

PROVERBS

Part One: Ten Instructions for the Wisdom Seeker Chapters 1-9

Introduction. Proverbs is generally regarded as the book that best characterizes the Wisdom tradition. It is presented as a “guide for successful living.” Its primary purpose is to teach wisdom.

A “proverb” is a short saying that summarizes some truths about life. Knowing and practicing such truths constitutes wisdom—the ability to navigate human relationships and realities.

The Book of Proverbs takes its name from its first verse: “The proverbs of Solomon, the son of David.” Solomon is not the author of this book which is a compilation of smaller collections of sayings gathered up over many centuries and finally edited around 500 B.C.

In Proverbs we will find that certain themes or topics are dealt with several times, such as respect for parents and teachers, control of one’s tongue, cautious trust of others, care in the selection of friends, avoidance of fools and women with loose morals, practice of virtues such as humility, prudence, justice, temperance and obedience. Family values are stressed; both father and mother should be involved in the instruction of children. The Book of Proverbs is quoted fourteen times in the New Testament and is alluded to in about twenty other passages. Jesus presents himself as a Wisdom teacher.

Division of chapters. As with many books of the Bible, different scholars break the chapters down in various ways. Below is one common way:

1. Ten wisdom instructions for a son
2. First collection of the proverbs of Solomon (Chapters 10:1 to 22:16)
3. Sayings of the wise (Chapters 22:17 to 24:34)
4. Second collection of Proverbs of Solomon (Chapters 25-29)
5. The words of Agur and Lemuel; the ideal wife (Chapters 30-31)

COMMENTARY

PART 1: Ten wisdom instructions (Chapters 1-9)

In chapters 1-9, we find a set of ten instructions, aimed at persuading young minds about the power of wisdom.

CHAPTER 1: Avoid the path of the wicked; Lady Wisdom speaks

“That men may appreciate wisdom and discipline, may understand words of intelligence; may receive training in wise conduct....” (vv 2-3)

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge....” (v.7)

Verses 1-7. In these verses, the sage or teacher sets down his goal: to instruct people in the ways of wisdom.

The ten instructions in chapters 1-9 are for those interested in learning about wisdom. “The fear of the Lord” is a phrase that we will often hear in this book. The editors of Proverbs and Sirach insist that the “fear of the Lord” is the foundation stone upon which all true wisdom ultimately rests. In Wisdom literature, “fear of the Lord” means awe and respect for God. It means knowing one’s place as “creature” in relationship to one’s “Creator.” Fear of the Lord means reverent humility before God.

Kenneth Aitken writes: *“Proverbs teaches the practical lessons of experience rather than the spiritual lessons of faith. Its counsel is one for “worldly success” (in the best of senses) and not for spiritual growth. The wise man in Proverbs is a man of the world, who has his wits about him and knows how to get the best out of life and to live out his life to its fullest potential. But a building needs a solid foundation. And so here the sage insists that religious faith is the essential foundation for a good, happy and prosperous life. The truly wise man of the world will be a man of faith”* (Daily Bible Study Series – Proverbs, p.13).

Let us now turn to the first of ten instructions on wisdom (chs 1-9).

First instruction—Avoid bad company (vv8-19).The father speaks to his son—a metaphor for a teacher speaking to a pupil. In this instruction, the father is telling his son to avoid bad company. So a first lesson for a beginner in Wisdom is to be aware of how easily one can be misled to do evil by temptation and seductive arguments. The teacher says that evildoers are foolish like birds that walk into a trap while searching for food.

Lady Wisdom speaks (vv 20-33). The ten instructions found in chapters 1-9 are interspersed with speeches by Lady Wisdom. In some of the Wisdom books of the Bible, wisdom is sometimes personified, spoken of as if she were a person distinct from God. Personifying wisdom was the way; ancient writers underlined the huge respect they had for wisdom which they regarded as the queen of all virtues. In reality, wisdom was an attribute of God, symbolizing God's great knowledge and comprehension of all things. We can say the personification of wisdom prefigured the coming of Jesus, the Word made flesh, the one who often presented himself as a wisdom teacher.

In 1:20-33, Lady Wisdom is crying out in the streets seeking to get the attention of passersby. Wisdom is like the figure of Jeremiah who went around the streets of Jerusalem trying to get people to listen to him. As with Jeremiah, Wisdom in these verses is rejected. Wisdom has tough words for those who refuse to listen to her (vv 24-32).

