

Get Smart: A Study in Proverbs

Study Notes for Lesson 1: Live Beyond a Bumper Sticker

The prologue makes it clear that the purpose of Proverbs is to help us become wise.

Proverbs 1:1-7

*1 The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:
2 for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight;
3 for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair;
4 for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young—
5 let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance—
6 for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise.
7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.*

What is Wisdom?

The book of Proverbs has a number of words that are all closely connected (wisdom, knowledge, understanding, prudence, insight, discipline) In the latter part of verse 3 we see that wisdom is for “*doing what is right and just and fair*” This shows us that wisdom is primarily defined morally. Wisdom is more about living right, than having intellectual knowledge. In the same way, the fool is not one who is mentally deficient, but rather one with poor morals, or one who is immature. If we take our cue from the wide variety of advice that fills the book, it is clear that wisdom has to do with living well.

“Wisdom is the skill of living. It is practical knowledge that helps one know how to act and how to speak in different situations. Wisdom entails the ability to avoid problems, and the skill to handle them when they present themselves”
(Longman p. 14)

Do you believe that God is interested in life as it is lived on this earth? Perhaps some would suggest that God is most interested in eternal life, life as it will be in the age to come. Certainly God is very much concerned with salvation and the life to come, but the book of Proverbs is an excellent reminder that God is every bit as much interested in the life we live here and now. He wants us to live “*right and just and fair*”.

No Guarantees

Proverbs are not perfect. The book of Proverbs is designed to help us live successfully, but this does not mean that we can expect life to be problem free. The book of proverbs never promises that if you live life by the book, that it will be all smooth sailing. This

book was given to us for the problems of life. While it may help us avoid problems, it also teaches us how to handle life's difficulties.

Proverbs are not promises. We cannot read them and expect them to be automatic. For instance Proverbs 21:17 *"He who loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich."* This is not a guarantee that we will never find a person who is hedonistic and rich. Proverbs are more observations that are often true in the long run. The fun loving millionaire athlete may be rich now, but 10 years after retirement what happens. Life is complex. Things don't always happen immediately.

Proverbs are not laws. Applying a proverb is not just about memorizing it and then doing it always. Sometimes we need to understand the proper context for a proverb. Take a look at Proverbs 26:4-5 *"4 Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. 5 Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes."* These proverbs seem contradictory, which would be a problem if they were meant to be universal laws. Wise people understand that there is a time for both of these proverbs, it depends on what type of fool you are talking with.

Proverbs are not always prescriptive. They do not always tell us what to do or what to value. Sometimes they describe reality without giving explicit instruction on what is good and bad. For instance Proverbs 19:4 *"Wealth brings many friends, but a poor man's friend deserts him."* This proverb accurately describes reality but does not teach us that we should abandon our poor friends. Rather it warns us of a danger of poverty.

Wisdom and God

In the last line of the prologue, we see the intimate connection between wisdom and God. Although proverbs is a practical book and does not always specifically mention God in all its advice, it is quite clear that the overall book of Proverbs is governed by attention to God. As Proverbs 1:7 says, the very beginning of knowledge is found in fearing the Lord. To fear God is to take him seriously and to live humbly before him. There are other verses which connect God and wisdom.

Proverbs 3:5-6 *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; 6 in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.*

We are not to trust our own understanding, but submit to God's guidance.

Proverbs 9:10 *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*

True understanding is first and foremost knowing God.

In fact, Proverbs 14:2 makes the point that the way we live our lives reflects on our relationship with God. *“He whose walk is upright fears the LORD, but he whose ways are devious despises him.”* Living well is God honoring. So the first message of Proverbs is that wisdom in life means knowing and fearing God. In order to live skillfully, we must first come under God’s direction and guidance. This is the assumption behind all the proverbs. These are not just men’s ideas, this is wisdom from God. True wisdom is God’s wisdom and therefore the two cannot be separated.

Invitations and Choices

One of the most distinctive aspects of the first section of the book of Proverbs (Ch.1-9) is the persistent invitation to embrace and pursue wisdom. In many respects, this is the most important decision one must make in life. Will you pursue God and his wisdom, or will you follow your own path to folly? These invitations are presented to us in several ways such as the call of a parent to a child or the call of a woman to a man.

The Call of Parent to Child (Usually Father to Son)

Proverbs 1:8 *Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction
and do not forsake your mother’s teaching.*

See also Proverbs 2:1, 4:1-5,

The Call of Woman to Man (Both wisdom and folly are portrayed as women)

Proverbs 9:1-6 *Wisdom has built her house; ... and she calls from the highest
point of the city. 4 “Let all who are simple come in here!” she says
to those who lack judgment. 5 “Come, eat my food and drink the
wine I have mixed. 6 Leave your simple ways and you will live;
walk in the way of understanding.*

Proverbs 9:13-18 *The woman Folly is loud; she is undisciplined and without
knowledge. ... calling out to those who pass by, who go straight on
their way. 16 “Let all who are simple come in here!” she says to
those who lack judgment. 17 “Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in
secret is delicious!” 18 But little do they know that the dead are
there, that her guests are in the depths of the grave.*

See also 1:20-33, 8:1-6

Each of these images present us with a choice. What woman will we embrace? What path will we follow? To whom will we listen?