowledge of God" are synonymous. "Fear" is not terror, or even a flinching before the overwhelming strength of an unpredictable power. Rather it is the sense of reverent awe given to a powerful but trusted person.

"Knowledge of God" is not theological information stored in the brain but the intimate, personal experience of a relationship with God. Therefore, the verb *to understand* is not the result of intellectual analysis, but like the verb *to find*, it is the comprehension of reality that comes through experience. Nevertheless, this grasp of reality is not ultimately the result of the student's efforts; it is a gift, "for the Lord gives wisdom" (v. 6).

The Hebrew word order of this phrase is significant. The subject, *the Lord*, occurs first, rather than in its usual position after the verb, and therefore, receives greater emphasis: "The Lord, *and only the Lord*, gives wisdom."

The same word that describes the strenuous effort of teacher/student is used to describe the generous giving of God. The student is directed to "treasure up" (*tsafan*) teachings (v. 1). We are assured that God "stores up" (*tsafan*) wisdom (v. 7) in his treasury to share with "the upright," God's people like the teacher and the student. God is a protecting shield who guards the "paths" of wisdom (the ways of life that include integrity and justice) and those who walk in them.

Proverbs 2:9-11

Verses 9-11 closely parallel verses 5-8. Both declare that the student will "understand" what wisdom is. Both show this understanding occurs, "for" something happens to the student ("for the Lord gives wisdom" in v. 6 and "for wisdom will come" in v. 10). Both clauses conclude by describing the result of the student's life being preserved/watched over and guarded (vv. 8, 11).

Verse 9 describes the content of wisdom: righteousness, justice, equity and every good path. These qualities function as synonyms for wisdom because biblical wisdom is not an accumulation of facts, but the ability to make right choices in life.

The parallel function of verses 6 and 10 shows that the presence of wisdom reflects God's activity, not simply human teaching and learning. Wisdom "comes" from outside human effort and bestows

a blessing on one's being ("pleasant to your soul"). Verse 11 demonstrates that wisdom is God's activity by using the same verbs of verse 8 in reverse order. According to verse 8 it is God who guards (*natsar*) and preserves (*shamar*), while in verse 11 wisdom's synonyms (*discretion* and *understanding*) watch over (*shamar*) and guard (*natsar*).

Proverbs 2:12-15

Proverbs 2:12-15 and 16-19 provide complementary descriptions of evil's temptations. In verses 12-15 the tempters are men; in verses 16-19 the source of temptation is a single female. By using male and female, singular and plural, the writer signifies that through the gift of wisdom, God delivers us from the totality of temptation.

The writer does more than describe the results of the quest for wisdom in verses 20-22. These verses provide insight into God's purpose for giving wisdom: so that the student and the teacher may truly experience "the good life," life lived according to God's instruction, which is full and not cut short.

To a very large degree, we deliberately choose our life's path rather than just falling into one way of living or another. While certain events happen in our lives over which we have little or no control, we are still responsible for how we negotiate those events. And sometimes we create the events that come our way by the choices we make.

We face the temptation of being lured from the good way (v. 20) to travel, instead, more dark and dangerous paths. Many people have abandoned God's direction in life and receive pleasure from their own practice of wickedness and from deceiving others to follow their example.

These individuals have made a choice to "forsake" (v. 13) the good road in order to take, instead, the darker path. It is not as if they are ignorant of the good way; they have intentionally taken a detour. They are able to pervert both speech and deed, twisting logic so that bad is good and good is bad. They find pleasure in their evil that is more than mere sensuality or profit, and they seek to enlist others in their twisted way of living. The naive and gullible easily become their prey.

Proverbs declares that wisdom is God's way of "delivering" (RSV, v.

12; the same word, *natsal*, is translated "will be saved" in v. 16) us from such tempting words. When wisdom becomes a part of us, we can recognize temptation ("ways of darkness," v. 13) and choose the other path.

Wisdom for Today

Perhaps you have seen the television commercial in which a fellow is tempted to steal a certain pair of golf shoes. A little devil on his left shoulder describes the shoes to him and urges him to take them. On his right shoulder, a little angel does a poor job exhorting him to make the wise and right decision. The angel winds up saying only, "OK, OK, just don't get caught this time!"

The teacher of Proverbs 2 does a much better job preparing us to meet temptation through his instruction in wisdom. He anticipates the very words the sources of various temptations might use. In doing so, he does not put new ideas in our heads, but actually neutralizes the power of these temptations when we meet them. As my father taught me: "If you make up your mind now how you will react to certain temptations, you will find it much easier to make and carry out the right decisions when the time comes."

A church member recently told me he had been enjoying a new job of about three weeks. I was surprised, and told him I was unaware he had left his old job. He then told about how his former boss had cheated customers, charging for work that was never done and parts that had not been replaced. This boss asked Dwayne to sign off on a bill saying, "I hope you do not have a problem with this, or you will not work here anymore."

Immediately, my friend responded, "Well, I guess I don't work here anymore, because I do have a problem with it."

He continued his conversation with me by adding, "It was hard on us for a little while, but God really blessed me with this new job. I am much happier, and my new boss does not cheat!"

It was living proof that "the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding . . . so you will walk in the way of good men and keep to the paths of the righteous" (Prov 2:6, 20).

Written by Gary Light, pastor, Winfree Memorial Baptist Church, Midlothian, Virginia

The Pursuit of Happiness

Proverbs 3:13-18; 8:32-36; 17:22

Theme: Wisdom provides happiness.

Introduction

“Whoever said money can’t buy happiness isn’t spending it right,” according to an ad for Lexus automobiles.

“Whoever has the most in the end, wins,” according to the game of American materialistic consumerism.

“Finders keepers, losers weepers,” symbolizes the power of possessions, even for the young.

“Eat, drink and be merry,” so the ancient saying went.

The formula seems simple: wealth and riches are the keys to success and happiness in life. They are the supreme good of life.

Is it true or a myth?

Interviews with lottery winners and notables on Forbes’ list of the 100 wealthiest Americans reveal that making it big financially brings only temporary joy. Those who depend on wealth for happiness usually find that they always need another fix, another trinket, but the good feelings don’t last. In fact, diminishing returns are often the result.

“The second piece of pie, or the second \$50,000, never tastes as good as the first” (see “Does Economic Growth Improve Human Morale?” www.newdream.org/newsletter/myers.html). America is the most affluent country in the world, but those who say they are “very happy” has declined from 35 to 30 percent since 1957.

There is nothing wrong with being happy. Indeed, happiness has been called the “the supreme good” in various ethical systems.

Aristotle thought so. “Eudemonia” (happiness) derived from a balanced, virtuous life.

In the theory of utilitarianism, formulated by Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century, morality was defined as “the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people.” Sounds democratic. The majority defines happiness. But how do we calculate happiness? Bentham defined it in terms of quantity; it was the amount of happiness that mattered.

Would you be happy with ten fast food burgers or three prime rib steaks? John Stuart Mill refined the morality of happiness to say that quality mattered: “It is better to be a dissatisfied human than a satisfied pig.” All the slop in the world couldn’t make Mill happy because he desired the higher pleasures of the intellect. It was better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a blissful, ignorant fool.

How do we define happiness? What is its source? Does physical pleasure, power, prestige, social standing, wealth or material possessions define it? Is it in the quantity or even quality of goods? Does the majority rule?

The Proverbs give the biblical answer: Happiness is found in wisdom that comes from God.

The Biblical Witness

Proverbs 3:13-18

Just like we look for love in all the wrong places, we look for happiness in wealth and material possessions. The ancient teacher of Proverbs saw that phenomenon in his own people and warned against it. Happiness is not found in silver or gold (v. 14) or jewels (v. 15); no human possession can deliver genuine happiness (v. 15).

Christians generally have regarded money as a gift from God, a means to serving him. Unfortunately, prosperity can sometimes be viewed as a sign of divine favor, a god that receives ultimate allegiance. The famous Puritan minister Cotton Mather suggested that “religion begat prosperity and the daughter devoured the mother.”

The Book of Proverbs does not condemn wealth, but warns that riches without character forms a foundation built on sand. A good name and a good reputation are far better than economic selfishness (22:1; 23:4-5).

Thomas Aquinas, the dominant theologian of medieval Christendom, reportedly once listened to Pope Innocent II comment about the prosperity of the Church. When Innocent bragged, "See, Thomas, the church can no longer say, 'Silver and gold have I none,'" Aquinas was unimpressed and responded, "True, Holy Father, but neither can she now say, 'Arise and walk.'"

Jesus' teachings are replete with warnings about the misguided search for happiness through wealth and material possessions. The rich person built bigger barns, only thinking of himself, and was a fool (Lk 12:16-21; note the extensive focus on "I" and "me"). The rich man, in contrast to the poor, sore-infested Lazarus, appeared happy, feasting sumptuously every day, but from the view of eternity, he recognized the poverty and tragedy of his own life (Lk 16:19-31). The rich ruler appeared impeccably moral, but turned from Jesus because of the priority of wealth in his life (Lk 18:18-25). Zacchaeus was rich but selfishly unhappy until he met Jesus and then knew the happiness of serving the less fortunate (Lk 19:1-10).

What then is the source of genuine happiness? The ancient teacher of Proverbs succinctly defined the term: happy are those who find wisdom and get understanding (v. 13). Wisdom is the key to long life (v. 16) and guides disciples along pleasant and peaceful paths (v. 17). In language reminiscent of the creation account (Gen 2:9), wisdom is a tree of life for those who follow (v. 18; see also Prov 11:30). She symbolizes the fulfillment of life.

Throughout these verses, wisdom is personified. But is pursuit of Lady Wisdom (the phrase used by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*) the supreme good, an end in and of itself? Verse 15b, "nothing you desire can compare with her," might give the reader pause.

St. Francis of Assisi, the Catholic medieval saint, is helpful here. He had great disdain for the lust of wealth and material possessions and spoke intimately of "Lady Poverty," the symbolic bride of apostolic faith, personal holiness and ultimate allegiance to the sacrificial and selfless way of Jesus. In the same way, the ancient

teacher of Proverbs reminds us that wisdom symbolizes and points to a way much different and far better than riches or material possessions (vv. 14-15).

Proverbs 8:32-36

The source of genuine happiness is wisdom, and wisdom is related to the ways of God. In Proverbs 3:5-7, the ancient teacher says, "trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil."

Clearly, human wisdom is dependent upon God and his way (see also 1 Cor 1:18-25).

In Proverbs 8:32-36 wisdom, life and the Lord are intertwined. Whoever finds wisdom finds life and obtains favor from the Lord (v. 35). Happiness comes with following the way of wisdom, meaning happiness comes from following the way of God (v. 32).

Happy is the one who listens to God (wisdom symbolizing the "voice" of God), watching daily at wisdom's gates and waiting beside its doors (v. 34). In other words, happiness comes when a person becomes a student of God's way. Disciples are called to gather around God the Divine Teacher who provides knowledge for living.

Ancient Greek philosophers knew the virtue of wisdom. According to Plato, courage, temperance, justice and wisdom were the cardinal virtues of an ethical person. They were derived from perfect forms/ideals in the heavens. Early Christian writers like Augustine "christianized" these four virtues and added faith, hope and love. These "Seven Cardinal Virtues" had their meaning, however, in the character of God. Wisdom is a moral attribute of God. To be wise, then, is to follow God's way and his knowledge.