Pause: Why do teens raised in good homes sometimes seek out bad company?

CHAPTER 2: Second instruction—Blessings of wisdom

“My son, if you receive my words, treasure my commands.”(v.1)

“You will understand rectitude and justice, honesty, every good path.” (v.9)

“Wisdom will save you from the way of evil men ... who leave the straight paths....” (vv 12-13)

In the second instruction, the teacher describes the blessings of wisdom (vv 1-11), warns against the evil person giving special mention of the adulteress woman (vv 16-19), and concludes by returning to the

blessings in store for the one who seeks wisdom (vv 20-22).

Verses 1-11.The teacher stresses that wisdom is a gift of God: *“The Lord gives wisdom”* (v.6). It is not the product of native human intelligence, considering that some highly intelligent people can be very foolish in their behavior. While wisdom is God's gift, one must also be a seeker of wisdom: *“Seek her like silver”* (v.4).

Verses 12-19 sketch the way of the wicked whose thinking and speech are crooked and perverse. These verses that warn us to shun evil people anticipate Paul's words in Eph 5:15: *“Watch carefully then how to live, not as a foolish person but as wise, because the days are evil.”*

The theme of the adulteress or loose woman (vv 16-19) is developed at greater length later (5:1-14, 6:24-35 and 7:1-25).

Pause: How has wisdom helped you in your life?

CHAPTER 3: Third and fourth instructions

“My son, forget not my teaching, keep in mind my commands.”(v.1)

“Let not kindness, and fidelity leave you; bind them around your neck....” (v.3)

“Honor the Lord with your wealth, with first fruits of all your produce.” (v.9)

“Happy the man who finds wisdom.... None of your choice possessions can compare with her.”(vv 13-15)

“Say not to your neighbor, ‘Go and come back again, tomorrow I will give,’ when you can give at once.”(v.28)

Third instruction—Blessing of fidelity to God(vv 1-12).This instruction focuses on the blessing that comes to us when we are faithful to God and pursue holy wisdom: *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart”* which is also the teaching of the first beatitude (Mt 5:2).

Fourth instruction—Wisdom's value in society (vv 13-35).Verses 13-24 are a hymn applauding the worth of wisdom.

Verses 27-34. The wise person is a good neighbor.

CHAPTER 4: Fifth and sixth instructions

“Hear, O children, a father’s instruction....” (v.1)

“Extol wisdom and she will exalt you, she will bring you honors if you embrace her.” (v.8)

“With the closest custody, guard your heart, for in it are sources of life.” (v.23)

Fifth instruction—Pursue wisdom (vv 1-9). Because wisdom is seen as a wonderful treasure, one should pursue it, go after it: *“Get wisdom, get understanding...”* (v.5).

Sixth instruction—Two paths (vv 10-27). One of the major themes of Wisdom literature is the essence that there is only one of two ways: one way leads to light and life, the other to darkness and death; one is straight, the other is crooked and devious.

Verses 20-27. There is always a human urge to entertain or to do some sinful things while trying to live a basically upright life. The masters of wisdom had no use for such dallying. A choice must be made, and one’s whole life must then be directed to attaining wholeness and uprightness. Above all, speech betrays the real directions of a person’s heart. False speech is the chief enemy of wisdom.

Pause: What verse or thought spoke to you most in chapter 5? To what extent do you believe that “speech” betrays the real direction of a person’s heart?

CHAPTER 5: Seventh instruction—the dangers of an immoral woman

“The lips of the adulteress drip with honey, and her mouth is smoother than oil. But in the end, she is bitter as wormwood, as sharp as a two-edged sword.” (vv 3-4)

[In contrast, the faithful wife] *“will watch over you and when you wake she will share your concerns; wherever you turn, she will guide you.”* (v.22)

If the sage believes that *speech* can be the greatest internal enemy of a person, he also believes that the lures of the *adulteress* are the greatest external enemy of young men seeking wisdom.

After being stung badly for going down a wayward path, the fallen person asks: *“Why did I not listen to the voice of my teachers...?”* (v.13)

Verses 15-19. In sharp contrast, verses 15-19 draw upon the age-old metaphor of fresh running water to describe a faithful marriage, which is the best antidote against the destructive wiles of a seductive, immoral woman.

