

Proverbs Today

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Sayings of the wise

People usually appreciate advice when it is practical, down-to-earth, and based on experience. That is one reason why proverbs are part of the heritage of most cultures. The wisdom of experience is put into short memorable sayings that can be passed on from generation to generation. The biblical book of Proverbs is an ancient Israelite composition that preserves hundreds of such sayings.

God has many ways of teaching his people. In New Testament times he used apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers; in Old Testament times he used priests, prophets and wisdom teachers.¹ The priests taught the law of Moses, the prophets stirred people with direct messages from God, and ‘the wise’ taught wisdom based on their own studies of life’s everyday affairs.²

Some of this wisdom teaching, such as we meet in Proverbs, is concerned with what we observe to be the normal outworking of right and wrong in daily life. It says, in effect, ‘as a general rule, this is what happens’. Other wisdom teaching, such as we meet in Job and Ecclesiastes, is concerned with the apparent contradictions in daily life. It says, in effect, ‘there may be puzzling exceptions to the general rule, but life still has meaning’.

Wisdom teachers were therefore more than instructors who passed on pithy sayings – and Proverbs is more than a collection of pithy sayings. Certainly, such sayings dominate, for much of the book consists of two collections of proverbs from Solomon³ along with teachings from other Israelite wise men.⁴ But the book also contains other forms of wisdom teaching. The lengthy opening section is a collection of lectures on the importance of choosing wisdom and avoiding folly,⁵ and the shorter closing section consists of three collections from other wisdom teachers.⁶ But the entire book is as profitable today as it was when first written.

1. Eph 4:11; Jer 18:18
2. Eccles 12:9-11
3. Prov 10:1-22:16 (375 proverbs) and 25:1-29:27 (128 proverbs)
4. Prov 22:17-24:34
5. Prov 1:1-9:18
6. Prov 30:1-33; 31:1-9; 31:10-31



Residential area, old Jerusalem

The basis of wisdom

Teachers of wisdom were active in other nations besides Israel,¹ and they, like the Israelites, found helpful instruction in each other's proverbs. Sometimes they made international journeys to test each other's wisdom and broaden their experience.²

Since the wisdom that these teachers exchanged often concerned the exercise of common sense in everyday life, it is not surprising to find parallels in the proverbs of Israel and its neighbours. But there was one important distinction. The basis of Israelite wisdom was a proper understanding of God and a right relation with him – 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'.³ Israelite wisdom was not tainted by the idolatry, immorality and selfishness often found in the teaching of other nations.

There is, in any era, a form of behaviour that might appeal to people as 'the common sense thing to do', but if it does not spring from an understanding of God, the results are likely to be more harmful than helpful. The wisdom that is 'from above' motivates behaviour that is pure, peaceable, gentle, merciful, sincere and open to reason. The wisdom that is 'from below' motivates behaviour that is devilish, unspiritual, jealous, disorderly and self-assertive.⁴ Godly wisdom promotes behaviour that puts God's interests first, whereas worldly wisdom promotes behaviour that is concerned above all with one's own interests.

Because human beings have a natural bias towards self, they need to check themselves constantly if they are to maintain the sort of life that pleases God. This is where proverbs are helpful. Most are in two-line units which, in the style of Hebrew poetry, express either parallels or opposites. This makes them easy to memorize, so that they might readily come to mind as people face life day by day. But even memorization is of little use if the proverbs are not put into practice.

1. 1 Kings 4:30; Jer 49:7; 50:35; Acts 7:22
2. 1 Kings 4:31-34; 10:1
3. Prov 1:7; cf. Job 28:28; Eccles 12:13
4. James 3:15-17



Ancient Edom, noted for its 'wise men'

In the market place

Whether teaching theological truths or giving advice for living, the Bible rarely speaks in abstract language. It mostly uses picture language or gives real-life examples that anyone can understand. The writer of Proverbs does not want his teaching on the value of wisdom to be a philosophical discourse, so he gains the ordinary reader's attention with a colourful word-picture.

The writer pictures wisdom as a well-respected woman who moves around the city's streets and market places, making announcements to the people. She has something to offer that is available to anyone who wants it.¹ The meaning is that wisdom offers benefits to everyone; it is not just for the chosen few. In fact, the people who think they need it least are the ones who need it most.

Three classes of people that the woman says need wisdom are the simple, the scoffers and the fools.² None of us wants to think that we fit into any of these categories. But if we are irresponsible or easily influenced, we are those designated as simple. If we are arrogantly confident in our own ability and scornful of the opinions of others, we are what the writer calls scoffers. If we have no interest in right thinking or right behaviour, we are fools.

Educated people may find such blunt assessments offensive. What the writer is talking about, however, is not education, or even intelligence, but attitude. He is not talking about those whose mental ability is below average, but about those whose attitude to the issues of life is so sloppy that they can no longer distinguish between the worthwhile and the worthless.

Lack of wisdom caused 'the rulers of this age' to crucify the Lord of glory.³ And if people without wisdom are capable of that, they are capable of anything.

1. Prov 1:20-21; cf. 8:1-3

2. Prov 1:22; cf. 8:4-5

3. 1 Cor 2:8



Around streets and markets, Jerusalem

Cool water to a thirsty soul

‘Like cool water to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country’.¹ This proverb is a favourite of those who live or travel in places far from home. The lack of news about events at home is what makes the news refreshing when it arrives, just as the lack of fluid makes a drink welcome. Thirst makes ordinary water taste like a drink from heaven.