Students of the New Testament will remember Paul's language that calls Christ the "wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24, 30). Or they will quickly think of Jesus' divine assertion, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6) and confess that true wisdom, true happiness, is in following the way of Jesus.

“Whoever finds me finds life” (v. 35) raises a question of allegiance and priorities. Clarence Jordan, social prophet and founder of the 1940s interracial commune, Koinonia Farm, was accosted by an elderly woman in a southern church after preaching on biblical equality. “I want you to know that my grandfather fought in the Civil War,” she retorted, “and I’ll never believe a word you say.”

“Ma’am,” Jordan replied, “your choice seems quite clear. It is whether you will follow your granddaddy or Jesus Christ.”

The choice is ours to receive or to reject life and genuine happiness (see also Josh 24:15). The failure to follow wisdom rooted in God does irreparable damage to the soul (v. 36).

Proverbs 17:22

The ancient teacher of Proverbs knew what modern doctors tell us: health and happiness are related. “A cheerful disposition is good for your health; gloom and doom leave you bone-tired,” according to *The Message*.

We know the adage: a day without laughter is wasted. At the same time, laughter can hide, rather than heal a sad heart (14:13).

What brings inner peace and genuine happiness? Wisdom, following God’s way. That is when we can say (or sing) with Paul, “rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil 4:4).

Wisdom for Today

Following his conversion, the fourth-century theologian Augustine of Hippo penned a book titled *The Happy Life*. Written in the form of a dialogue between a small group of his friends, Augustine focused on the human desire for happiness. “We wish to be happy, don’t we?” he asked his friends.

They all immediately agreed, so Augustine continued. “In your opinion, is a person happy who does not possess what he wants?” Again they concurred; this person would not be happy. The conversation was interrupted, however, by the insight of Augustine’s devout mother, Monica, who cautioned, “If he wished and possesses good things, he is happy; if he desires evil things—no matter if he possess them—he is wretched.”

What are the “good things” that bring happiness? Augustine knew that happiness was not equated with simply getting what one wants. He had tried to find happiness in frivolity, in an unmarried relationship, in human learning, in a career and in social prestige. He gradually realized in prayer that “we are restless until we find rest in Thee.” He found wisdom; wisdom not defined by the majority or by the world’s pleasures but through a relationship with God.

Similar to the ancient teacher of Proverbs, an early Christian writing of the second century, *The Didache*, said that there were two ways a person could choose: the way of life or the way of death. The way of life was the way of Jesus Christ, and interestingly, some of what we call the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) was quoted.

The Sermon on the Mount defines the holy habits of happiness found in God:

- Happy (blessed) are the poor in spirit (dependent upon God).
- Happy are those who mourn (for their sin).
- Happy are the meek (God-controlled).
- Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (a right relationship with God).
- Happy are the merciful (like God who forgives and reconciles).
- Happy are the pure in heart (a single-minded devotion to God).
- Happy are the peacemakers (like God who offers peace).
- Happy are those who are persecuted on account of their faith in Jesus Christ.

In sum, happy are those who follow the way of life found in God, or in the words of Proverbs 3:13, “Happy are those who find wisdom.”

Written by Doug Weaver, Professor of Christianity, Brewton-Parker College, Mount Vernon, Georgia

Marriage Matters

Proverbs 5:1-14

Theme: Wisdom guards one from temptation.

Introduction

President Harry Truman's friends knew he was devoted to his wife, Bess, and that he went to great lengths to guard against the temptation of adultery. When traveling, he called her frequently and often sent daily notes. He made it a policy never to be alone in a room with a woman. Some, of course, thought Truman took his precautions to an extreme. The results, though, were impressive. His marriage endured; his only child grew up to believe that her parents' marriage had been the most important thing in their lives and historians, to this day, have never found any reason to doubt Truman's fidelity to his wife.

Truman, like many well-read people of his era, was steeped in Scripture. Certainly, he knew Proverbs well, and the kind of wisdom found in Proverbs 5:1-14 provided a framework for his marriage. He believed that fidelity was essential to the good life.

Family life experts recently arrived at a similar conclusion. In February 2002, thirteen leading scholars released a report based on decades of research. They concluded that people in stable marriages enjoy better than average health and economic security. Children reared in such marriage environments are more likely to become stable adults than their counterparts from broken or highly distressed homes. The researchers also noted that society benefits from the results of committed marriage. (See the complete report at www.americanvalues.org under the title "Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-One Conclusions from the Social Sciences.")

Despite such reasons to invest in marriage, divorce is widespread in American culture, including the Christian community. More often than not, infidelity is a major factor. Apparently, evidence and

examples are not enough to help us in the struggle to maintain fidelity. What we need is a change of mindset.

For decades, many people have assumed that fidelity is the product of a healthy relationship. Perhaps we have reversed the sequence of development. Maybe a healthy marriage, at least in part, is a product of fidelity. If that is so, we might also argue that the results of a good marriage (increased possibilities for good health, stable children, etc.) begin with the practice of fidelity.

The Biblical Witness

Proverbs 5:1-14 insists a wise person commits to and guards marital fidelity, and proven techniques exist that enhance the chances for success.

The passage is written in the form of advice from a parent to a son who has recently married or is about to do so. The parent contrasts fidelity and infidelity, in the process, providing shrewd commentary on the dynamics of temptation and the results of succumbing to it. Obviously, the counsel given applies to both men and women.

Proverbs 5:1-2

Most parents can identify with the opening words of Proverbs 5: "My child, be attentive to my wisdom, incline your ear to my understanding" (v. 1). As we consider the admonition, though, we need, instead, to identify intentionally with the child. In order to benefit from Proverbs 5:1-14, we must begin by admitting that the ancient, biblical insistence on fidelity in marriage is worth our attention.

Shifting our focus to that wisdom is more difficult than we may imagine. We live in a culture that tends to magnify the importance of peer wisdom or individual preference and to devalue the ideas of previous generations. In addition, our culture is saturated with messages glamorizing sexual infidelity. The writer of Proverbs is quite right to begin with a call for focused attention to his words, and we will have to make a conscious effort to respond affirmatively.

Verse 2 suggests that paying attention will enable us to develop *prudence* and *guard* the received knowledge. Prudence is the

cultivated ability to pause, look and consider consequences before taking an action. In this case, the writer of Proverbs wants his child to develop prudence when it comes to fidelity and infidelity. The parent figure also promises to provide the kind of knowledge that will enable one to recognize and flee the temptation to commit adultery. All this will be for naught, though, unless the recipient treasures or guards such knowledge.

Verses 1-2 are packed with practical advice that the writer will expand on in the remainder of the passage:

- Pay attention to ancient wisdom with regard to fidelity.
- Remember what you learn.
- Cultivate prudence.
- Develop and practice basic skills that protect fidelity.

Proverbs 5:3-6

How are we to recognize a dangerous situation? The writer answers the question by describing the kind of woman who seeks to entice and snare a married man. Keep in mind that each quality or trait ascribed to the “loose woman” applies equally to a man who sets out to lure a married woman into adultery.

Her lips “drip honey” and “her speech is smoother than oil” (v. 3). Proverbs 7:21 amplifies the description: “With much seductive speech she persuades him; with her smooth talk she compels him.”

Words are powerful for good or ill and play a major role in seduction. The would-be sexual partner compliments her potential victim, using words to bolster his ego and encourage him to view her as kind and supportive. She smoothes over the rough spots in their developing relationship. Where his spouse may find his faults infuriating, this woman calls them endearing or dismisses them as irrelevant to their happiness. In short, through words she seeks to lead the young man to see her as infinitely more attractive, encouraging and available than his wife.

What is the point? Beware of the person who sounds too good to be true. Their words may tempt us by promising a kind of no-cost intimacy that seems much easier than the give and take of marriage.

The promise is false: “In the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword.” Wormwood is a common, intensely bitter

plant found throughout the Middle East. The “two-edged sword” is the sword which cuts both ways. The writer reveals deep insight into the nature of adultery. Adultery promises escape, adventure and passion, but in the end, it produces only fractured lives and the bitter knowledge that we contributed to such results.

The adulteress of the passage promises new life, but her way leads only to death. Most likely, the writer meant death as the loss of a life that might have been and separation from God. In our time, when sexually transmitted diseases have reached epidemic proportions and show amazing resistance to treatment, infidelity may indeed lead to physical death.

Even the temptress does not realize the full import of her words and actions. She may well think she is pursuing a better life for herself and her intended partner, or she may well hold a belief system that justifies infidelity. In any case, she herself is deceived; she does not know that she walks a path that leads only to death. People who follow in her steps share her fate.

Proverbs 5:7-10

Once again the writer entreats his child to listen to genuine wisdom, remember what he hears and put it into practice without fail (v. 7). Having counseled prudence, the writer adds a tactic to those already mentioned: “Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house” (v. 8).

The surest way to avoid adultery is to avoid the temptation to commit infidelity. Taking such an approach requires humility on our part. Frankly, we are called to admit we might not be wise or strong enough to endure temptation successfully. The young man is told not to place himself in situations he already knows will furnish temptations to adultery. Left unsaid but implied is the idea that life will provide an ample number of unexpected temptations without our adding to their number by taking foolish risks.

If the child chooses to disregard this simple call to prudence, he will probably fail to maintain marital fidelity and will then pay a heavy price. The images found in 5:9-10 would have been chilling to a person of ancient Israel. The price for adultery is the loss of honor, goods and position.

Proverbs 5:11-14

Verses 11-14 continue to describe the fate of one who fails to heed the received wisdom. He will come to the end of his life filled with pain and regret. Such a person will look back and, at last, see with remorse the crucial turning point: "I hated discipline, and my heart despised reproof. I did not listen to the voice of my teachers or incline my ear to my instructors." There he began the journey which has led to his "utter ruin in the public assembly."

The contrasts between the two possible courses of life are stark. The good life is founded upon a willingness to accept wise counsel and the discipline to put such wisdom into daily practice. Refusing to listen, accept correction and practice the ways of wisdom lead to disaster.

Wisdom for Today

Wouldn't it be easier if fidelity did not matter? Failing that, if fidelity in marriage matters so much, why does it have to be so difficult to practice? In nearly 30 years of pastoral ministry, I've been asked those questions more times than I recall.

The hard reality is that fidelity does matter. It is foundational to healthy marriages, the well being of children and a stable society. Whenever we are tempted to think otherwise, remember how a promising presidency was undermined by infidelity. Think of the destruction you have seen in the lives of others or in your own life because of infidelity. We have seen the results of infidelity, and we know they are not what we want for ourselves or for those we love.

Still, maintaining fidelity is hard work. Marriage requires a great deal of each partner: adjustments, honesty, sharing, forgiveness and acceptance of much that cannot be changed. Is it really possible for the average man or woman to remain faithful? The biblical answer is affirmative.

Most of us have known at least a few persons who lived out their lives faithful to their spouse. We've seen the results: emotional security, a good reputation, a family life that is healthier than average, friendship in marriage and children who are better prepared to try and build the same kind of life. In our best moments, we know we want such things for ourselves and our families.