Verses 20-23 draw a moral conclusion: Why go after forbidden and disastrous pleasure that leads to destruction when so much good can be found in faithful love?

Pause: What are some good ways to protect one’s marriage vows and to fight off any temptations to stray?

CHAPTER 6: Four lessons about wise conduct; Eighth instruction

“A scoundrel, a villain, is he who deals in crooked talk.” (v.12)

“These are six things the Lord hates...seven are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that plots wicked schemes, feet that run quickly to evil, the false witness who utters lies, and he who sows discord among brothers.” (vv. 16-19)

“Lust not in your heart after her beauty.” (v.25)

“Or can a man walk on live coals, and his feet not be scorched?” (v.28)

Verses 1-5 warn against the folly of overextending ourselves financially. Poor financial decisions can get us into a lot of trouble.

Verses 6-11 are aimed at the lazy person who thinks he/she does not need to plan for the future.

Verses 12-15 address the double-dealing person who defrauds others. It’s a put-down on the smooth talker who cheats others.

Verses 16-19 list seven things hateful to the Lord.

Eighth instruction—Another warning against adultery (vv 20-35)

Of the three messages in which the sage treats this topic in chapters 5-7, this is the most carefully reasoned. He asks his pupils to consider the issue of adultery from various angles. If the pupil thinks about the consequences of this sin, he will quickly see the stupidity of going down that path.

CHAPTER 7: Ninth instruction—More on the dangers of becoming involved with an adulteress

“My son, keep my words, and treasure my commands.”(v.1)

“Bind them on your fingers, write them on the tablet of your heart” (v.3)

“And lo! The woman comes to meet him, robed like a harlot... (v.10) and says, ‘Come let us drink our fill of love...for my husband is away....’” (v.19)

Just in case there are any lingering doubts about the perils of getting involved with a woman with loose morals, the sage seeks to drive home his lesson with a story about something he saw happening from his own window (v.6). There is “a youth with no sense” walking into trouble as the darkness of night descends. He encounters a woman who knows well how to seduce young foolish men. Verses 21-23 tell us that the young man finds her irresistible and he is like putty in her hands. The sage compares him to “a bird that rushes into a snare.” This story is told from the point of view of a father instructing his son. Needless to say, parents are to also instruct their daughters to be wary of the hunter who is out to steal their virginity.

CHAPTER 8: Lady Wisdom speaks again

[Wisdom raises her voice and says:] *“Happy the man watching daily at my gates, waiting at my doorposts; for he who finds me finds life, and wins favor from the Lord; but he who misses me harms himself; all who hate me love death.”* (vv 34-36)

In sharp contrast to the woman in chapter 7, Wisdom herself now calls for attention and offers a counter-ideal. Lady Wisdom sees in the seductress her greatest rival for men’s affection. She takes her stand at the city gates and cries aloud, calling on men everywhere to pay attention to her. She recommends herself to men as serving their best interests.

Wisdom offers the gift of statesmanship, the skill of public office (vv 15-16). Those who pursue and seek a relationship with Lady Wisdom will be blessed.

Finally, in verses 22-31, we have Wisdom’s greatest claim that she was created before all the natural wonders of the world: *“The Lord begot me, the firstborn of his ways”* (v.22). *“When the heavens were established I was there...”* (v.27). She states her role in God’s creation of the world. Because of all this, all should seek the ways of Wisdom: *“He who finds her finds life and wins the favor of the Lord”* (v.35).

Pause: What can help us to be pursuers of wisdom?

CHAPTER 9: Tenth instruction—Parable of two banquets

“Wisdom has built herself a house....” (v.1)

“... To him who lacks understanding, I say, ‘Come, eat of my food, and drink of the wine I have mixed! Forsake foolishness that you may live....’” (vv 4-6)

“The woman Folly is fickle, she is insane and knows nothing.”(v.13)

The first section of this book ends with a story about two banquets intended to show once again Lady Wisdom’s superiority to Dame Folly. Both Ladies sit by the road seeking to attract people; both offer a reward (vv 5, 17). But Wisdom’s reward turns out to be life (vv 6,11), while Folly’s is poison that brings death (v.18).

Pause: Who or what today represents Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly?