

Old Testament Core Seminar

13

THE PROVERBS

Introduction

Good morning, and welcome back again. After today's lesson we will be exactly half way through our study of the Old Testament. We've covered a lot of ground so far, but we also have a long way still to go. So, it seems like a good place to take a break and address any questions at all that you may have which have not been addressed. We'll save time at the end of class for that. So be thinking of what you'd like to ask – any question at all – which answered might help us understand the Old Testament a little bit better.

Before we get there though, we're going to take a look at the book of Proverbs. The Proverbs are exactly what the title of the book suggests: they are a collection of wise saying, advice, and principles. Some of them are connected to each other thematically, and some are randomly collected together, just standing on there own.

In today's class we'll consider what proverbs actually are, and what they are not, a method for interpreting this genre of Scripture, and, of course, some key texts that seem to really bring out the themes of the whole book.

[PRAY]

Context

Most of the Proverbs were written by David's first descendent to rule over Israel after him, King Solomon. He reigned in the mid-10th century BC. The only real historical context to speak of is that King Solomon's reign was a prosperous and peaceful time in the history of Israel. However, that probably has very little bearing on the interpretation of the Proverbs. What may have more an effect on interpretation is that many times in the first chapters Solomon is addressing his son. It's as though he's teaching this son how to be a man. Whether this son is literal or rhetorical doesn't matter. The Proverbs are full of the wisdom of a man who has lived life and seen much of the world and wants to pass on what he's learned, to help anyone who will listen about how to live a good life and avoid the mistakes a lot of others fall into.

In terms of redemptive-history, the Proverbs don't move the plot line along at all. There isn't much about God's plan of salvation in the course of time. But, as we mentioned last week, Solomon is a type of Christ just like David is. And so the Proverbs typify the wisdom that the king needs to rule over God's people. Of course only Christ possesses the greatest wisdom and can rule over God's people forever. Thus, Solomon's reign being part of the golden days of the kingship in Israel (which we'll discuss more of in the coming weeks), it's apropos that he wrote much of the wisdom literature of Israel.

Theme

There are a lot of themes and principles in the book of Proverbs, but we can generalize the whole book like this:

Wisdom is fearing the LORD, being teachable, and having skill in godly living.

Now from those sort of central themes, many many issues are addressed in the Proverbs: the fear of the LORD, the power of the tongue, what makes a godly woman and how a man should beware of ungodly women, what it means to truly live life, the very pursuit of wisdom, that is to say *how* to get it, receiving instruction, the sovereignty of God, honesty, marriage, sex, family, work, economics, generosity, friendship, and on an on. We'll also see a lot of characters in the Proverbs. These characters will serve as comparisons between opposite ways of life. We'll see the wise man compared with the fool, or the simple man; the righteous and the wicked; the diligent and the sluggard; lady wisdom and the harlot. So there are really a lot themes, and a number of characters who embody them. Nonetheless, we'll see that these many themes will really revolve around these three things. (1) Fearing God means living life in relation to the truth about who He is. (2) Wisdom is often defined in the book of Proverbs as the attribute of teachability. Often there is less of a focus on what one knows, and more of a focus on whether or not they are willing to listen and learn more, or whether they are, sadly, already wise in their own eyes and unwilling to humbly submit to the teaching of others. And (3) wisdom is knowing how to apply truth about God and the world to your life. It's a lot more than just knowing things. It's knowing what to do with that knowledge now that you have it, in order to live a more godly life. Well, however wisdom is presented and promoted at any point in the book, it's very important to understand that:

The LORD is the ground, the means, and the goal of wisdom.

What I mean by the *ground* that is that all wisdom is first found in God. And since He is the Creator of all things, anything that is going to be known in His universe is not entirely understood until it is understood in relation to who He is, why He created it, what it tells us about Him, and so forth. Then, God is also the *means* by which anyone gets wisdom. All wisdom comes from God as a gift. If anyone has wisdom, it is because God has given it to him or her. Thus, He is also the One who gives more wisdom. And by the *goal* of wisdom, I mean that the ultimate value of having wisdom is to know God better. Knowing Him is the end, the greatest good, of having wisdom. Wisdom is not an end in itself, but if it recognizes God (for He is the ground), and comes from God (for He is the means) then it will result in recognizing Him and His ways all the more (hence the goal of wisdom).

[This outline does not need to be gone over. The class only needs to be told that it is printed in their handouts so that they could have a little guide for their own study.]

Outline w/ Pivotal Texts

- I. Proverbs 1-9 – Solomon's Wisdom for the Young Man
- II. Proverbs 10-29 – Solomon's Collection of Independent Proverbs
 - A. Chapters 10-24: The proverbs of Solomon
 - B. Chapters 25-29: The proverbs of Solomon, collected by Hezekiah
- III. Proverbs 30-31 – Non-Solomonic Proverbs
 - A. Chapter 30: The words of Agur
 - B. Chapter 31: The words of Lemuel which his mother taught him

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

What are the Proverbs?

Let's first examine what the proverbs are and what makes them different from other types of Scripture. Most of the Scriptures teach eternal, unassailable truth about God, man, and the world. However, the Proverbs are a bit different. Still inspired, and still very profitable, they are unique in that most of them aren't exactly hardened fast rules that govern the universe, nor guarantees in life. Rather, they are **general principles and observations that can be drawn from the created order by those who fear the LORD**. Take for example **Proverb 26:27**. It says, "If a man digs a pit, he will fall into it; if a man rolls a stone, it will roll back on him." Does that mean that every one who has ever dug a pit has fallen in, or that everyone who has ever rolled a stone has been crushed by that stone? No. I myself have dug pits and rolled stones in safety. Rather, what the proverb is saying has to do with deceit. Digging a pit here is for the intent of harming someone. And rolling a stone is with the intent of trying to fudge property boundaries which were marked by stones in the ancient Near East. So the writer is saying that your deceit will only come back to bite you in the end. That's a good principle to live by and always remember isn't it? But it's just not true that every lie harms the liar (in this life). Yes, ultimately, every lie will be found out on the judgment day and there will be no hiding from the penetrating gaze of the Almighty. However, here in this life it's true that many people tell lies and get away with them. I'm sure you can think of any number of lies you've told and gotten away with. But that doesn't negate the truth of the proverb. Generally speaking, lies do come back to bite us in the end. For every lie you've gotten away with, I'm sure you can think of a dozen that caused the situation to return on your head, worse than it was before. So the application of the proverb then is what? [WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER] Don't try to deceive people, because, nine times out of ten, you will only harm *yourself* in your deceit.

Nonetheless, there are some proverbs that *are* always true; there are **some that do convey eternal truth about God and the hardened fast workings of the universe**. These can be spotted because they make sweeping claims that simply can't apply sometimes and not others. Take for example **Proverb 16:33**. "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD." This is proverb affirming God's sovereignty. And if He's not sovereign all the time, then He's not sovereign. Furthermore, the proverb says its *every* decision is from the LORD. That word "every" is a bit of a give away. So this proverb functions more as a true saying about things than a principle or some sort of advice. Or take **Proverb 17:15** as another example. "Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent-- the LORD detests them both." This one is about God's delight in justice and hatred for injustice. That never changes. He is always righteous. The proverb would *never* make sense if He only *sometimes* hated injustice. So you see it's pretty easy to see when a proverb is functioning as a principle, a general observation about the way things are, and therefore serves as advice; and when a proverb is eternal truth, and therefore should be thought of more in terms of command than advice.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

How are the Proverbs interpreted?

Last week we talked about how Hebrew poetry uses “parallelisms.” That’s where one line expands upon, and amplifies, the line before. Well, the Proverbs are a style of poetry, so everything we said last week still applies. However, they are slightly different because they use parallels in contrast a lot more. That is to say, in simplest terms, they use the word “but” a lot more. So here are a few simple steps to help you interpret the Proverbs.

