

**WISDOM FOR LIVING:
(3) WISDOM AND SUCCESS**

PROVERBS

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PROLOGUE

Elbert Hubbard has said:

Every[one] is a fool for at least five minutes every day; wisdom consists of not exceeding the limit.

SCRIPTURE

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: {2} For learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, {3} for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity; {4} to teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young-- {5} Let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill, {6} to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles. {7} The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. Hear, my child, your father's instruction, and do not reject your mother's teaching (Proverbs 1:1-8NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Proverbs is a collection of collections of wise sayings that provide a guidebook for successful living. The English name for this book is taken from its Latin translation (*Liber Proverbiorum*). However, the original Hebrew term (mashal, maw-shaw'l) has a broader meaning than the typical way we use the word "proverb" in English. It can refer to any form of speech that is more intense and provocative than a simple, straightforward saying. It could be a comparison, a riddle, a short essay or even an acrostic poem like the one about the ideal wife at the end of the book.

The phrase in the opening verse, "The proverbs of Solomon," does not mean he was the author of all the material in this book but that these collections represent the kind of wisdom associated with him. The Bible tells us:

God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore (1 Ki 4:29 NRSV).

The character of Solomon embodies biblical wisdom. So even though some of the collections come from people like Hezekiah, Agur and Lemuel, they are recognized as being consistent with the Solomonic model.

Starting with chapter 10 we find hundreds and hundreds of short, unconnected, staccato-like sayings that seem to be repeating the same thing over and over again in different ways. If the Book of Proverbs started here we would quickly become disoriented and overwhelmed. It would be difficult to make sense of it all.

Fortunately, the Book starts with an extended introduction in chapters 1-9. Here we find a series of miniature essays on the meaning and value of wisdom that we can then apply to the rest of the book. The opening verses of chapter 1 set the tone for the entire introduction.

1. PROVERBS AND THE MEANING OF SUCCESS

For gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity (1:3).

The Book of Proverbs helps us to make the right choices that lead to success in life. But the key question is, “What do we mean by success?”

Jim Collins, author of, “Good to Great”, points out that about half of the greatest business leaders in American history trashed their personal lives in the process of rising to the top. He says they did not have to do this. It was a choice they made based on how they defined success. Ron Jenson, who wrote, “Make a Life, Not Just a Living”, argues that if you succeed in your professional life yet fail in your personal life you have failed.

The world defines success in terms of one’s standard of living. The Book of Proverbs defines success in terms of the character of one’s life. The world asks, “How much power, prestige and prosperity have you acquired?” Proverbs asks, “Are you able to make choices that are right, just and fair?” (3).

To be sure, Proverbs does speak about material rewards in this life:

A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich (10:4 NRSV).

The idea that prosperity is the fruit of hard work is quite common in Proverbs. But this can be misunderstood. Proverbs tells us what is generally true not what is invariably true. Generally speaking, the harder you work and the more honestly you live the better you will fare in life. But there are many exceptions. You may recall that it was Job’s experience with the exceptions that tripped up his so-called friends.

We need to understand that Proverbs is not promising an excessive supply of luxuries but a plentiful supply of necessities. Jesus reaffirmed this principle when he said that if we put God’s rule and righteousness first we need not worry about receiving what we need (Mt 6:33).

Proverbs also recognizes that life is often more complicated than some of the sayings imply:

The field of the poor may yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice (3:23 NRSV).

When a principle from Proverbs does not seem to work this may be a reflection of the wickedness in our world such as the unfair distribution of resources. Instead of being a cause for a complaint against God we are to see it as a challenge to fight injustice in the name of God.

Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him (14:31 NRSV).

2. PROVERBS AND THE FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS

The phrase “beginning of” as in “the beginning of knowledge” (1:7) or “the beginning of wisdom” (9:10) is from a Hebrew expression meaning “this is foundational.”

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge (1:7).

The fear of the Lord is the foundation for true knowledge and wisdom. It is foundational because you never cease to need it. Proverbs assumes you cannot live a full and successful life unless you see God as the Author of life, and seek an understanding of life from God with reverence and humility.

Proverbs is rather adventurous in how it communicates its message. Wisdom is personified as a concerned woman:

Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? (1:20-22 NRSV).

Foolishness, on the other hand, is personified as an alluring prostitute:

The foolish woman is loud; she is ignorant and knows nothing. She sits at the door of her house, on a seat at the high places of the town, calling to those who pass by, who are going straight on their way, "You who are simple, turn in here!" And to those without sense she says, "Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant" (9:13-17 NRSV).

Over and over again Proverbs presents us with two paths: a path of foolishness, wickedness and violence; and a path of wisdom, goodness and righteousness. You may know what is the right path but you still have to choose the right path, even if it goes against what others are telling you.

A young boy was driving a hayrack down the road, and it turned over right in front of a

farmer's house. The farmer came out, saw the young boy crying, and said, "Son, don't worry about this, we can fix it. Right now dinner's ready. Why don't you come in and eat with us and then I'll help you put the hay back on the rack." The boy said, "No, I can't. My father is going to be very angry with me." The farmer said, "Now don't worry, just come in and have some dinner and you'll feel better." The boy said, "I'm just afraid my father is going to be very angry with me." The farmer prevailed and the young boy went inside and had dinner. Afterwards, as they walked outside to the hayrack, the farmer said, "Son, don't you feel better now?" The boy said, "Maybe, but I just know that my father will be very angry with me." The farmer said, "Nonsense. Let's talk to your father. Where is he anyway?" The boy said, "He's under that pile of hay."

3. PROVERBS AND THE SCHOOL FOR SUCCESS

Reading Proverbs may seem at times like we are eavesdropping on a personal correspondence between parent and child:

Hear, my child, your father's instruction, and do not reject your mother's teaching (1:8 NRSV).

In reality, this was a style of writing quite common for Wisdom Literature, especially in organized instruction for young people. In a manner of speaking, Proverbs is like a school — a school for successful living. It involves both classroom instruction found in chapters 1-9 and field education found in chapters 10-31. For example, if the book was a school for pilots, chapters 1-9 would be ground school and chapters 10-31 would be time spent flying the plane.

Let's consider a specific example:

Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself.
Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes
(26:4-5 NRSV).

If this is "classroom instruction" telling us what to do then it is contradictory and makes no sense. But if this is a case study that challenges us to think about what we have learned and apply it to real-life situations then it is a different matter. If nothing else this is teaching us to think before we speak.

A tourist asked a taxi driver in New York, "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?" The cabbie replied, "Practice, practice, practice." The logic of Proverbs is if you practice, practice practice, you will find your way to wisdom.

CONCLUSION

The Book of Proverbs is part of the Wisdom Literature of the Bible. It contains principles for right living and general descriptions of life's realities, rather than sure-fire promises or guarantees. Proverbs does not offer immunity from illness, accident or financial trouble. Its

purpose is not to come up with a rule for every situation in life but rather to encourage us to place all of life under the rule of God.

A father was watching his young son trying to dislodge a heavy stone. The boy couldn't budge it. "Are you sure you are using all your strength?" the father asked. "Yes, I am," said the exasperated boy. "No, you are not," the father replied. "You haven't asked me to help you."

To hold on to wisdom is to hold on to God. By ourselves this is impossible. But here is the Good News: God wants to hold on to us! With his strength we can live the life he intended us to live.