Experiences we sometimes complain about are what make other things more enjoyable. The tiredness of a long day’s work makes sleep a greater pleasure. The loneliness of isolation gives interest to events that might hardly seem worth reporting. The trials of life lead to friendships that otherwise might never have developed their richness – as the proverb says, ‘There are friends who pretend to be friends, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother’.² The true friend is ‘born for adversity’.³

If life was free of trouble from start to finish, it would rob us of those rich contrasts that make it colourful. Like the Lord Jesus, we learn obedience through the things we suffer,⁴ and in the process move towards the full-grown person that God wants us to be. Whatever night of darkness we may go through, the new light that dawns has a glory that is the more striking because of what has gone before.

When we do not expect life to be an existence of unbroken serenity and comfort, we are likely to find true contentment. And that contentment will not only show on our faces, but will be a tonic to us and to others. ‘A glad heart makes a cheerful face . . . a cheerful heart is good medicine’.⁵



1. Prov 25:25; see also v. 13

2. Prov 18:24

3. Prov 17:17

4. Heb 5:8

5. Prov 15:13; 17:22

Cool water in a dry land

Honest work

Many proverbs encourage honest work and discourage laziness. For example, 'Lazy hands bring poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth'.¹ Some may argue that they do not see poverty as shameful or wealth as desirable. Such an attitude is commendable, but the truth behind the writer's statement is that although poverty may not be shameful, laziness is. Although wealth may not be desirable, diligence is.

Elsewhere the writer speaks of the shame that people bring on themselves when their neglected, untidy, overgrown fields silently proclaim their laziness. 'The vineyard is overgrown with thorns, the ground is covered with nettles, the wall is broken down'²

The lazy may not be concerned that they disgrace themselves, but they ought to think of the shame they bring upon their family. 'A son who sleeps in harvest brings shame.'³ Laziness is a form of selfishness. It is also destructive, as observed in the proverb, 'A lazy person is brother to a destructive person'; meaning 'failure to do what should be done is as bad as destroying what has been done'.⁴

We readily acknowledge that we must work if we are to live. But work should be more than merely a way of earning money. From the beginning, God intended people to work, and to find dignity and enjoyment in it. Many tasks in the home, the community and the church may be unpaid, but they are still work, and should be done with purpose and to the best of one's ability.

Christians have added reason for doing all things well, because they work to please their unseen master, Jesus Christ. The quality of their work should be worthy of him.⁵ In Proverbs also there is an acknowledgment that worthwhile work has value in itself. 'The person who does a good job is worthy to stand before kings'.⁶

1. Prov 10:4

2. Prov 24:30-31; cf. 15:19

3. Prov 10:5

4. Prov 18:9; cf. 21:25

5. Col 3:17,23

6. Prov 22:29



Thorns, nettles and thistles

Rewards or results?

Wisdom teachers were observers as well as thinkers. Although they struggled with the mysteries of life, they also looked at the workaday world closely and critically. They taught as those who faced life honestly.

Sometimes the 'teaching' was no more than an observation. It contained no instruction, one way or the other. For example, 'The poor are disliked by their neighbours, but the rich have many friends'.¹ 'A gift opens doors for the giver and brings him before the great'.² Elsewhere the teacher speaks sympathetically of the despised poor and critically of the corrupt rich, but here he is primarily recording his observations.

This is something we should bear in mind when reading those proverbs that may seem at first to appeal to human selfishness. For example, 'Keep my teachings, for they will prolong your life and bring you prosperity'.³ 'Honour the Lord with your wealth and the best of your crops; then your barns will be filled with grain and your vats will overflow with wine'.⁴ It seems that people are urged to a course of action solely because of the reward that lures them on.

A better way to understand such proverbs is not as inducements but as observations. The writer is not appealing to selfish motives, but telling people what will happen if they behave in a certain way. And that applies to bad behaviour as well as good.

The writer has observed that whatever people sow, eventually they reap. The consequences of their behaviour inevitably returns to them, for better or for worse. In the end, those who sow to the flesh will reap corruption, but those who sow to the Spirit will reap life.⁵

1. Prov 14:20
2. Prov 18:16
3. Prov 3:1-2
4. Prov 3:9-10
5. Gal 6:7-8



Dates, Israel

A good listener

Other people notice if we do not listen while they are speaking. Even on the telephone, they can notice our distraction if we are fiddling with a computer, scribbling down something we think more important, or trying to keep track of what is happening on the TV.

Sometimes we give an impression of listening, while thinking rather of what we want to say next. In such cases we deserve the criticism of the proverb that says, 'A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion'.¹ It is yet another form of selfishness, an indication that we consider ourselves more important than others.

On the other hand, how pleasant it is to meet those who are obviously more learned, more gifted, more in demand or more pressed for time than we are, yet they give us their undivided attention. They seem to be really interested in the comparatively insignificant matters we want to talk about. They may, of course, simply be exercising politeness (and even that is commendable), but they may be exhibiting a Christlikeness they learnt from the Master himself. For Jesus repeatedly gave his undivided attention to people who may have appeared to be wasting his time.²

This ability to listen is especially necessary when we are talking with non-Christians, so that we may allow them to express their questions, doubts and opinions. We should realize that many have a deep concern within, and if we are 'people of understanding' we shall know how to 'draw it out'.³

When exchanging views with non-Christians, however, we must be careful not to become heated if they do not readily accept what we say. We must be 'swift to hear, slow to speak', remembering that our anger is not a channel for God's righteousness.⁴ Such anger is often an indication of pride – a feeling of hurt that they reject our arguments rather than sorrow that they reject God's truth.