Turn to **Proverbs 10:8**. [READ] [THE TEACHER MAY WANT TO WRITE THIS VERSE ON A WHITE/CHALK BOARD BEFORE CLASS]

1. First determine the **parallelisms**. What in the second line is in parallel with “the wise in heart?” [WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER] “A chattering fool.” And what’s in parallel with the verb, “accept?” [WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER] “Comes.” Finally, what’s in parallel with “commands?” [WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER] “To ruin.” This one’s an easy one because all the parallel elements are in the same order. However, there is one other parallelism in the verse. Does anyone see it? [WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER] “Accepts commands” can be seen in parallel with “chattering fool.” Do you see that? One is a listener, but the other is a talker. Like all poetry, it’s not an exact science. This new parallelism we’ve found would actually negate the first parallelisms we’ve found. Anyway, slowing down and mulling over the text like this is opening our eyes to some possible different interpretations.
2. Next, identify any **figures of speech**. In the example we just looked at, we said that digging a pit and rolling a stone were ways of talking about deception. Well, are there any figures of speech here? [WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER] “Chattering fool” means one who talks a lot. Further, it probably means one who talks so much that he has no time to listen. What does “comes to ruin” mean? [WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER] Most likely means that trouble and tragedy will come to whatever relationship it is in which you behave like a chattering fool: with a spouse, with an employer, with a parent, etc. One last thing we may need to notice here is that this proverb has to do with superiors, doesn’t it? It talks about accepting commands. So this proverb has little to do with how we relate to our children, or students, or strangers we meet. Those aren’t the type of people who usually give us commands.
3. Thirdly, **summarize** what the proverb says in your own words, based on what you’ve found so far. What might a summary statement sound like? [WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER] “To be wise is not to be above counsel, advice, or commands, but to listen to such. However, if you’re unsubmissive, and always talking and running your mouth, and even finding excuses for not obeying, you will wreck your relationship.”
4. Fourthly, try to think of an **example** from the Bible. Can anyone think of an example in the Bible where a subordinate harmed their relationship when they wouldn’t accept commands? [WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER] I think of John Mark and Paul. John Mark abandoned Paul and Barnabas, and couldn’t travel with them again when he wanted to. However, like we said, the Proverbs are principles for living wise and godly lives, not absolute rules. So it’s no surprise that, while John Mark and Paul did have a falling out, because of John Mark’s insubordination, they did reconcile.

5. Finally, seek about how to **apply** this to your own life. We all have parents who we must submit to. Most of us have bosses. Students, you have teachers. Wives, you have husbands. Members of CHBC, you have elders. And we all live under the authority of God. In these relationships, be quick to listen and submit, and don't wrangle and bicker over things. If you do, you will prove yourself to be wise. But again, these aren't absolute laws. If anyone commands you to sin, obviously you shouldn't. For that, there are a number of other Proverbs warning you to flee from sin.

The real value of these steps is that they make you **slow down** and really consider what the Proverb says. Sometimes we can read over something so quickly that we can totally miss some real gems in the text. Slowing down like this, and really meditating over a text, will cause things to jump out like they haven't before.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

Theme texts

Well, there are a lot of Proverbs that you can throw yourself into, really meditate over, and apply to your life. The first 9 and the last 2 chapters are full of proverbs that are thematically related. They are like extended dialogues on wisdom, how to attain it, and how to apply it. Then the rest of the book has independent proverbs like the one we just looked at. They stand on their own, independent of their surrounding context.

Well, wherever you find yourself in the proverbs, it will be very helpful to remember what we said at the beginning of the class: *The LORD is the ground, the means, and the goal of wisdom*. He is the beginning, the middle, and the end of all wisdom.

Turn to **1:7**. [READ FIRST HALF OF VERSE] The beginning of all knowledge, the starting place of all wisdom, is in fearing the LORD. What does it mean to fear the LORD? [WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER] It means to know who He is in His sovereignty, holiness, wisdom, majesty, power, dominion, beauty, and justice; and to therefore live your life knowing that this God sees everything. To know that He created all things and will call everyone to account for every action, thought, and word will completely change the way one sees the world and their own life. Now, nothing is understood in and of, and by itself. Rather, everything needs to be thought of as part of God's creation, made by Him and for Him, and continually under His scrutinizing penetrating holy gaze. To see the world as *God's* world, and you as just a small part of it, is the beginning and the ground of wisdom.