"Hold on to prudence," wrote the ancient sage. As it turns out, his words remain startlingly relevant with regard to marriage at the start of the twenty-first century.

Written by Michael A. Smith, pastor, First Baptist Church, Murfreesboro, Tennessee

Working Wisely

Proverbs 6:6-11

Theme: Wisdom leads to a good work ethic

Introduction

At a conference I attended on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, our facilitators placed signs at opposite sides of the room. One sign read: "I must finish my work before I can play." The other read: "It is OK to play before you work."

The facilitators asked us to sort ourselves according to our affinity with these two statements. Our group became a living spectrum of ambivalent attitudes toward work. We were strung across the room from pole to pole and points in between.

Our work pursuit and attitude toward it reveal much about who we are, our feelings about others and ourselves and our view of God.

Consider how often we say "I *am* a teacher / plumber / accountant / software programmer / nurse / realtor / fashion designer / electrical engineer / etc," Pastor David Wheeler writes. "For many Americans, work is not only a source of income, but a primary source of meaning and identity as well" (see "Shine Faith's Light on Work This Labor Day" www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1471).

Despite this work-centered identity, Americans have contradictory, ambivalent and varied attitudes toward work. For some people, work is drudgery. They groan about Monday mornings, gripe about working themselves to death and grumble about lack of free time. According to an article by Alison Stein Wellner in the July 2000 issue of *American Demographics*, the average married couple today works 717 hours more each year than the couple of 30 years ago, a full month more of work.

Kansas City psychologist Jack Larsen recalls a client who described his life this way: "I jump out of bed at the crack of dawn and rush off to work where I am pressured, stressed and busy all day."

Others derive immense satisfaction from their work. I talked recently with a friend who spent an hour effusively telling me of the rewards of her new job and her sense of God's calling to this vocation. For her, this was good work!

Generational attitudes toward work vary. America's senior adults, known as Builders, grew up in economic turmoil and tend to have "traditional" attitudes toward work: discipline, self-denial and retirement as reward for hard work. Baby Boomers grew up in economic expansion and tend to view work as a place of self-expression. GenXers (Busters) grew up in uncertain economic times and view work as a pragmatic necessity. One could say that Builders work hard; Boomers live to work and Busters work to live.

The Biblical Witness

Hebrew and Christian scriptures consider work as an integral part of human life. God's work is creative (Gen 1:1-2:22; Ps 104), and humans are to be creative co-workers with God. Genesis 2 pictures humanity lovingly placed in a garden and charged to "till and keep it" (Gen 2:15). God balances work with Sabbath rest (Gen 2:1-3) and asks humanity to do the same (Ex 20:8-11). Some have interpreted Genesis 3:17-19 to be a curse upon work, pronouncing work to be toilsome.

The Teacher of Ecclesiastes took a cynical but pragmatic view toward work. He despaired about the ultimate value of his toil (Eccl 2:18-23) but finally resolved that we should take pleasure in our work as a gift from God (Eccl 3:9-13). The prophets criticized Israel for treating workers unjustly (Amos 2:6-7; Isa 58:3).

Jesus told parables drawn from the world of work, such as the wise and foolish builders (Mt 7:24-27), the laborers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1-6) and the obedient and disobedient workers (Mt 21:28-30).

In leading toward its goal of wisdom, the book of Proverbs also addresses work and those things that stand in its way. It personifies wisdom as a woman who stands like a prophet on the busy street corner of life and cries out to the simple (Prov 1:20-33). She warns of distractions such as waywardness (1:32), wickedness (4:14-17), foolishness (1:7) and self-reliance (3:5-9). She exhorts students to walk in God's ways (2:20) and to obey God's commandments (3:1-2).

Proverbs 2:9-11 describes the end result of seeking wisdom: “Wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; prudence will watch over you; and understanding will guard you.”

Wisdom is the ability to live life well. The wise person is guided by God’s precepts that have become internalized and issued forth in fruitful living. Proverbs 6:6-11, using the ant as a figure for self-discipline and productive work, describes working wisely and contrasts it with laziness.

Proverbs 6:6

While Solomon’s name is attached to the book of Proverbs, much of the book was written after his death. The attribution of the book to him is a way of honoring him for his legacy of wisdom. Key in the collection of the Proverbs and in the production of all of the Hebrew wisdom tradition were wise men and women known as sages. They worked as servants of the king in a variety of capacities, including serving as treasury accountants and scribes for state documents. Sages are credited not only with writing their own literature but also with editing many of the books of the Hebrew Bible before these books became a part of the official canon.

The Hebrew sages looked to God’s creation to find lessons for human living. Job told his friends: “Ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you” (Job 12:7). In the proverbs Solomon composed, 1 Kings 4:29-34 relates that “he would speak of trees ... he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish.”

Proverbs 4-9 is framed as the instruction of a sage imparting wisdom to students.

In Proverbs 6:6 the sage addressed students and said: “Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways and be wise.” To learn to work wisely, he advised, we need look no further than the example of the ant.

Centuries later, *Poor Richard’s Almanac* would concur: “None preaches better than the ant, and she says nothing.” The use of the singular here is significant: each person has an individual responsibility to achieve wisdom and work wisely.

As a child, I was fascinated by ants. I watched them making long trails to and from their sources of food. I would experiment by blocking their path with various objects. They would be confused momentarily, then they would find a way around the blockade. I was amazed to see ants carrying leaves or twigs or dead insects much larger than themselves. The anthill itself was a busy place, teeming with worker ants. No wonder the sage pointed our attention to ants! They are industrious, diligent, persistent creatures.

Proverbs 6:7-8

The sage continued by saying: “Without any chief or officer or ruler, it prepares its food in summer, and gathers its sustenance in harvest.” The ant is a model for wise work in two ways: it is a self-starter who works without being prodded; and it is proactive, working in rhythm with the present seasons to prepare for the future.

In all my childhood observations of ants, I never saw a line supervisor, CEO, coach or any sign of an ant bureaucracy. Ants work as a team on behalf of the whole colony. They work without supervision. Each one plays its own role. Further reading on the subject taught me that ants specialize, some caring for young, some repairing the nest, some hunting for food. They do their work out of their own God-given character as ants. From the ant we learn that wise work proceeds from good character.

The sage was particularly struck by the careful preparation of the ant. Work is done in rhythm with the seasons of summer and harvest but in preparedness for future needs. The ant is not trapped in the realities of day-to-day work or deceived by abundance. The labor is done in readiness for the coming winter. As the sage said later in application of this nature lesson, “A child who gathers in summer is prudent, but a child who sleeps in harvest brings shame” (Prov 10:5).

From the ant we learn that wise work is oriented to the long-term good of the community. Wise people do the right things without being told to do them, simply because they are the right things to do.

Proverbs 6:9-11

Next, the sage warned those tempted to ignore the ant's example: "How long will you lie there, O lazybones? When will you rise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want, like an armed warrior."

The opposite of the industrious ant is the lazybones ("sluggard" in RSV). The lazybones specializes in taking breaks and, thus, falls out of rhythm with nature. In contrast to healing Sabbath rest, the sleep of the lazybones is simply indolent.

While the sage's warning places responsibility where it lies, it also gives the lazy person freedom to make up his or her own mind. His question, *When will you rise?*, suggests that there is an option. Lazy individuals do not have to remain lazy. They can change, but the choice is theirs.

Proverbs 24:30-34 repeats this bit of wisdom. In this setting, the sage passed by the field of a lazy person. The field was overgrown with weeds and its protective walls were in disrepair. The end result was an unproductive farm, leaving the lazy farmer with no food. As Proverbs 20:4 says, "The lazy person does not plow in season; harvest comes, and there is nothing to be found."

Wisdom for Today

"By work one knows the worker," wrote French poet Jean de La Fontaine.

Whether our work is done for hire or as a volunteer, on a job or at home, as a parent or as an employee, the quality of the work speaks volumes about our character. We value the hard-working volunteer; we chafe at the co-worker who coasts. We delight in the employee who models excellence; we are angered at the family member who never does chores.

As I was growing up, I sometimes heard adults ask, "Are you working hard or hardly working?" It is easy to grasp the contrast between laziness and diligence. But lest we too easily equate biblical wisdom with the Protestant work ethic, we need a third phrase in the question. Are you a workaholic? Do you absorb your

entire energy and your entire identity into work? Do you take time for Sabbath rest? (To learn the warning signs of workaholicism, explore www.shpm.com/articles/wf/work.html.) Perhaps a better question would be: "Are you working wisely, working yourself to death, or hardly working?"

Like many Americans, I struggle with finding this balance. When I was in my 30s, I had workaholic tendencies. After my doctor threatened to hospitalize me with chronic exhaustion, I knew I had to change my attitudes and lifestyle. Surely, this wasn't working wisely! I began to retrain myself to work proactively, focusing on the long-term purpose of my actions and the values that informed my work. I found myself beginning to work in rhythm with my vocation instead of being prodded along by short-term demands.

A decade later, I find myself a healthier worker. This past summer my church graciously gifted me with a sabbatical. I returned energized, refreshed and ready for the work of ministry. Wise work finds a balance between workaholicism and laziness.

I poked around in my yard today and discovered the ants at work. On the verge of spring, they are already preparing busily for the next winter. As the sage urges us, "Go to the ant ... consider its ways and be wise."

Written by James C. Browning, senior pastor, Englewood Baptist Church, Gladstone, Missouri

Think Before You Speak!

Proverbs 12:14-22

Theme: Wisdom helps us control our speech.

Introduction

An experience I had while writing this lesson illustrates how hard it is for us to guard our words. At the time, I was teaching the Wednesday night Bible study in which we used the Courageous Churches curriculum produced by Baptist Center for Ethics. Each week I distributed copies of the lesson both for the current week and the next week. On each set of lessons I had written the appropriate date.

On this particular evening, one of our deacons arrived late and came to the front to get copies of both lessons. As I handed them to her, she asked, "Which one is for tonight?"

My instantaneous and sarcastic response was, "The one with today's date on it."

It was good for a laugh when I told those gathered for the Bible study that I was writing a lesson on wise use of speech. The preacher got caught not listening to his own sermon.

Our speech may bring not only embarrassment but also hurt and anguish. The wrong words are not always as innocuous as the example above, nor are their effects as temporary. My deacon was not offended by what I said, but that was because of her, not me. I can think of some others who would have taken offense at my "smart" comeback.

Indications are that Americans' speech habits have gotten out of control, not only in tone but also in words. Did you know that there is actually an organization called The Cuss Control Academy? It exists to "increase awareness of the negative impact bad language has on society and on individuals who swear too frequently or

inappropriately" and "to help individuals and groups eliminate or reduce their use of profanity, vulgarity and offensive slang" (www.cusscontrol.com).

Words themselves carry no inherent evil or good. A visitor from outer space who picked up a Webster's dictionary would not be able to distinguish between "good" and "bad" words. Words take on power based upon the way we use them and the voice that speaks them, that is to say, speech.

We need wisdom to use words correctly.

With our mouths, we sing praises to God and utter blasphemy against God. Words have the power to heal or to harm, clarify or confuse, cause strife or create peace.

We should not be surprised, then, that the Book of Proverbs admonishes us to seek wisdom for help in controlling our speech and warns us against speaking foolishly and carelessly. Proverbs also emphasizes the rewards for using wise speech.