1. Prov 18:2

2. Mark 5:35-43; 6:30-44; 10:13-16,46-52

3. Prov 20:5

4. James 1:19-20; cf. Prov 17:27; 29:20



Streetside, Jordan

The enjoyment of nature

A much-read part of Proverbs is the second half of Chapter 8, which speaks of the existence of wisdom before the world's creation. Not only was God the source of this wisdom, but by wisdom he created the universe. 'The Lord by wisdom laid the earth's foundations, and by understanding he established the heavens.'¹

Like the wisdom teachers, the songwriters of Israel also had an appreciation of the wisdom of God in creation. Many psalms describe the splendour of the physical world, the most detailed and perhaps the most moving being the lengthy Psalm 104. There the psalmist, like the wisdom teacher, sees every element in the physical creation as a product of God's wisdom. Worshipfully he exclaims, 'In wisdom you made them all'.²

When people do not acknowledge God as the sovereign Creator, they tend to drift into one of two extremes. Many exalt nature beyond what it deserves, sometimes to the point where environmental values outweigh human values. They may even see no distinction between nature and God. Nature becomes sovereign and they become pantheists.³

By contrast, other people see nature chiefly as something they can exploit for selfish gain. They are not concerned for the needs of either the physical environment or other human beings. This was a problem in ancient Israel just as it is today. 'The poor man's field may produce much food, but it is swept away through injustice.'⁴

The lengthy statement of Proverbs 8 referred to above concludes by showing how God rejoices in the inhabited world and delights in the human race.⁵ Whatever pleasure people find in nature is but a faint reflection of the joy experienced by God himself; but even this cannot compare with the love God has for those created in his image. And that is the way it should be with us.



Lotus flowers

1. Prov 3:19-20; 8:22-30

2. Ps 104:24

3. Pantheism is a belief that God is everything and everything is God.

4. Prov 13:23

5. Prov 8:31

Can we trust each other?

Many people do not like to be given instruction, especially the black-and-white instruction that we meet in Proverbs. This is a reflection on our fallen human nature; we do not like laws. We want to be free from restraints, free to do our own thing. But in that case we shall soon discover that where there is no law there is no trust. And without trust, society falls apart.

We see this, for example, when some catastrophe occurs and there is a breakdown in law and order. Looting becomes common, even among those who normally do not break in and steal. Once any course of action becomes more convenient – cheating the tax office, shoplifting, prostitution, abortion, divorce – people will be tempted to take advantage of it.

If we can barely trust ourselves to maintain personal standards once society's restraints are relaxed, how much less can we trust others – people we do not know at all. That is why a society needs civil laws. Where people do not know each other personally, they must have some recognized standard by which society can function.

Within the family, however, written laws should not be necessary. The trust between husband and wife should produce a confidence in their relationship, so that it might be said of the wife, 'her husband trusts in her',¹ and of the husband, 'she does him good all the days of her life'.² This trust not only gives security to their relationship, but also helps in bringing up their children. The 'father's teaching' and the 'mother's instruction' are equally beneficial because the two people trust and support each other.³

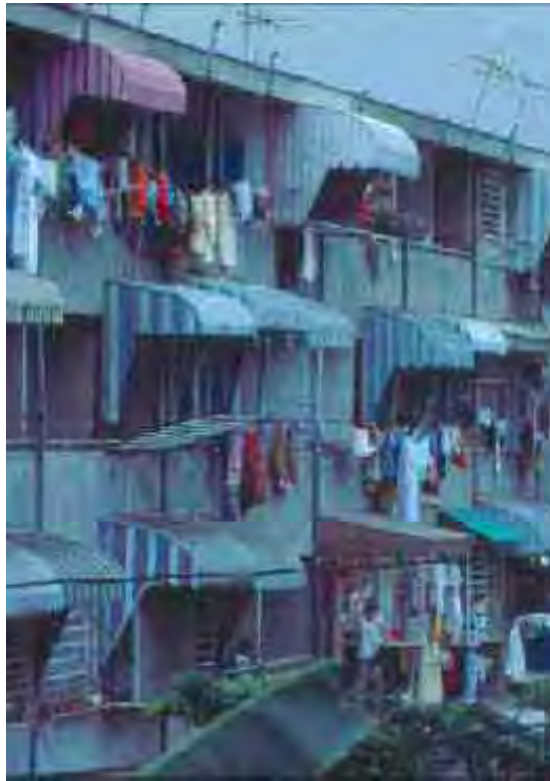
Parents hope that as the children grow to maturity, their lifestyle will exhibit a degree of quality and so reflect well upon the family name.⁴ At the same time they are aware, as many Proverbs affirm, that family failures occur and heartache results. We do not always achieve the ideal, but that is no reason to throw the ideal away.