Turn now to **2:6**. [READ] There are a lot of Proverbs that instruct us on how to get wisdom: by listening, being teachable, being slow to speak, etc. But those are earthly means. It's not that they are not important. They are. But they are secondary. The primary, and ultimate source of wisdom is God Himself. He gives wisdom. If anyone has wisdom, they have God alone to thank.

Finally, look at **verses 1-5**, and let's see what the goal of obtaining wisdom is. What will be the result in one's life if they fear the LORD and He gives them wisdom? As we read these verses, notice that they comprise one long sentence with an if/then clause. The sentence relays a

cause and effect relationship. [READ] Did you hear that? *If you accept words of wisdom, if you turn your ear to wisdom, if you call out for more wisdom, if you search for it as for silver, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.* The ultimate end of obtaining wisdom is that we may know our great God better. Wisdom is not a means to bettering our business, nor simply making our lives more comfortable or easy. But wisdom has a higher goal: to know and enjoy the LORD Almighty. To have wisdom is to understand the world and life, both of which God has created. Therefore, as the world and life are better known, and such wisdom is applied and lived out, of course the Creator will be known and experienced. And that is why we want such wisdom: to know what this world and our lives are meant to be as we see God more clearly and know Him more intimately.

Of course, this in no way replaces the **necessity of faith** in Christ as the only path to being reconciled with God and having a relationship with Him. After all, that initial ground of wisdom *is* the fear of LORD, which, as you heard me describe, is just another way of describing faith. So faith is the starting point, and all who have faith in Christ have a relationship with God. But it's no secret that some know God better than others, and seem to be able to live their lives more in line with the gospel. This is because they have set their hearts to obtain wisdom, and the LORD has given it to them.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

Of course we can't conclude without asking where Jesus and the gospel are in the Proverbs. Well, first, Christ was the very embodiment of wisdom. In **Matthew 12:42** He said that He is greater than Solomon in all his wisdom. No one understood the world and life, and the consequences of one's actions like Jesus did. Now, the wisest thing anyone of us can do is to repent of their sins and put their faith in Jesus Christ. In **I Corinthians 1 and 2** Paul glories in the wisdom of the gospel. He marvels that the gospel is so wise that it supersedes all the human attempts at wisdom by all the wisest men to ever live. For if is only in the gospel that God can be known. No matter how wise one might be in earthly things, without the gospel their wisdom is still insufficient to know God. Thus, God's wisdom in the gospel makes man's wisdom appear as foolishness.

Conclusion

The Proverbs are rich and full of wisdom. Read them slowly, and read them contemplatively. And by all means, strive to apply them, and so understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God.

Application

We all spend a lot of time doing what we love. We spend our energy pursuing the things we like. Well, our application for today would have to be this: want wisdom; desire knowledge! Heed the wisdom of **Proverbs 3:5-6**. [READ] Seek to understand **Proverbs 3:13-18**. [READ] **Proverbs 19:8** says, "He who gets wisdom loves his own soul; He who keeps understanding will find good." I recommend everyone to study and meditate over **Proverbs, chapter 8**. There, Lady Wisdom is personified as the most beautiful of all creatures, more desirable than anything else in the created order. Desire and treasure wisdom. Pursue her. She will help you understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God.

And from that, a second application can be made: parents, teach your children the Proverbs. Much of the wisdom in the first 9 chapters is prefaced with “My son, hear...,” or “My son, listen...” The book of Proverbs is sort of like a training manual for parents. Do you want your children to become godly adults? Then the Proverbs are a great resource for you to use to shape them into godly men and women. Then they too will understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God.

[TAKE GENERAL QUESTIONS ON THE OLD TESTAMENT ANYONE MAY HAVE]¹

[PRAY]

¹ The teacher may want to suggest some books again. The following books are all the Old Testament and particularly as it relates to the New Testament and the gospel. They are here listed in order of simplest to more complex:

God's Big Picture by Vaughn Roberts
Gospel and Kingdom by Graeme Goldsworthy
The Symphony of Scripture by Mark Strom
According to Plan by Graeme Goldsworthy
Dominion and Dynasty by Stephen G. Dempster
Biblical Theology by Geerhardus Vos