The Biblical Witness

Proverbs 12:14-22 presents a set of words that elicits a strong reaction: fool and wise.

As L.D. Johnson points out in his book *Israel's Wisdom*, even people who would not be upset to be called a "sinner" take great offense at being called a "fool."

On the other hand, most people would rather be known as "wise" than as a "saint." Proverbs, therefore, takes the comparison from being a religious statement to one that addresses the broader society. This is not to say, however, that there are not spiritual implications to the comparison.

Being a foolish or wise person in this case has nothing to do with intelligence. Rather, whether one is foolish or wise is a statement about one's approach to life. The wise person seeks the best out of life by devotion to the ways of Yahweh, while the foolish person seeks his or her own way.

What does wisdom in speech do for a person? What kind of fruit does the wise use of speech bear? Let's look at Proverbs.

Proverbs 12:14

An underlying principle for the author is that rewards come based upon work that is done by one's hands, in other words, hard work equals prosperity and no work equals poverty. The shocking statement in verse 14 is that what one says is on the same level as what one does when it comes to rewards in life. When speech is positive and productive, the individual receives a benefit.

Proverbs 12:15

A primary characteristic of the fool, according to commentator William McKane, is the inability for sane appraisal and sound intellectual judgment. Such a person does not evaluate his or her words but naturally thinks he or she speaks absolute truth with perfect evaluation. Since the fool does not engage in self-evaluation, words simply flow out unguarded.

The wise person, on the other hand, recognizes that there are other ways of looking at issues and at life and is open to input from those who have a clearer understanding of life and of his or her actions.

Proverbs 12:16, 18

Reaction time in the use of words is important, especially when encountering an insult. The foolish person flies off the handle with an immediate gut reaction. The wise person, true to the commitment to use his or her brain, considers the implications of an immediate reaction.

One result of not responding in anger is that the wise person does not give any satisfaction to the one who intends harm. The attacker is deprived of the joy of seeing the effect of the attack of words. In addition, when verse 16 is considered with verse 15, the possibility exists that the fool reacts with anger because he or she gives no credence to the idea that there maybe be some truth in the assessment of the one bringing the insult. The moment of insult brings an opportunity for self-reflection that can temper the harshness of the insult.

Verse 18 speaks to the person who is tempted to make the harsh comment, even if it has an element of truth in it. The purpose of interaction with other people is to bring healing. The value of being

wise is to recognize that the purpose of life is not always to win but to live in peaceful and healthy relationships with those around us. The fool does not give attention to relationships, because the fool thinks he or she is the center of the universe.

Proverbs 12:17, 19

Both verses 17 and 19 bring to mind a courtroom setting in which a witness gives an account before a judge. Based upon the words of the witness, the judge will decide the outcome of the case. Thus, the use of words is connected with the establishment of justice.

Words are to be a truthful witness by which justice may be established. Those who are truthful and accurate will establish a reputation such that they may be called upon again to give evidence. The liar, however, will be discovered in a short time and be discredited from any future times of witness. This means, of course, that the liar will not even be able to give testimony in court on his own behalf.

Some commentators point out that it is only in the Greek Septuagint that verse 19 takes on this judicial flavor. The Hebrew text of verse 19 takes on a more general nature. Therefore, not only in court but also in everyday conversation, society values the truthful person for the long term, while the liar is soon marginalized.

Proverbs 12:20

This verse is concerned about the effect of words on the one who speaks them. Verse 20 contrasts those who use their gifts and abilities for the common wholeness (in Hebrew, *shalom*) with those who spend their time being destructive. This social planning has very personal results in the life of the individual. Joy comes to the one who plans for *shalom*. The life of the one who plans for evil is lived under a cloud because he or she will not know joy but have a heart filled with deceit. McKane says that those who plot evil become their own worst enemies.

Proverbs 12:21–22

Not only do the courts and society take note of honesty and truthfulness (vv.17, 19), but so does God. The implication is that God takes an active interest in the protection of those who are righteous. The lives of the evil are full of misfortune. According to

verse 22, the truthful receive God's approval (delight in NIV) while the liar receives God's strong disapproval. Here the value of being truthful in speech moves from the advantage in court and society to the reward of being in God's favor.

Proverbs 13:2-3

These verses also contrast the good person with the treacherous person. The focus of the contrast is in how one uses words. Judgment again enters the picture in these proverbs. The life of the person who speaks well is blessed, but the person who is unwise in speech faces violence and ruin (see also 10:11, 21; 11:9) and is to be avoided (see 20:19). Proverbs proclaims that we actually protect our lives by the way we use words.

Proverbs 15:1-2

Perhaps the most familiar of the Proverbs' wisdom concerning speech, these verses remind us that controlling our speech is more than an act of self-preservation. Self-disciplined speech also keeps us from causing harm to others. While these verses are often quoted and easy to say, they are difficult to practice. As humans, we usually respond to anger and pain in like kind. The wise person, however, not only avoids using speech to cause others pain, he or she also has the insight to say the right thing in a particular situation.

Wisdom for Today

Over the past few years I have observed the stock market, partially because of my own investments but also because it serves as an indication of what is of concern in society. Outside of some truly major events, such as the 9/11 attacks, the events in the world seem to have no predictable effect on the stock market. What you would expect to have a detrimental effect sometimes works the other way and vice versa.

I have noticed, however, that the words of the Federal Reserve Chairman, Alan Greenspan, are a consistent predictor of a rise or fall in the market, at least for the short term. If he is positive in his remarks before Congress, the market rises. If he is negative, the market falls.

Proverbs teaches us that the words we use are just as powerful for our lives as Alan Greenspan's words are for the stock market. There is little argument that the words we use have a huge effect on the people around us.

Our words should be uplifting and redemptive.

Our words should be filled with truth.

Our words should flow out of critical thinking.

Before we speak, we should have a clear understanding of our own motives and ourselves.

Most of this simply boils down to providing a good Christian witness with our speech.

The surprising element of these proverbs about speech is the effect our use of words has upon us. Paying to our concern for our own best interests, Proverbs points out what our words do to and for us.

Our words affect our ability to have meaningful social relationships.

Our words determine our community's view of us.

Our words affect our spiritual condition and even God's judgment of our lives.

Our words determine whether our lives are joy-filled or full of despair.

Controlling our speech is an act of self-preservation and an act that uplifts those around us. With wisdom we will use our words to affirm life. With wisdom we will benefit from the fruits of our mouth. With wisdom we will know the truth that "those who guard their mouths preserve their lives" (Prov 13:3).

Written by Wayne Hager, pastor, Calvary Baptist Church, Mt. Airy, North Carolina

Anger? Danger!

Proverbs 12:16; 14:17, 29; 15:1, 18; 29:11

Theme: Wisdom controls temper.

Introduction

Type the words *anger management* into a Web search engine, and you're likely to get over 500,000 links to sites that aim to help.

Anger, particularly uncontrolled anger, is epidemic in America: A parent at a child's hockey game beats another parent to death. A little league baseball coach punches an umpire in his nose, breaking it. An angry motorist turns his vehicle into weapon, hitting another car head-on and killing several innocent people. Another driver, believing a fellow motorist cut her off in traffic, chases down the vehicle, motions for the driver to pull over, gets out of her car and shoots her, killing her instantly.

Author and clinical psychologist W. Doyle Gentry asserts that more than 20 million Americans are harboring a toxic, unhealthy, maladaptive anger he calls Toxic Anger Syndrome (see "Toxic Anger Affects 20 Million Americans and Counting" at www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=564).

"Anger is an emotion and as such it is time-limited," Gentry says. "It comes and goes on a more or less frequent basis. So, we do not wear it on our shirtsleeves. What I think some Americans may wear outwardly are symbols of hostility, an attitude that conveys a feeling of ill-will towards others or hate [manifested as] extreme hostility."

"When anger goes awry it gets manifested as jealousy, bitterness or hostility and [people] may not even be aware of it," according to Andrew Lester, author and professor of pastoral theology and pastoral counseling at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas.

Gentry adds, "I make a distinction between 'people who get angry' versus 'angry people.' The latter are people who are angry so often that it tends to distinguish them from all others around them.

"I do think people are getting angrier these days," he says. "There are many factors contributing to this. Not the least is the accelerating sense of 'entitlement' that Americans have about life, an attitude that goes along with the increasingly narcissistic nature of our culture."

Clearly, many people, including Christians, have a problem with controlling their tempers. The Proverbs offer both warnings and advice that can change homes, workplaces, sports fields, highways and every other place people feel anger.

The Biblical Witness

The testimony of Proverbs provides timely and wise counsel with regard to anger management. These texts have never been more appropriate or more needed. Our focus will be upon six specific verses from this collection of wisdom. From these texts, four characteristics of anger emerge, each with an option for the believer to choose with regard to his or her anger. Notice that there is no denial of anger. Instead, the focus is upon a proper handling of the emotion we will inevitably experience.

Proverbs 12:16; 14:17, 29

These verses make clear that each of us can choose the *speed* with which we express our anger. We can choose to be *slow* or we can choose to be *hasty*.

"Fools show their anger at once, but the prudent ignore an insult" (12:16).

"One who is quick-tempered acts foolishly..." (14:17).

"Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but one who has a hasty temper exalts folly" (14:29).

A hair trigger is nearly always guaranteed to make one look foolish. Most of us can recount times when we spoke in reaction to something or someone who made us angry and uttered words we later regretted and had to apologize for. Many commit acts of

violence or destruction and pay for their momentary temper tantrum for years and years. The folly of a hasty temper is played out daily in the local newspaper accounts of road rage, family quarrels that turn deadly and minor confrontations that quickly escalate.

The author of Proverbs implies that a gradual approach to anger has a powerful benefit. Along the way to anger, one is granted understanding. Isn't that the way it has worked for you? Rather than reacting viscerally, you try engaging the mind before engaging the tongue. Seeking to listen and understand before replying or reacting can be a great source of insight and may bring a fresh appreciation for the circumstances that have produced the person or event that is so aggravating.

Proverbs 15:1

Each of us can also choose the *texture* with which we express our anger. We can choose to be *soft* or *harsh*.

"A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (15:1).

One of the great lessons of life most of us learn the hard way is that people tend to give back to us what we give them. A calm, friendly face is more likely to soften that harried check-out clerk than a stern, condescending demeanor.

Notice that this text suggests that it is a soft *answer* that works the magic of transformation. An answer implies a preceding question. A question implies interest in someone or something. The tone of our response to those who inquire of us is often the key to whether the conversation proceeds in a comfortable or in an uncomfortable direction.

Suppose someone whose spouse is undergoing chemotherapy asks you: "What kind of God would permit that kind of suffering?" The tone of your response is critical. A soft answer filled with empathy and concern may well turn away the wrath implicit in the question and cultivate a deeper conversation about God's enduring love. A harsh response, defensive and dismissive because of a perceived attack against God, might well confirm the doubter's suspicion that God is vindictive and not approachable.

Proverbs 15:18

This verse advises that each of us must choose the *temperature* at which we express ourselves. We can choose to be *cool* or *hot*.

"Those who are hot-tempered stir up strife, but those who are slow to anger calm contention" (15:18).