1. Prov 31:11

2. Prov 31:12

3. Prov 1:8; 6:20

4. Prov 23:24-25



High density housing, Indonesia

Permissiveness

The repeated warnings in Proverbs against prostitution show that sexual immorality was as widespread a problem then as it is now.¹ Those who go looking for unrestrained sexual pleasure often end up feeling disgusted with themselves. This is well expressed by a man who, thinking back on his misguided adventures, confesses, 'I hated discipline and despised correction. I did not listen to my teachers'.²

From earliest times people have wanted to be free to do as they wish, regardless of the restrictions God or any other authority might place upon them. This attitude is commonly called 'permissiveness', and the society that approves of it 'the permissive society'. People want freedom in a range of moral issues, especially sex. By this we mean not the freedom to make love (people have always had that freedom), but the freedom to do so with any person they desire, regardless of a marriage commitment.

We cannot, however, pick and choose from God's moral law, wanting society to acknowledge certain boundaries when it suits us but allow unlimited freedom when it does not. If we have permissiveness in matters where we want it, we shall soon have it in matters where we do not want it. The moral weakness that wants permissiveness in sexual behaviour cannot stop it from affecting other behaviour. The rebellion against restraint that produces sexual licence produces also greed, cheating, violence, corruption, lying and oppression.

In reality, what most people want is permissiveness for themselves but restraint for others. But God's moral order does not work that way. The one who said, 'Do not commit adultery' also said, 'Do not kill'.³ Once we accept one part of God's moral order, we are committed to accepting the lot. But, as the person in Proverbs discovered, to accept any part requires self-discipline. And self-discipline, since it reduces the need for imposed discipline, genuinely promotes a free society.

1. Prov 2:16-19; 5:1-14; 6:23-27; 7:1-27
2. Prov 5:12-13
3. James 2:11



Artemis, or Diana, worshipped in Ephesus as a fertility goddess

Christian influence

Activity done in the name of Christianity has not always helped the Christian cause (the Crusades of the eleventh and twelfth centuries provide one unhappy example), but this ought not to blind us to the great amount of good it has done. Christians have practised the sort of social concern taught in the law of Moses and reinforced in many Hebrew proverbs. God's people have been leaders in helping the poor,¹ providing for good health,² establishing equal justice for all,³ protecting minorities,⁴ and ensuring fair trading standards.⁵

Many welfare services that we today take for granted (for example, hospitals) were Christian initiatives. A feature of the Western church's missionary work has been the provision of education and medical services for those who lacked them. Even in countries where Western missionaries no longer work, national Christian ministries usually provide services to those who are poor, sick, inadequately educated and easily exploited. Often this Christian care is the only care that such people receive.

Christians have been leaders in removing social evils such as child labour and slavery, and promoting social virtues such as freedom of speech and racial equality. But if we wish to enjoy the benefits that Christianity brings, we should defend and promote the values that produce those benefits. History shows that when Christian influence is removed, the nation suffers. Freedom of speech is lost, the right to a fair hearing vanishes, ethnic minorities are made inferior, the destitute are left helpless and the disabled are forgotten.

When the proverb says, 'Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to the people',⁶ it is not encouraging a particular nation to think it is better than others, but saying that any nation is capable of the greatest good or the greatest evil. A lot depends upon how much God's people are committed to God's values.

1. Exod 22:22-27; Lev 19:9-10,13; Prov 28:27; 29:7
2. Lev 13:1-59; Deut 23:10-13; Prov 23:20-21; 24:13
3. Exod 23:3,6; Lev 19:15; Prov 18:5; 21:3,15; 24:24; 31:9
4. Exod 23:9; Lev 19:33-34; Prov 31:8
5. Lev 19:35-36; Prov 11:1; 20:10,23
6. Prov 14:34



Christian care for orphans in the hills of Myanmar

What we put into life

Many Christians see the church as a sort of club – something that exists for the benefit of the members. And like club members in general, they are mostly in the club for what they can get out of it, not what they can give to it.

Experience shows, however, that when people's actions are determined chiefly by what is of benefit to them, they are rarely happy. The truly happy people are those who are so concerned with giving service to others that they have no time to sit around thinking about how to bring themselves contentment. Happiness is something that comes as a by-product of something else. We get it when we don't seek it. If we do seek it, we soon find that it has a way of cheating us.

By giving to others we enrich ourselves; by keeping for personal indulgence we impoverish ourselves. As the proverb says, 'Some people give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what they should give, and only suffer want.'¹ Contrasting examples are then given. Some hold back food in a time of scarcity in the hope of forcing up the price, but others gladly sell at a price that helps the needy. The former are cursed, the latter blessed.²

Often the church's work suffers (and not just the church's work, but community service in general), because people are motivated by what suits them, not by what suits others. Workers are hard to find if the work is unpaid and done in one's own time, but not if it pays good wages and is limited to set working hours.

When personal interest is people's main consideration, the church cannot function as God intended. Soon people are complaining that they 'get nothing from the church', and start looking for another. But the church is like most other things in life in that we only get out of it what we put into it.

1. Prov 11:24; see also v. 25

2. Prov 11:26



Water for passers-by, Jordan

Love and the law

Two proverbs in Chapter 28 declare that obedience to God's law teaches us how to resist wrongdoers (v. 4) and how to decide which people make fitting companions and which do not (v. 7). As in many other parts of the Bible, the law of God spoken of here is not a collection of regulations, but the written revelation of what God is like and what he wants us to be like. To keep this law means to love God and, next to that, to love others.¹

An emphasis on love does not mean that moral standards no longer apply or that wrongdoing can be ignored. Love and law are not opposed. God's purpose in making known his law is not to reduce people to a state where love has no place and they can no longer be themselves, but to show them the sort of life that he, their Maker, wants for them.