Reactive anger wells up within us and raises our body temperature and blood pressure. The outward signs are universal: our skin reddens, our veins bulge, our voice quivers, our words come out in a rush and at a higher pitch than normal. Those physical characteristics are mirrored by others, and in no time a contentious situation escalates into something that can quickly get out of hand.

On the other hand, when our anxiety is controlled and our reactions are measured and considered, the result is a calming effect upon all involved. Cool, slow-to-anger Christians use a calm demeanor and appropriate humor to bring temperatures down and keep communication lines open.

Jesus modeled this non-reactive, non-anxious presence again and again in his encounters with hostile religious leaders who deliberately tried to provoke him and break his calm spirit. When his enemies would come spoiling for a fight, his reliance upon parables as answers, undoubtedly told with a twinkle in his eye, sent them away frustrated by a man who would not play by their rules. (For an example, see Mt 22:15-22.) We have the same opportunity to witness to the presence of the Spirit and the power of God to cool the heat of emotions.

Proverbs 29:11

Each of us can choose the *quantity* of our anger we express, according to this verse. We can choose between *partial* and *full*.

"A fool gives full vent to anger, but the wise quietly holds it back" (29:11).

The writer of Proverbs speaks a word of truth about human interactions that plays out again and again in our culture. Have you listened to some of the talk-radio programs lately? Ranting and raving is an accurate description of much that takes place on some of the more rabid programming. Guests are invited on, ambushed and subjected to a tirade of vitriol that precludes any meaningful

conversation. True communication is impossible, and often the programs degenerate into shouting matches.

Contrast that with the wise ones who “quietly hold back” on their opinions and anger in order to foster authentic communication. Even when individuals fiercely hold to opposing views, this model allows for dialogue and conversation without the threat of broken fellowship. Some Christians seem unable to engage in relationships with those who are different than they because they know only one way to express their opinions: wide open.

One of Jesus’ most endearing qualities was being accused of consorting with those who were not as religious nor as moral as he. His ability to “quietly hold back” allowed him to enter into life-changing relationships that the religious professionals never knew.

Wisdom for Today

The world is increasingly desperate to see men and women who live out the claims of the Christian faith in real life. All of our rosy rhetoric, all the sermons and lessons we so ardently proclaim can be destroyed by a moment of anger that is unchecked and on public display. Our public witness, our demeanor in our home and on the job might well be the only glimpse of the Christian faith some will ever know. Handling our anger in a biblical, Christ-like fashion is a vital part of living the Christian life well.

But there is more reason to manage our anger than what it can do to others.

Have you read Frederick Buechner’s definition of anger? “Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun,” he writes. “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 to 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.”

The real wisdom of these texts from Proverbs is that handling our anger may save our lives. Mis-handled anger is like a toxic substance in our spiritual life. When we deal with our anger appropriately, we free up the Spirit to lead us into the deeper

regions of the faith. No longer are we like children, sentenced by our emotional upheavals to a life of shallow faith. Instead, we become deeper and wiser followers of Christ. Jesus calls that “abundant life” (Jn 10:10).

By dealing with our anger at the appropriate speed, texture and temperature and in the right quantity, we are freed to live the life of dynamic discipleship Jesus envisioned for us. Our understanding of life and faith and people grows exponentially as we move past our anger into understanding.

How wise the writer of Proverbs proves to be! “Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding...” (14:29).

Written by Bill Wilson, pastor, First Baptist Church, Waynesboro, Virginia

When Much Is Too Much

Proverbs 1:8-19; 23:4; 15:27; 16:8; 22:1-2; 28:25

Theme: Wisdom warns about greed.

Introduction

A fight broke out in the hot, humid air of the sparse classroom. Two young boys, neither of whom owned anything worth fighting over, scuffled in the dirt floor. When the new teacher stepped in to interrupt the struggle, one of the small boys fixed his glare on her and menacingly raised his fists.

Now principal of the Verbo School in Managua, Nicaragua, Gloria recalls this first memory of that ruffian named Israel. As a young teacher, she wondered if Israel would ever change his volatile temperament.

After checking his background, Gloria discovered that Israel and his twin sister had been abandoned as babies. Today he has no memory of a parent. The orphanage, a crudely constructed brick building with ill-shaped holes for windows, is now “home.” He wears dollar-store rubber sandals as his only pair of shoes. His ribs protrude, symptomatic of the all-too-common malnutrition. The orphans are his only family.

The fight occurred in a former day of Israel’s young life. Now a slightly built 14-year-old, Israel’s demeanor is far removed from the angry boy who feared the intervention of the adult. Instead of closed fists, Israel now greets visitors to his orphanage home with a wide smile and a warm hug. The young teacher is now his principal and friend (see “West Virginia Church Experiences Life ‘in the Raw’” www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1184).

Despite having nothing of his own, Israel has managed to replace hate with love, fear with trust and strife with contentment. Israel possesses what many of us want, even though he lives among the poorest in this impoverished country.

Israel lives in stark contrast to the pursuit of life as we know it. In his world, nothingness leads to everything. In our world, having even slightly less than our neighbor signifies a subtle awareness of inferiority, a sense of failure. In Israel’s world of material poverty, he still accumulates much: the treasures of life in love, trust and contentment.

Based on many of the wisdom sayings of the Proverbs, the word that separates Israel’s world and most of the communities in which we live is *greed*. It is the word that simply means “too much.” It drives our overpowering thirst for possessions, our unbridled hunger for things and the overwhelming desire for the money to buy those things. Designated by its contemporary moniker *affluenza*, greed is the disease of affluence.

Given the drastic contrast between Israel’s existence and that of the typical American, we recognize that we have much. The question is, “When is much too much?”

The answer is not an easy one. Our society tolerates greed and even celebrates it. More is better; the quest is admirable and wealth is accomplishment. In the end, one can argue that greed is the catalyst for wealth, which spurs employment, which stimulates production, which provides the resources to purchase the product, which generates more wealth. The cycle is dizzying, but is greed the engine that propels the American dream?

We cannot relegate our ascription of greed to the business world only. Even some within the Christian tradition claim that material wealth is a sign of God’s favor. The best-selling concept of the prayer of Jabez gives hope to those who wish to “enlarge their territory.” Greed then becomes the human pursuit of the divine blessing.

When is much too much?

The Biblical Witness

Numerous biblical passages in Christian scripture give warning to greed, the lust for possessions. Consistently, the texts point to the spirit of greed as the germination that leads to full-blown obsession, replacing God with other foci of worship. Greed reorders our priorities. Greed is, in short, idolatry.

The book of Proverbs contains numerous warnings about greed. Despite these biblical admonitions, greed still flourishes—even in the church.

Proverbs 1:8-19

Wisdom warns that greed associates us with the wrong crowd.

In this first long teaching poem of Proverbs, the parents warn the youth about the companions with whom he associates. While the words of loving parents are like a beautiful crown of flowers and an expensive pendant of jewelry (vv. 8-9), the enticement of the lawless crowd is the fateful attainment of things (v. 19).

The criminal element bribes the young with easy wealth (v. 13). Their victims are innocent people (v. 11) selected merely because of the bounty that such a target could yield. They show no regard for human life or any respect for what belongs to another. The only rule is that if you can get to it, you can have it.

They also coax the youth with friendship. With the promise that “we will all have one purse” (v. 14), the coalition of greed provides a secure bond of companionship.

The futility of associating with such bad influences is compared to a bird that watches a trap being set for it (vv. 17-18). Oddly, the bird has more sense, as it avoids the ambush laid out before its very eyes. On the other hand, these marauders entrap themselves through their unwavering pursuit of what rightfully belongs to someone else. The price of greed is ultimately the life of the one who associates with such evil.

The wise resist greediness and thereby avoid association with the wrongdoers.

Proverbs 23:4

“Do not wear yourself out to get rich,” Wisdom warns. “Be wise enough to desist (23:4).

Greed leads to overwork and even workaholism.

Americans are working longer hours than ever. The idea of “9 to 5” seems more like a movie title or an archaic cliché than a realistic

work schedule. With constant connection via cell phones, pagers, faxes and email, many workers never leave the job. While they may physically be at their child’s recital, they are mentally, and perhaps emotionally, still on the job.

The irony of this verse is that the quest to gather things wears one out in the pursuit itself. Once one has collected the booty of her work, she is too exhausted to enjoy the product of her labor. The exhaustion of overwork is the paycheck of greed.

The wise keep their work in balance and avoid overworking, knowing greed is insatiable.

Proverbs 15:27

Wisdom warns that greed for unjust gain brings trouble for the family.

The writer focuses attention on a special vein of greed. Not that any form of greed is acceptable, but this verse specifically warns about the manner in which greed flows. A particularly pernicious greed seeps into the very fiber of the family. The writer links this kind of understated, yet sinister, greed to “unjust gain.”

Greed is often defensible in the mind of the accumulator, because the method of obtaining the wealth is appreciated and encouraged in American life. We can justify workaholism, because a workaholic is often described as a hard worker. We teach our children a strong work ethic. The owner of the mansion on the corner with the filled five-car garage is revered as successful. We teach our children to want success. The corporate partner who wears a different Armani suit every day is viewed by his peers as a smart businessman.

The greed in this verse addresses the desire for possessions not borne through hard work, success or knowledge. This greed uses unjust means to fill the craving to have more.

The second half of the parallel verse links unjust gain to the acceptance of bribes. Bribes are based on manipulation. Gambling is a form of unjust gain that is built on the principle that many lose so that one can win. Stealing is a form of unjust gain that is based on false ownership. The list is infinite. Surely, all unjust gain creates “trouble for their households.”

The common thread among all forms of unjust gain is that someone inevitably gets hurt. First and foremost, the writer indicates that trouble is a magnet to those who are closest to the greed. The family is the first to hurt.

The wise, on the other hand, make their money justly.

Proverbs 16:8

Wisdom warns that greed is tied to injustice.

This verse builds on the concept of unjust gain (15:27). The process for the greed is the focus. Are possessions collected with “righteousness” or with “injustice”?

The writer uses a proverbial comparison pattern in which two paths emerge, but one is deemed better than the other (see 15:16). It is far better to gain a small amount of wealth in a righteous way than to accumulate a mass of wealth through injustice.

The proverb reverses the “more is better” philosophy of our society. When righteousness is absent from the pursuit, more is not better. In that case, little is better.

Wise individuals base the worth of their earnings on righteousness—not on the amount in the bank account.

Proverbs 22:1-2

Wisdom warns that greed is less valuable than a good reputation.

We are born with one commonality: God creates each of us (22:2). Whether we are born into wealth or poverty, God still is our Creator. Whether we have accumulated hordes of gold or live with the orphan Israel as an outcast of society, God still is our Creator.

We begin the journey alike in the Creator’s eyes. Each human life is equally valuable in the sight of God. The Creator does not measure our worth by our heated driveways or marble tubs.

Similarly, we must not be guilty of measuring our worth by how much we have made. A good reputation is far more valuable than all the wealth of the creation (22:1).

The wise focus their energy on preserving the good name they have before others rather than the possessions they can parade before others.

Proverbs 28:25

Wisdom warns that greed reveals a lack of trust in God.

The greedy person is juxtaposed with the one who trusts in the Lord. The fate of greed is strife. By definition, greed always demands more. With more things comes more danger of possessiveness. With more wealth comes more concern to protect that wealth. With more accumulation comes more risk of others’ covetousness. With more wealth comes more strife. The rat on the spinning wheel runs ever faster with no relief.

However, the one who trusts in God, as opposed to trusting in his gold and jewels, “will be enriched.” The enriched life is not the one that “has it all” by the world’s standards. True riches in life come from a trust in God that far outweighs the size of our fortunes. This treasure chest is bottomless, satisfying and fulfilling.

The wise place their faith in God, not in their wealth.

Wisdom for Today

One Sunday morning, we worshiped with Israel and his “family” at the Nicaraguan orphanage. Possession-deprived orphan and wealthy American stood side by side in the dirt. I found myself with one arm around my own son and another arm around Israel. My son is a strong, healthy, 14-year-old. Israel stands about a foot and a half shorter than my son and is about half his weight. They are the same age. That day, my son stood tall with his basketball shoes and athletic build. Israel stood much smaller with his skeletal back and shoeless feet. However, the greatest difference was that one was called “son” and the other was called “orphan.”

At the end of worship, I squeezed my son tightly. I squeezed the ribs of Israel’s shirtless body just as tightly. Then, the three of us hugged. A father, a son and an orphan. All three of us cried . . . for different reasons. In America, it was Father’s Day. In Nicaragua, it was a day to have a family.

Israel taught us some powerful lessons that day about what it means to be rich. He taught us that he does not need abundant possessions to find enrichment in life. He does not need wealth to be affluent. He does not need accumulations to have family. Israel has found richness by trusting God instead of desiring things. Even though he has no family, his life is full because he knows the love of his “household.”

When is much too much? The life of Israel says, “Too much is when greed for things becomes the idol of worship and the value of family is lost in the pursuit.”

“Those who are greedy for unjust gain make trouble for their households” (Prov 15:27a).

Written by J. Allen Reasons, senior minister, Fifth Avenue Baptist Church, Huntington, West Virginia

Justice for All

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

Theme: Wisdom pursues justice.

Introduction

Recent world events have brought the matter of justice to the forefront of public discussion. Those who attacked the Pentagon and the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, were motivated by a sense of justice. They seemed to think: “America deserves this because she is secular, sensual and selfish.”

Americans (and indeed people around the world) were astonished and angry. Our national leaders vowed to “bring to justice” those who perpetrated this stunning act of terrorism. Thus have come wars and rumors of wars, mixing death, destruction and social chaos with life, liberation and social reconstruction.

These things have touched us all deeply. They have challenged our assumptions and upset our stereotypes. They have pushed us to seek more intensely the wisdom to discern the times and understand the world. Proverbs truly asserts: “Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding” (3:13).

What does the Bible say about justice? How can we apply the biblical ideal of justice to the large issues of international relations as well as the small matters of routine business?

The Book of Proverbs says that those who seek the Lord can understand justice (28:5). When we seek the Lord in the Bible, we discover that there is a serious and sustained attention to these matters.

Deuteronomy 16:19-20 says: “You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes....Justice, and

only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you.”

The great prophets took up this theme. Micah, for instance, stated plainly: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (6:8).

Out of this commitment to justice, the people of Israel formulated many laws that regulated social interaction at both the personal and public levels. The primitive law of revenge was replaced by the principle of restitution, articulated in the phrase, “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” Scales for selling goods were to be honest and fair; stones that marked land boundaries were not to be moved.

The Sabbath rule allowed rest for workers once a week and for the land every seven years. The Jubilee guidelines stipulated that land that had accumulated from the many to the few was to be returned, thus becoming an early effort to maintain fair distribution of natural resources.

Jesus himself picked up this concern for fairness and equity and commanded his disciples to act with kindness and generosity toward those who were weak, alone and ignored. That social environment in which justice prevails and grace rules is known, in the teaching of Jesus, as the kingdom of God, and Jesus directed that we who claim his name seek it first, above all things.

The Biblical Witness

Seven sets of statements from the book of Proverbs demand our attention, promising to provide the kind of wisdom we need in order to discern and do justice.

Proverbs 8:12-21

We begin with one of the wisdom poems that constitute the first section of the book of Proverbs. These poems describe wisdom in such ways as to make wisdom attractive, something to be desired and valued, something that brings good things to life. Wisdom, here personified, gives good advice and sound wisdom (v. 14) and ensures riches and honor, wealth and prosperity (v. 18).

When the poem asserts that “wisdom walks in the way of righteousness, along the path of justice” (v. 20), it does two things of importance. First, it essentially equates “righteousness” and “justice,” putting them in parallel (as synonyms) as is typical of Hebrew poetry. Second, it connects wisdom with justice, saying that where wisdom is, justice prevails. Wisdom leads, to use the familiar words of the 23rd Psalm, in the paths of righteousness.

Proverbs 21:3

Poets, prophets, apostles and preachers have long studied the relationship between worship and justice. It does not surprise us that there is much in the Bible about worship: its forms, its location, its leaders, its spirit. This is altogether right and proper. But the consistent witness of the Bible is this: there is something sick and sinful about worship that does not inspire justice and righteousness.

The Ten Commandments move easily from the rules about worship (commands 1-4) to the regulations about life (commands 5-10). Amos rejected the worship services of Israel because they did not produce justice: “I hate, I despise your festivals, I take no delight in your solemn assemblies....but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream” (5:21, 24).

Worship is the wellspring of justice, as Proverbs recognizes when it says, “To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.”

Proverbs 21:21; 22:16

Here and throughout the Bible we find plain and practical ways to do justice, as well as definite practices to avoid:

“Whoever pursues righteousness and kindness will find life and honor” (21:21).

“Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself, and giving to the rich, will lead only to loss” (22:16).

“Speak out for those who cannot speak” (31:8) is an action plan that has many applications. The Bible connects it to those who are marginalized in society: the poor, the alien, the widow, the outcast, the unclean, the sinner—in fact, anyone who is outside the parameters of power and opportunity.

Many people in the world today are without voice and without vote. They suffer under the tyranny of evil regimes and evil systems. They call out in prayer to God, "Deliver us from this evil." Defending "the rights of the poor and needy" (31:9) is a vocation for individuals and organizations.

The story of Naomi and Ruth illustrates both aspects of the way of justice. Ruth married the son of Naomi; when he died, Ruth became a widow. Naomi, nevertheless, had compassion on her and insisted that Ruth stay as part of her family.

Trying to support herself, Ruth went to the field of Boaz and picked grain from the stalks left standing along the edges of the field. It was a social and legal custom for farmers to leave these stalks standing so the poor might have something to eat. In the end, Boaz married Ruth; but the way to their marital happiness was paved with the justice and mercy of the community in which they lived and particular individuals within that community.

This collaboration of social policy and personal attitude reflects the teaching of scripture and also of Jesus Christ our Lord. It offers a wonderful inspiration to all of us who long to walk in the way of wisdom, who desire to do justice and love mercy, who find delight in living in the way of Jesus.

Proverbs 21:21 and 22:8

Scripture teaches that the fruit of justice is life and blessing, while the result of wickedness is death and judgment. Israel's faithfulness to the covenant of God will allow her to live in peace and prosperity in the Promised Land (see Deut 16:19-20 above).

Much later, in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles, this reward is in the life to come, as life eternal. (See the parable in Matt 25:31-46.)

Here in Proverbs (and in most of the Wisdom literature, what the Jews called Writings), the reward for justice and righteousness is the "life and honor" that comes in this life before death. The first Psalm, which serves as a general introduction to the wisdom literature, describes those who walk in the way of the Lord: "They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper" (1:3).

On the other hand, those who ignore the wisdom of justice "are like the chaff that the wind drives away" (Ps 1:4). This harsh and unequivocal judgment is echoed in Proverbs: "Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail" (22:8).

Then, and now, people tried to reconcile this conviction with the realities of life. They saw the righteous suffering and the wicked living in ease. This disconcerting matter constitutes the entire theme of the book of Job. Jesus promised that those who ignore justice and mercy will "go away into eternal punishment" (Matt 25:46).

Wisdom for Today

Those who read the Bible and worship the true and living God need a fresh anointing of the wisdom of God. We need to understand how the biblical principles of justice and mercy can be effective means of transformation in our lives and in the communities of which we are a part.

We have many questions:

How shall we behave in a society that is increasingly shaped by massive networks and institutions (governments, corporations, religions, media, etc.)?

How shall we deal with the ethical dilemmas that are emerging from the intersection of technology, science and religion?

How shall we respond to the kind of violent provocations like those of September 11, 2001?

How shall we replace vengeful anger with restorative justice?

How can scripture, written so long ago in a culture so vastly different than ours, continue to guide and inspire our search for wisdom?

How can Jesus himself be a model for us as we face the overwhelming issues of the new millennia and of our global village? This lesson reminds us of the connection between worship and justice. It prompts us to ensure that the forms and fashions of our worship services confront us with the character and purpose of God, as one who loves justice and hates wickedness, who holds all

of us accountable for this life and for the life to come. It challenges us to the kind of personal and communal transformation through worship that gives substance to the prayer we pray, that “God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

This lesson also demonstrates the need to read and hear the entire Bible. Every piece and part of it is inspired, and is useful for teaching us, for correcting us, for training us in righteousness, that we might be equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17). We tend to read and rely upon those texts of the Bible that conform to our preferences and confirm our practices. Those that challenge us to think and act radically, even in the cause of justice and rightness, are often ignored. We do this at our own peril; in so doing we jeopardize our witness for God and also God’s will for the human race.

This lesson opens us to hear the Word of God as it comes to us in unexpected ways, breaking through the familiar phrases of church life and breaking down the flimsy facts of our social preferences. For instance, in the Oscar winning film “Chicago,” the under-appreciated, often ignored husband named Amos sings a song that reminds us of those who, like himself, need a fresh look and a fresh help from others: “Cellophane. Mister Cellophane should have been my name. Mister Cellophane: ‘cause you can look right through me, walk right by me and never know I’m there!”

This lament lays bare the realities of life as a “cellophane man” in a society shaped by celebrity and success. Into this distorted and dysfunctional society, we are called to walk in the way of wisdom, doing justice and loving mercy, even (or perhaps more correctly, especially) to the cellophane people on every corner.

Written by Dwight Moody, dean of the chapel, Georgetown College, Georgetown, Kentucky

Avoiding the Fall

Proverbs 16:18-19

Theme: Wisdom keeps pride at bay.

Introduction

It’s the final seconds of the big game in the big tournament. The team with the basketball is losing by one point. As they drive to the hoop to score, a defender suddenly steals the ball. The crowd goes wild.

The young star, amazed at his incredible play, excitedly gestures, “We’re number one!” The referee immediately calls a traveling foul on this strutting player, now basking in the audience’s praise, unaware that he’s just given the ball to his rival.

The opponent hits a last second shot to seal the game. Mere seconds elapse between the thrill of standing on top of the world and the agony of hitting the bottom.

Such basketball drama is the before and after picture of Proverbs 16:18. Fallen pride becomes the pained face of the athlete shown over endless television replays following the game. If only he could have seen what was coming, or if only he had known what he was setting himself up to lose, he would have acted differently. With the benefit of wisdom, he might have avoided the shortsightedness of foolish pride.