God wants people to enjoy life because of a relationship they enjoy with him. In human relationships the more loving and understanding two people are, the more each does what pleases the other. Although they may keep certain unwritten 'rules', they do not see them as rules. The relationship is based on love, which is how God wants it to be with us. Love is not an alternative to the law, but the fulfilment of it.²

Once we have this right relation with God, we shall not see his teachings as burdensome.³ If we love Jesus, we shall want to keep his commandments.⁴ The New Testament is no different from the Old in giving specific instruction about right and wrong behaviour, and Jesus did not teach that we can do as we like provided we are acting in love. Certainly, he condemned those whose law-keeping made them proud of themselves and critical of others, but he did not oppose the law itself. In fact, his teaching about love-based behaviour came direct from the Old Testament.⁵

1. Matt 22:35-39

2. Rom 13:8,10

3. 1 John 5:3

4. John 14:15,23; 15:10

5. Lev 19:17-18; Deut 10:12-13



Christ Church, Jerusalem

The tongue

In a way, biblical statements about the right and wrong use of the tongue are easy to preach on. They require little explanation, and the hearers know from experience that they are true. In another way, however, the statements are difficult to preach on, because preachers are as likely to err as anyone else. People have succeeded in taming birds and other animals, but no one has succeeded in taming the tongue.¹

We all know the truth of the saying, ‘When words are many, transgression is not lacking’,² and therefore we should discipline ourselves to use words sparingly and selectively. The problem may not be that we set out to injure someone (though there are times when that is the case³), but that our ability to control the tongue is not as good as we thought.

Words need not be directed at a particular person in order to do damage. They can do damage even when overheard by someone outside the circle of conversation. Ugly words stick in the mind – which is one reason why we must be especially careful of the words we use within the hearing of children. But fine words also stick in the mind, and every time we say something worthwhile, it could have unexpected and lasting benefit in the life of someone who is listening.

Fine words are therefore of priceless value: ‘the tongue of the righteous is choice silver’, ‘the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel’, and ‘a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver’.⁴ It is sobering to remember what Jesus said about giving account of our words in the day of judgment,⁵ but that ought not to make us timid. God wants us to use our tongues helpfully but truthfully. ‘The tongue of the wise brings healing’ and ‘truthful lips endure for ever’.⁶

1. James 3:7-8

2. Prov 10:19

3. Prov 11: 9,12; 12:18; 26:24

4. Prov 10:20; 20:15; 25:11

5. Matt 12:36-37

6. Prov 12:18-19



Tamed animals put to use, Pakistan

A tree of life

When Solomon, early in Proverbs, said that wisdom brings a long life of peace, contentment and prosperity, he no doubt had much in his experience to support the assertion. He was wise and he seemed to lack nothing. To him, wisdom was a 'tree of life', a source of all that was desirable for an enjoyable and fulfilling life.¹

In the collection of Solomon's proverbs that follows, the picture of the tree of life reappears. The fruit of righteousness is a tree of life, because of the enriching influence it has on others.² A desire fulfilled is a tree of life, because it uplifts those who might otherwise be crushed in spirit.³ A gentle tongue is a tree of life, because its kind words heal the broken-hearted.⁴

The picture of the tree of life very likely comes from the Garden of Eden, where a long life of peace, contentment and prosperity was available, but only if people were submissive to God and obedient. They were not to eat of the other tree in the middle of the garden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because God alone was the one who determined what was right and what was wrong. But human beings, from the beginning, have not been content with submission to God. They want to 'be like God', have their 'eyes opened', have 'the knowledge of good and evil' and, by any means available, gain whatever is 'desirable to make one wise'.⁵

Solomon, in spite of the wisdom he taught, fell into the same sin as Adam and Eve. He wanted to be independent of God and determine what was right and what was wrong. In the end his life was not the noble example it would have been had he submitted to God. He taught the wisdom God gave him, but then failed to practise what he taught.⁶ Wisdom *is* a tree of life, but it begins with reverence for God,⁷ and that requires obedience.



Life, shade, refreshment

1. Prov 3:13-18; cf 1 Kings 4:24,29; 10:23

2. Prov 11:30

3. Prov 13:12

4. Prov 15:4

5. Gen 2:9,16-17; 3:1-6

6. 1 Kings 11:6-10

7. Prov 1:7

Grudgingly or gladly?

In the two sections that collect sayings from Israelite wise men other than Solomon,¹ most of the teachings are lengthier than the familiar two-line form. They extend over several verses, which enables them to build more detailed pictures or give explanatory comment. The subjects they deal with are similar to those dealt with elsewhere.

One colourful picture warns that some selfish people are so miserable that any attempt to get close to them only makes them more miserable. The illustration is of a wealthy but mean person who grudgingly has guests for a meal and all the time is thinking of how much these guests are costing him. The guests are trying to make pleasant conversation, but they are wasting their words.² It is almost impossible to make selfish people happy.

Some people have a way of giving that lets the receiver know they are giving not because they want to but because they are required to. Their heart is not in it. The same is true of certain people who are asked to help in some work or activity. They might consent to help, but they do so in such a way that those who asked them wished they had kept quiet.