The pride that leads to a fall, and the fall itself, are frequent plot formulas in fiction and in life.

To varying degrees, we all know the athlete’s experience. We regularly see it in those in the spotlight, people we love and ourselves. Pride and its consequences are familiar to us. What we need is more familiarity with the kind of wisdom that keeps pride at bay.

Our family has a new teenager in the house. Because of our rapid immersion in such realities as tied-up phone lines and a “baby” now taller than his parents, we know that driving lessons are not far away. Along with their child’s ability to parallel park, parents hope for some demonstration of a wise and humble approach behind the wheel.

Unfortunately, such wisdom does not come as automatically as learner’s permits. It must be learned and, sometimes, results only after a hard lesson.

What is true for the highway also holds true for spiritual travels. Arrogance results in accidents. When we take our eyes off the road, Scripture advises, we crash. Proverbs 16:18-19 offers wisdom for journeying the godly life.

By steering away from pride and conceit, we find a better way to travel.

The Biblical Witness

Proverbs 16:18

Few of us consciously choose a road that leads to ruin. Most try to avoid the paths that cause stumbling, falling or self-destructing. So, why do people fall so frequently?

We may argue that when we took our dead-end roads, they were unmarked or had deceptive signs. More likely, though, we learned to ignore or overlook those helps that would keep us on the better paths.

Scripture repeatedly gives insight into the better ways to travel. Proverbs clearly instructs that our attitude toward our life journey with God affects where that journey takes us. Pride, haughtiness and arrogance are marks of spiritual traveling that has taken a wrong turn.

“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall,” warns Proverbs 16:18.

The succinct wisdom sayings in this book could serve as captions for many stories of Scripture, from Adam and Eve’s saga in the garden to the tumble of the Tower of Babel to Mary’s proclamation

through the Magnificat that the proud will fall and the lowly be lifted up.

No one is immune from the dangers of pride and arrogance. Jesus was most harsh with those who claimed to speak for God. Through his words to the Pharisees he reminded all religious types to be careful with speech, actions and judgments. We must not equate ourselves, our words and our ways with God.

Too often, followers of Christ forget that imitating Christ’s humility is our calling. The most effective witness for Christ comes from those who share the gospel by emptying themselves, taking the form of servants and being obedient to a God they know is beyond their equal. Haughtiness that leaves no room for humility certainly fails and destroys.

With strong language, the Proverbs writers declare God’s disdain for pride and arrogance:

“Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate” (8:13b).

“All those who are arrogant are an abomination to the Lord; be assured, they will not go unpunished” (16:5).

Proverbs describes the punishment of the proud as something that is both self-inflicted and part of God’s active judgment. Those who follow the destructive path have chosen the fall for themselves by ignoring God’s clear direction to avoid this way that will lead to destruction.

God is actively involved in creating a kingdom in which the meek inherit the earth. The arrogant, who put their trust in themselves, will eventually see the truth of what the lowly already know—their only hope is in God. “The Lord tears down the house of the proud, but maintains the widow’s boundaries” (15:25).

Such destructive pride is more than a single decision or an isolated incident. This pride and arrogance is a condition of the heart:

“Before destruction, one’s heart is haughty,” (18:12a).

“Haughty eyes and a proud heart—the lamp of the wicked—are sin” (21:4).

For the Hebrew people, the heart was not only the center of the spiritual life, but the center for all aspects of life. This was where the conscience lay. The word *heart* was frequently substituted for the word *soul*.

Pride takes over our lives and colors everything—our worldview, our vision of God, the way we see ourselves and those around us.

Proverbs 16:19

Fortunately, Proverbs does not leave us this descriptive word of judgment in verse 18 without providing the antidote for debilitating arrogance in the next verse:

“It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud” (16:19).

Picture the contrasting images of pride and humility. Pride, with its elevated position, is quick to place itself on a pedestal and set itself up for a certain fall. Humility is a “lowly spirit,” so close to the ground that it has nowhere left to fall. Instead, it may continue on a steady path.

To live with humility is to live close to the ground, or as Richard Foster suggests in his book *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, “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 pride colors all that we see and distorts the truth, humility gives us clear vision. We recognize who we are in relation to God. We acknowledge that the abundant life comes from God, rather than our own attempts to “divide the spoil.”

Humility is the better way God wants us to follow. Honor follows the one who travels this path (18:12b). “Toward the scornful he is scornful, but to the humble he shows favor. The wise will inherit honor, but stubborn fools, disgrace” (3:34-35).

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

Jesus often reiterated this theme in his teachings, such as when he instructed his followers not to secure the best seats at the banquet

because they might have to “move down,” and when he offered them the truth that those who seek to be first will be last, and the last will be first.

While we know the devastating effects of pride, we still struggle with its hold on us. As Benjamin Franklin said, “In reality there is perhaps no one of our natural Passions so hard to subdue as Pride. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive...For even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my Humility” (www.usoe.k12.ut.us/curr/char_ed/stories/sketches/benfranklin.html).

How do we learn to cultivate humility and travel this better way? Writers of classic devotional literature address this question with which we struggle. St. Benedict, Teresa of Avila and Therese of Lisieux maintain that humility grows when we learn to focus on Christ, cultivate silence, avoid needless chatter, learn to be content in all our circumstances and commit to do small things for the love of God.

Verse 19 assures us that it is better not to take matters into our own hands and seek our own reward, either materially or spiritually. As Thomas R. Hawkins writes, when we are so full of our own accomplishments, we have no room left to receive what God would give to us.

Wisdom for Today

In a powerful scene from his video series based on the book, *The Ascent of Man*, Jacob Bronowski stands on the grounds of the German concentration camp at Auschwitz and scoops a handful of mud from the pond.

“Into this pond were flushed the ashes of some four million people,” he says. “And that was not done by gas. It was done by arrogance. It was done by dogma. It was done by ignorance. When people believe that they have absolute knowledge, with no test in reality, this is how they behave. This is what men do when they aspire to the knowledge of gods.”

He continues, quoting the English military, political and religious leader Oliver Cromwell: “I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ,

think it possible you may be mistaken...’ We have to cure ourselves of the itch for absolute knowledge and power. We have to close the distance between the push-button order and the human act. We have to touch people.”

The subject of humility and prideful arrogance has moved beyond Sunday school classroom discussions and into the realm of editorial pages and Sunday morning talk shows. *TIME* magazine columnists have recently sounded like they were familiar with the words of Proverbs as they urged leaders to walk the path of humility and expressed their yearnings for a better world in which we all might live.

As countries work out their foreign policies and leaders make their plans, God’s wisdom again remains a timely, needed word.

We live in a time when cynicism, another form of pride, runs rampant. People question whether wisdom can possibly prevail or even earn a hearing. Scenes of destruction get more airtime than the better views that result from humble action. But truth persistently reminds us of the better path that God directs us to take.

May we recognize this way of humility and find our way to abundant life.

May we seek the wisdom that keeps pride at bay.

May we remember that “pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (16:18).

Written by Carol Younger, freelance writer, Fort Worth, Texas

Healthy Living

Proverbs 23:29-35

Theme: Wisdom knows the dangers of alcohol.

Introduction

He was a deacon, a father of two beautiful children and a farmer. Richard was also an alcoholic. I met Richard when he presented himself for treatment. He was tired of alcohol destroying everything he loved and everything he had worked so hard to achieve.

I will always remember his response to my question concerning the impact his drinking was having on his ability to maintain the farm. “You can plant a lot more crops on a crooked row, you know.” He waited for my response, and his smile captured me.

Richard worked hard, came to all the required meetings and shared openly. He was the model of how to put it all back together. This pleased me because I really liked Richard. He had an engaging presence, a great laugh and values I deeply respected.

Then came the relapse. Richard accidentally hurt one of his children and lost the trust of his wife. After such a great start, his whole family felt they had lost their best chance at getting Richard back.

When Richard came to my office, his eyes were red from weeping and from the hangover. Richard looked straight into my eyes, his voice deep with emotion. “You’ve got to believe me...I’m not a bad person, I just can’t stop.” And then he wept some more.

My encounter with Richard was a benchmark for me. From that time on, I did not prejudge the character of an alcoholic, nor did I underestimate the power of alcohol to destroy. Richard’s story is only one of millions that bring us to a disturbing reality.

By any means one would choose to add up the cost, the bottom line is the same. Alcohol abuse exacts a terrible toll. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, for example, estimates that alcohol is involved in 40 percent of all fatal automobile crashes. U.S. government data indicates that 40 percent of deaths in the workplace are caused by alcohol abuse.

The economic costs are also amazingly high. Drug abuse costs industry about \$100 billion a year. Alcohol abuse alone will cost each American man, woman and child roughly \$1050 this year.

The wisdom of yesteryear is born out in the statistics and stories of today. Although much has changed since the writing of Proverbs, the power of alcohol has remained constant. It was right and good then, just as it is now, for an older and wiser person to speak honestly about this dangerous drug.

The Biblical Witness

The Bible does not speak with one voice on the use of alcohol. It would be unfair to suggest that this text represents the only perspective one could take away from a biblical study. For example, the Psalmist speaks of wine as a gift from God, and it is to be used to “gladden the heart” (Ps 104:15).

However, the Bible does reflect a universal condemnation on drinking to excess and getting drunk. The cautionary tone of this passage fits well into our modern understanding of the addictive nature of alcohol. The awareness that alcohol consumption can move with stealth from controlled use to addictive abuse is born of wisdom.

Proverbs 23:29-30

In verse 29 the sage abruptly turns the focus of the discourse to alcohol by constructing a six-question riddle. This clever device conveys a great deal of information concerning the consequences of drinking too much wine. The first four questions relate to the serious emotional consequences of alcohol abuse. Woe, sorrow, strife and complaining are apt descriptions of the emotional baggage of an addict.

He no doubt used the “gotcha” nature of these verses to model the process by which alcohol can “strike” the unaware person.

Proverbs 23:33-34

Verse 33 expresses the effects of drunkenness on the mind. Because the language references archaic imagery, it is a very difficult passage to translate. It is clear, however, that the writer is making two important statements on the ways in which alcohol stifles the capacity to know God’s wisdom.

First, alcohol abuse diminishes the ability to perceive clearly what God would have us experience. The effects of drunkenness twist reality into something that is not of God. Secondly, drinking to excess reduces the ability to think plainly. Such impaired thinking blocks relationship to God, thus separating us further from God’s wisdom.

Verse 34, although obscure, is likely setting up the “seasickness” analogy for drunkenness. As one might be tossed about sitting on the deck of a boat, the effect would be multiplied many times from a position on the top of the mast.

Proverbs 23:35

We can convey the dangers of alcohol abuse through a variety of methods: studies of brain chemistry, accident statistics, economic costs, youth bingeing behaviors. But these methods fall short of the most powerful means available: the alcoholic’s own words.

The passage ends with the most compelling argument presented on the dangers of alcohol abuse. The writer allows the affected person to give voice to the result of giving in to the seductions of alcohol.

Many alcoholics know well the scenario presented in verse 35. Waking up after a binge, they realize they have been in a fight or an accident and simply have not felt the resulting pain. It is no accident that alcohol was used to block the pain of medical procedures long before the advent of our modern notions of anesthesia.