Proverbs, like the rest of the Bible, encourages people not just to do their duty, but also to do it in the right spirit. More than that, they should gladly do more than people ask of them. 'Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due when it is in your power to do it. And do not say to your neighbour, "Come back tomorrow and I will give it to you", when you already have it with you'.³

No matter what people give – time, effort, work, possessions, money – they should give it gladly, not grudgingly. God has always loved the cheerful giver.⁴



Generous meal, Zambia

1. Prov 22:17-24:22 and 24:23-34

2. Prov 23:6-8

3. Prov 3:27-28

4. 2 Cor 9:7

Plugging the hole

If we are not careful, an apparently trivial matter can grow into a major conflict. ‘The beginning of strife is like letting out water’.¹ The picture is of water that begins to leak out of a dam. If not stopped, it will increase in volume till it bursts out – and then all the water is lost. Applying this illustration to the beginnings of ill feeling between two people, the proverb gives the blunt advice, ‘quit before the quarrel breaks out’.

The Lord Jesus gave similar instruction.² The best thing to do is forgive, not only because it is a fitting attitude for those who have themselves received forgiveness, but also because when people bear grudges they do more harm to themselves than to anyone else. If, on the other hand, they do not allow themselves to be easily offended, they make life much easier for everyone. As the proverb says, ‘their glory is to overlook an offence.’³

Another proverb concerned with avoiding disputes says, ‘Argue your case with your neighbour himself and do not disclose another’s secret’.⁴ In other words, it is unwise to rush into conflict with someone on the basis of hearsay or gossip. Personal discussion with the person may reveal that one did not have the full story.

The second part of the proverb gives the caution that, having learnt the facts, one must not make public something that has been told in confidence. People who spread such stories ruin their own reputation – an observation that concludes the proverb in the next verse: ‘. . . lest those who hear you shame you, and you never lose your bad reputation.’⁵ A talebearer cannot be trusted. We can be assured that if a person breaks a confidence in telling us a story about someone else, that same person will have no hesitation in telling other people stories about us.



Failed dam, no water, dry creek

1. Prov 17:14
2. Matt 5:25-26
3. Prov 19:11
4. Prov 25:9
5. Prov 25:10

Small things

It is not difficult to associate wisdom with people or things that are impressive to look at. But the wise man Agur reminds us that some things may be very small but at the same time very wise.¹

Ants, for example, are so small as to appear physically powerless, but they have enough wisdom to store up food to avoid a shortage when it is less readily available. Rock badgers are not as small as ants but, realizing they are an easy prey for more powerful animals, they secure themselves by building homes in rocky clefts. Locusts have no king to direct them, but they know that orderly discipline and cooperation will ensure a worthwhile existence. The household lizard is a small and apparently insignificant creature, but it is at home in places where most people could never dream of living, such as the palaces of the mighty.

God seems often to choose things that appear weak to shame those that appear strong. He chooses people who are despised to bring to nothing those who think themselves wise.² When children bring him praise, they put to shame adults who cannot understand the plain evidence before them.³

This is not to say that the prayers of children are to be the pattern for the prayers of adults. God does not expect childishness from mature people, but he does seem to like things that are honest and practical. And the prayers of children, though often concerned with apparently small and insignificant matters, are at least honest and practical. They know what adults have at times forgotten, namely, that God is interested in the small things as well as the big things.

If God sees the activities of ants, badgers, locusts and lizards, he sees also the details of human life. If he notices the fall of a sparrow,⁴ he notices also the activities of human beings. And again it may be the small things that indicate whether or not they are wise.

1. Prov 30:24-28

2. 1 Cor 1:27-28

3. Matt 21:14-16

4. Matt 10:29



Children, Uganda

Fuel for the fire

Immeasurable damage can be done through a trivial piece of gossip. 'For lack of wood the fire goes out; and where there is no whisperer, quarrelling ceases'.¹ Something might begin as idle talk, but through the addition of personal comments, half-truths and exaggerations it finishes up doing great damage. 'A great forest can be set ablaze by a small fire'.²

One problem with gossip is that we always think the problem applies to others, not to us. Some people might admit to being too talkative, and others might admit to being sharp-tongued, but it is difficult to find anyone who would admit to being a gossip. We have even learnt how to gossip by using a spiritual tone of voice. The truth is, according to the wise man, that 'those who belittle others lack sense', whereas 'those who keep quiet have understanding'. While 'talebearers reveal secrets', 'the trustworthy keep a matter hidden'.³

If not checked, gossip can become a habit; worse still, an enjoyable habit. 'The words of the gossip are like delicious pieces of food; they go down into the inner parts of the body'.⁴ They give people a satisfaction that arises only because they consider themselves to be free of the failures they report in others. But such self-confidence leads to self-deception. To feel superior is a sign not of wisdom, but of folly.

There is, however, another kind of speech that can become a habit – again an enjoyable habit, and again likened to something enjoyable to the mouth and the stomach. Pleasant words, like honeycomb, are sweetness to the soul and health to the body.⁵ They also have a far-reaching effect, but in this case the effect is helpful, not destructive. As wisdom teaches people to use the right words, their speech is not only pleasant but also persuasive.⁶

1. Prov 26:20
2. James 3:5-6
3. Prov 11:12-13
4. Prov 18:8
5. Prov 16:24
6. Prov 16:21,23



Bushfire

Grandparents

Younger people usually prefer not to think that, according to the normal course of events, one day they will be old. Some dread the thought. But many people, having reached an age that they formerly thought of as 'old', find they do not feel as old as they had imagined.