In the last phrase of the passage, the writer brings his treatment of alcohol to a sharp focus. After encountering the full litany of ill

effects of alcohol abuse from the physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions, the reader might expect the victim to swear off alcohol forever. Instead, the most perplexing and insidious qualities of alcohol are simply and powerfully spoken: “I will seek another drink.”

Alcohol abuse and addiction have many symptoms. Perhaps the single symptom that most effectively focuses on the real danger of alcoholism is the person’s desire, need or craving to continue the destructive use of alcohol even in the face of mounting negative consequences.

The menacing words, “I will seek another drink,” leave no doubt about the overwhelming power of this drug. Unfortunately, these words are uttered most often through tears and among the shambles of a life destroyed by the drink that is craved.

Wisdom for Today

When my son was very young, *stupid* was a holy word in our home. It was a word not to be used in vain. For this reason, his eyes widened when I told him drinking alcohol was stupid. I reckoned that for the rest of his life, he would examine and test the nuances of this simple statement.

Like the writer of this passage, I found myself wanting the message to be simple and clear. Like the writer, I knew that many people use alcohol and get away with it. But, as this wonderful section of Scripture points out, the risks are far too great and the rewards are far too fleeting to justify drinking alcohol at all.

Although many thoughtful people will disagree with this position, most will agree that the Church should do all that it can to combat the excessive use of alcohol by everyone and the excessive exposure to alcohol marketing to our young.

In light of these teachings, and informed by a modern understanding of addiction, we must ask, “How does the Church live out the wisdom of this passage?” Consider these suggestions:

1. Be in but not of the culture of excess. The Church must not be afraid to be different from the environment of excess all around it. The Church’s natural influence creates an environment less conducive to the excesses of alcoholism. Intrinsic attitudes such as

discipline, responsibility and justice are all essential ingredients to an environment that promotes a growing faith and a healthy (non-addictive) lifestyle.

2. Strive to make a difference. The church has visibility, presence and resources that can make a difference in a culture that supports alcohol excesses. Perhaps no institution other than the Church has as many “branch offices” in our communities.

If the Church chooses to present a voice of moderation, the range of resources it can bring to bear is staggering. Though the alcohol industry can outspend the Church, it cannot match the power of its presence.

3. Work through the family. The Church has access to the single most important environmental component—the family. Good modeling, intergenerational anchors and attachment to loving and supportive people are the most important factors that lead to healthy choices later in life.

While alcohol abuse is a big problem, the church is big enough, its message is powerful enough and its impact is life-changing enough to create a healthier landscape. And there is no room in this land for alcohol. “Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise” (Prov 20:1).

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Walking with the Wise

Proverbs 13:20

Theme: Wisdom encourages us to associate with wise people.

Introduction

“For a long time, I didn’t have any self-esteem,” William began. “The only time I felt good was when I had \$100 sneakers and a \$60 sweatshirt. If I didn’t have them, I didn’t want to go to school.”

Does this sound familiar? Have you ever been negatively controlled by other people? If you are honest, you’ll say yes. Too often beneath a cool image lurks an ego that is easily crushed by something as simple as inexpensive shoes or a generic sweatshirt. Perhaps the desire for a certain reputation, the need to be a people-pleaser, the heavy load of peer pressure or a rocky relationship of co-dependency dictates behavior that enslaves rather than frees us.

We do not exist outside of other people. We live in community and bear the fingerprints of those with whom we live or have lived. God saw to that from the very beginning of time when God created Adam and Eve. Jesus was born into community. And we help shape one another, either positively or negatively.

Sometimes we take the seemingly easy way out in life, choosing to squeeze ourselves into the mold of negative influences within our community. Numerous lives reveal stories of tobacco, alcohol and drug abuse; sex on prom night; gifted students opting to “dumb-down” in order to fit in; credit cards maxed out to keep up with the Joneses; workplace ethics and morals compromised to “go along to get along” and Christians re-wallpapering their minds and actions to be accepted or to exude a faux spiritual status.

Yet, peer pressure at any age need not be negative. According to Herbert G. Lingren of the Nebraska Cooperative Extension, peer pressure “keeps youth participating in religious activities, going to 4-H meetings and playing on sports teams, even when they are not

leaders” (see “Adolescence and Peer Pressure,” www.ianr.unl.edu/pubs/family/nf211.htm).

Positive peer pressure shapes adults, too. Lingren writes, “It keeps adults going to religious services, serving on community committees and supporting worthwhile causes.”

The evidence is clear: the choices we make regarding the company we keep are critical to the kind of life we will live.

The Biblical Witness

If we genuinely seek wisdom, Scripture says, certain people can help us find it, and others will not only obstruct that search but will also lead us down destructive paths.

The Proverbs both advise us to associate with certain kinds of people and warn us to avoid others in our efforts to live a wise life. They reinforce the value of positive peer pressure and describe in some detail the dangers of walking alongside the foolish. The contrasts between the wise and the foolish are striking and numerous.

Take a few minutes to scan the Book of Proverbs and see how many references you can find that address the influence of others and the different paths pursued by wise and foolish individuals such as:

“My child, if sinners entice you, do not consent” (1:10).

“Therefore walk in the way of the good, and keep to the paths of the just” (2:20).

“Do not envy the violent and do not choose any of their ways; for the perverse are an abomination to the Lord, but the upright are in his confidence” (3:31-33).

“Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of evildoers. Avoid it; do not go on it; turn away from it and pass on” (4:14-15).

“But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. The way of the

wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what they stumble over” (4:18-19).

“The righteous gives good advice to friends, but the way of the wicked leads astray” (12:26).

“The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, so that one may avoid the snares of death” (13:14).

“Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not find words of knowledge” (14:7).

“The tongue of the wise dispenses knowledge, but the mouths of fools pour out folly” (15:2).

“The mind of one who has understanding seeks knowledge, but the mouths of fools feed on folly” (15:14).

Note the words connoting action and choice: *Do not consent. Walk. Keep. Do not envy. Do not choose. Do not enter. Do not walk. Avoid. Turn away. Leave.*

Also notice the positive references to the wise and the righteous. The emphatic implication is that wisdom in life lies not just in avoiding evildoers and fools but also in actively engaging with wise people.

Proverbs 13:20

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

Perhaps no verse in Proverbs more succinctly describes the book’s basic teaching on the company we keep. It’s really quite simple, the writer says. The person who truly wants to become wise spends time with people who are wise. Those who spend time in the presence of fools can expect bad things to happen.

Proverbs 13:20 is a positive statement. Its less positive, but just as important, corollary is found in 14:7: “Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not find words of knowledge.”

We will find what we look for in the company we keep, the Proverbs say, and that company will shape us. Fools can no more offer us knowledge than a cow can fly. It’s just not in their nature.

We waste our time when we spend it in the presence of foolish people, because they will never say anything worth hearing. Further, they will likely lead us down dangerous paths. But we astutely invest our time when we spend it with people who are wise.

It is a basic educational principle: wise people encourage others in their development of wisdom. Unfortunately, the converse is true. Fools are also good teachers. Their tribe continues to increase.

The Proverbs are clear in their descriptions of both the wise and the foolish. It should not be hard for us to distinguish between the two.

The Hebrew word for wise (*chakam*, pronounced khaw-kawm’) indicates one who is skilled, cunning, shrewd, prudent, learned and wise, both ethically and religiously. He is a good shepherd who has walked before us and learned firsthand what is best and not merely good.

The wise are not goody-two-shoes, those who never know the agony of defeat or temptation, but rather ones who face life’s ugly dragons and slay them. C.S. Lewis in *The Pilgrim’s Recess* writes, “And what is this valley called? We call it now simply Wisdom’s Valley: but the oldest maps mark it as the Valley of Humiliation.”

The wise are known by their genuine humility, honed on the sharp edge of life’s pressures. Sometimes they bear the scars to prove it. And surely they earn the right to train and guide us.

Another peculiar trait of a wise one centers on her sense of self. An old southern adage says, “She is comfortable in her own skin.” She exudes confidence in her personal relationship with God that spills over abundantly into her communal relationship with God. Others are drawn to her because they somehow instinctively sense God is alive and well within her. And they long to walk beside her and learn how their own lives can reflect and abide in that wisdom, peace and Presence.

The wise one uses both head and heart in walking alongside others. He celebrates the good gifts in others, affirms their value and challenges their use.

The wise feel no need to “go along to get along,” to compromise convictions. Their security is cemented in God’s design, freeing them to welcome others with open arms, to alter their thinking when new understandings arise and to be of tremendous service and guidance to those they encounter.

What about “the company of fools”? How can we recognize them? Fools, say the Proverbs:

- wander aimlessly and pursue evil (1:16; 2:15; 5:6)
- are complacent, even lazy, and do not plan for the future (1:32; 6:6-11; 20:4)
- are smooth-talkers (5:3)
- are up to no good and promote discord (6:12-14)
- use harmful, hurtful speech that often gets them into trouble (11:9; 14:3; 15:2; 18:6-7)
- think their own way is right and will not listen to the advice of others, even their own parents (12:15; 15:5)
- love to hear themselves talk (18:2)
- are quickly angered (12:16)
- cause their parents much distress and grief (15:20; 17:25)
- are prideful and haughty (16:18)
- are a bad influence on others (16:27-30).

“Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another” states Proverbs 27:17. The old adage “you are known by the company you keep” may be trite but true.

Hebrew wisdom teachers clearly placed tremendous value on interpersonal interaction. Our choices regarding the company we keep are critical. Without deliberate efforts to learn and work with others, we become dull.

Wisdom for Today

None of us wants to look like a fool. Even in our rebellion we often label ourselves as renegades rather than reprobates. Yet, foolishness raises its head within our lives, sometimes without our recognizing it. In Hebrew, the word *fool* (*kaiciyl*, pronounced kes-

eel’) indicates a person who is a stupid fellow, a dullard, a simpleton or an arrogant one.

Before we smugly surmise that none of these definitions describes us, consider the ways we may respond to life’s curve balls. Harry Pritchett, former Dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, likens our responses to various animals when the pressure’s on:

- Lion: The lion roars to overcome chaos. He demonizes any enemy as the Evil One.
- Ostrich: The ostrich sticks his head in the sand, denying or avoiding any problem. (Some who long for the “good old days” may fit this category.)
- Butterfly: The butterfly soars so high above the skyscrapers of difficulties that it may pray itself right out of dealing with reality.
- Rabbit: The rabbit freezes in the stark light of a problem; he remains hopelessly still and quiet, hoping it will all simply go away.
- Lemmings: The lemming follows others blindly, even to the point of running off a cliff into the sea.

The good news is that God can use our experiences, no matter how horrid or foolish, and the insights we gain to help others avoid the same pitfalls. The foolish can leave the company of fools and join the company of the wise.

Recognizing that we become wise by walking with the wise, where do we begin? One profound, yet basic, way focuses on having and being a mentor. Befriend someone older who is an effective listener and personal guide. Then befriend someone younger for whom you can fill the same role.

Have you seen Christ in a friend lately? Has a friend seen Christ in you lately?

When we follow the design in Scripture, “Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools suffers harm,” we stroll on holy ground.

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