Certainly, old age brings disadvantages, but it also has its bonuses. A lifetime of experience, for example, sometimes gives a quickness of perception that compensates for slowness in physical mobility. It may also have taught people to be patient where once they were impatient, to be calm where once they were turbulent. Old age, symbolized in the proverb by 'grey hair', has a certain 'glory' if it comes at the end of 'a righteous life'.¹

Understandably, younger people do not appreciate the intrusion of older people into their affairs, but they may be surprised at the sympathetic hearing they get when they take older people into their confidence. The grey-headed should not be despised. An aged father, mother or grandparent need not yet be written off as outdated.² If they have lived their years in a healthy relationship with a wise and loving God, they should have wisdom from which younger people can profit.

In every generation, parents make sacrifices so that their children enjoy opportunities and benefits that they themselves were denied. Rarely do older people show any jealousy because of this. On the contrary, they receive much enjoyment through seeing their children and grandchildren benefit from the privileges they lacked. This is one way in which 'grandchildren are the crown of the aged'³, and one reason why the aged should not be forgotten.⁴

1. Prov 16:31
2. Prov 23:22
3. Prov 17:6
4. 1 Tim 5:4



Grandparents

Fair play

Most citizens have a sense of 'fair play' in the way people in authority deal with issues. This is reflected in a number of proverbs scattered through the book. 'When things go well with the righteous, the city rejoices; when the wicked perish there are shouts of joy'.¹ In spite of the failings of human nature, people are still able to acknowledge goodness when they see it, and are pleased when they see cruelty and injustice dealt with.

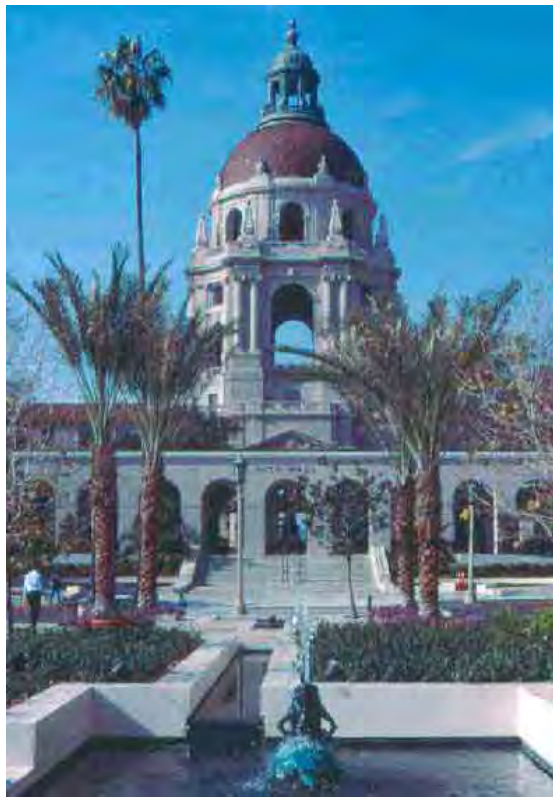
At the same time, citizens should not allow themselves to be swept along by the current of popular opinion. Public feeling can change quickly. That is one reason why government is necessary, even though it may not be the government of our choice. If a body of capable people can share their insights, they can at least provide some stability. 'Without guidance a nation will fall, but with many counsellors there is security.'²

Trouble arises, however, when the government become oppressive and corrupt. Those with money or influence can buy favours, while those who are defenceless or disliked suffer discrimination. In short, when the wicked rule, 'the people groan', 'bribery ruins the nation', 'officials become liars', and 'transgression increases'.³

In view of the devastating effect that a small group, or even one person, can have on an entire nation, Proverbs records the advice given on one occasion to a nation's ruler. It is in the form of a poem written by the man's mother.⁴

The central point of the poem is that, whereas some rulers may use their position to bring self-satisfaction, truly dedicated rulers should deny themselves personal pleasures in order to serve their people properly. Only in this way can they judge with justice and defend the vulnerable. Self-centredness, whether among rulers or among citizens in general, ultimately brings disorder and injustice. Self-denial ensures a more worthwhile life for everyone.

1. Prov 11:10
2. Prov 11:14; cf. 8:12-16
3. Prov 29:2,4,12,16
4. Prov 31:1-9



Seat of government

Status seekers

A number of colourful proverbs show that the desire to impress can easily land people in trouble. Some spend beyond their means and finish with ruinous debts. They should have heeded the proverb that says it is better to be of humble standing and debt-free than to act as someone important and go hungry.¹ As another proverb says, they pretend to be rich but have nothing (while some stingy people pretend to be poor but are wealthy).²

Being seen with the right people helps the ambitious move up the social ladder. At the same time they hope to gain material benefits that will help them further. That is why 'many seek the favour of the person who is rich and generous, and everyone wants the friendship of those who give favours'.³

Money is seen as one way to achieve personal ambitions. But it can also lead to corruption. Bribery gives access to people of influence and smooths over obstacles that appear along the way.⁴ In the process it destroys trust and makes honest dealings impossible. For once people can be bought, they can no longer be trusted.

We do not know where selfish ambition may lead. But we can be sure that the New Testament is making an accurate observation when it says, 'where selfish ambition exists, there you will find disorder and every kind of evil practice'.⁵ In a day when self-assertion is promoted as a virtue, we need to remind ourselves of the warning of Solomon, echoed by Jesus, against being too concerned about status and too eager for the most prominent position. Jesus added to Solomon's warning that those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted.⁶

1. Prov 12:9

2. Prov 13:7

3. Prov 19:6

4. Prov 18:16; 21:14

5. James 3:16

6. Prov 25:6-7; Luke 14:7-11



Enticements

Friends and neighbours

In societies where families are close-knit, people are expected to be helpful to relatives, particularly in times of crisis. Even then, they may give help out of a sense of duty more than out of warm-hearted love. Therefore, while Proverbs encourages family loyalties, it sometimes rates the true friend ahead of a brother or sister. It also acknowledges that not all 'friends' are the real thing.¹

Within any society there will be those who want to befriend others mainly because of what they hope to get from them.² True friends, however, do not use each other for personal benefit, nor do they try to impress with empty or insincere words.³ They are honestly open with each other, rebuking when necessary, forgiving generously, and conversing in a way that sharpens the other's perceptions.⁴

Most people want to live in a neighbourhood that promotes this kind of friendship. Unfortunately, there are nuisances who always spoil things. Chapter 26 collects a number of proverbs that give colourful descriptions of some of these people.

First there are the busybodies, always meddling in other people's affairs (v. 17). Then there are the thoughtless chatterers who, when they see the damage they have done, excuse themselves by saying they were only joking (v. 18-19). Some people gossip and others argue constantly about trifles, but between them they keep alive matters that should have died long ago (v. 20-22). Others specialize in smooth talk that hides a vicious heart – as the glaze on a pot hides the rough earthenware beneath (v. 23-26).

Believers have their patience tested by such people, but they must be 'slow to anger', and must not say, 'We shall do to them as they have done to us'.⁵ The Old Testament gives the same teaching as the New: 'If your enemies hunger, feed them'.⁶

1. Prov 17:17; 18:24

2. Prov 6:1-5; 19:4

3. Prov 27:14; 28:23

4. Prov 17:9; 27:6,17

5. Prov 16:32; 24:29

6. Prov 25:21-22; cf. Rom 12:20



Villagers winnowing grain, Nepal

Seven things God hates

A characteristic of ancient Hebrew poetry is to give a numbered list of items – ‘three things and four’, ‘six things and seven’ – as representative of something larger. This feature occurs in Proverbs 6:16-19,¹ where seven sins are listed as being especially hateful to God. They are not ‘seven deadly sins’ in the sense that they can never be forgiven, but examples of destructive sin concerning which a wise teacher warns his young student.

In summary, the seven sins are pride, lying, murder, evil plotting, violence, false witness and trouble-making. The verses mention the eyes, tongue, hands, heart and feet, and show that the sins are concerned with attitudes, words, thoughts and actions. They serve as a warning that no sin can be treated lightly. One bad habit leads to another, till in the end a person’s entire being comes under the control of sin. Jesus said, ‘Whoever commits sin becomes the slave of sin’,² and Paul echoed this in his teaching.³

This is good reason for keeping close watch on our habits. The gross sins people commit are not normally out of keeping with the character they have developed. By carelessly giving in to an apparently minor sin, we increase the possibility of giving in again, till eventually a minor fault becomes a major problem. Negligence leads to ruin, a truth reflected in proverbs that speak of houses falling to pieces, stone walls broken down and farmlands overgrown with weeds.⁴ Their condition is not what the owners originally desired; it is the product of neglect.

To prevent being ruined by bad habits, we need to cultivate good habits. Then, as Paul goes on to say in the passage referred to above, the habit of obedience makes us slaves of righteousness. Instead of being in bondage to sins that are hateful to God, we produce the character that is pleasing to God.

1. Also in Chapter 30 and elsewhere in the Old Testament.
2. John 8:34
3. Rom 6:16
4. Prov 15:19; 24:30-34; Eccles 10:18



Through negligence ‘a stone wall is broken down’

Concern for the poor

Any reading of the Bible will show that God has a special concern for the poor. In particular he is concerned for those who are poor through no fault of their own.

God identifies himself with the poor in such a way that those who despise them despise him.¹ When people oppress the poor, their cries touch God's heart in a way that causes him to deal with the oppressors as mercilessly as they dealt with the poor.² In like manner he sees kindnesses done to the poor as if they were done to him, and rewards them accordingly. 'Those who are kind to the poor lend to the Lord, and he will repay them in full'.³

In between the two extremes of oppressing the poor and helping the poor is the attitude of a large portion of the human race, and that is indifference. People may not imagine themselves to be working actively against the poor, but if they maintain a lifestyle and support policies that ensure their continued well-being at the expense of the poor, God sees their indifference as cruelty.

When people close their ears to the cries of the poor, God closes his ears to their cries.⁴ One reason why many Christians in rich countries lack a living relation with God is their indifference to the plight of fellow Christians in poor countries.

Just as the Old Testament demonstrated God's identification with the poor, so did the Lord Jesus. As the one who was God in human form, Jesus taught that indifference to the poor was indifference to him, and kindness to the poor was kindness to him. People deceive themselves when they think they can be disciples of Jesus Christ and at the same time neglect the poor, the hungry, the diseased and the outcasts.⁵

1. Prov 17:5

2. Isa 3:13-15; 5:8-10; cf. Prov 22:16,22-23

3. Prov 19:17

4. Prov 21:13

5. Matt 25:34-46; 1 John 3:17



Shredding tyres

