

The book of Proverbs is not mysterious, nor does it leave its readers wondering as to its purpose. At the very outset we are clearly told the author's intention.

The purpose of these proverbs is to teach people wisdom and discipline, and to help them understand wise sayings. Through these proverbs, people will receive instruction in discipline, good conduct, and doing what is right, just, and fair. These proverbs will make the simpleminded clever. They will give knowledge and purpose to young people. Let those who are wise listen to these proverbs and become even wiser. And let those who understand receive guidance by exploring the depth of meaning in these proverbs, parables, wise sayings, and riddles.
NLT, 1:2-6

The book of Proverbs is simply about godly wisdom, how to attain it, and how to use it in everyday living. In Proverbs the words *wise* or *wisdom* are used roughly 125 times. The wisdom that is spoken of in these proverbs is bigger than raw intelligence or advanced education. This is a wisdom that has to do with skillful living. It speaks of understanding how to act and be competent in a variety of life situations. Dr. Roy Zuck's definition of wisdom is to the point. *Wisdom means being skillful and successful in one's relationships and responsibilities . . . observing and following the Creator's principles of order in the moral universe.* (Zuck, Biblical Theology of the Old Testament, p. 232) The wisdom of Proverbs is not theoretical.¹ It assumes that there is a right way and a wrong way to live. It gives direction to our lives and keeps us in step with the fabric of life that God has created. When we are obedient, following this path of wisdom, life functions as God intended it.

While *wisdom* is the pivotal word in the book of Proverbs there are other words used to support and augment it. Tremper Longman comments.

At the heart of the book of Proverbs stands wisdom, but this word is supported by a formidable collection of related ideas and words. As scholars study the various words that are closely related to the Hebrew word for *wisdom* (*hokma*), we get a fuller understanding of what wisdom is. (Longman, p.16)

Longman goes on to list these words and ideas as associated with wisdom. At times they serve as a synonym of wisdom and at times they modify and amplify wisdom. We will see these words often in our study.

<i>discipline or correction</i>	<i>insight or prudence</i>
<i>successful or to have insight</i>	<i>right</i>
<i>understanding</i>	<i>just</i>
<i>knowledge</i>	<i>fair</i>
<i>discretion</i>	

¹ The Hebrew word for *wisdom* (*hokma*) and *wise* (*hakam*) was often used in the Old Testament to describe talented people who worked with their hands. It was used of the artisans who worked on the tabernacle (Exodus 28:3; 35:30-36:2) and Solomon's temple (1 Chronicles 22:15).

We are told in 1:1, 10:1, and 25:1 that King Solomon is the author of the book. However, not all the proverbs in this book are attributed to Solomon. In 25:1 we read of the *men of Hezekiah*, a group of scholars who gathered the material recorded in chapters 25-29.¹ At the end of the book, in chapters 30 and 31, we meet *Agur the son of Jakeh*, and *King Lemeul*. At some latter point these sayings were gathered together and arranged in what we now call the book of Proverbs.

The wisdom of Proverbs arose in the context of the other Near East wisdom literature. The Old Testament is not the least bit apologetic that there are other sages in the surrounding nations. Solomon's wisdom, however, is attributed to God and is, therefore, superior and authoritative.

God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than any other man, including Ethan the Ezrahite—wiser than Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. 1 Kings 4:29-31

Some of the sayings in Proverbs are similar to wisdom proverbs found outside of the Bible. It is obvious at times that the writers of Proverbs were familiar with other ancient wisdom sayings. This has caused some to question the relationship of the book of Proverbs to other wisdom writings. Longman helps us understand Proverbs in their cultural context.

Though the sages observed and appropriated, they never simply or uncritically borrowed ideas from the broader cultural setting. Rather they adapted them to their own religious values. Nowhere in Proverbs do we read about *Ma'at* or other pagan deities. If the sages observed a truth in Egyptian wisdom, they understood it to be a truth of Yahweh. They were in love with Woman Wisdom, and thus ultimately with Yahweh. (Longman, p.77)

Commentators have a field day attempting to outline Proverbs. It is not an easy book to organize and put in tidy little sections.² In our study of Proverbs make an effort to read, large sections or the entire book as often as possible and thereby gain the big picture of how wisdom works in the life of a Christian. Consider this outline as you read.

1. Introduction – 1:1-7 Key verse: *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.* (7)
2. The Father's encouragement to acquire wisdom 1:8-9:18 (a series of numerous discourses from a father to his son)

¹ King Hezekiah's reign took place in 715-686 B.C. roughly 300 years after King Solomons.

² We should be wary of attempting to over categorize these proverbs. *The final editors of the book were not interested in putting it into the kind of order that would appeal to modern Western logic.* (Longman, p.117)

3. Proverbs of Solomon 10:1-22:16
4. The Sayings of the Wise 22:17-24:34
5. The Proverbs of Solomon collected by the *men of Hezekiah* 25:1-29:27
6. The Sayings of Agur 30:1-33
7. The Sayings of Lemuel 31:1-9
8. The Wife of Noble Character 31:10-31

What is a proverb? The Spanish novelist Cervantes cleverly defined a proverb as, *a short sentence based on long experience*. (quoted in Wiersbe, p. 14) This is a fair definition from a literary viewpoint. What we find in the book of Proverbs, for the most part, is very brief poetic statements that tell us truths about living life uprightly and under God's direction. The poetry undoubtedly made more sense to the original readers. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart comment.

First, their form is that of poetry. But the poetry is Hebrew poetry, which means that some things translate into English, and some do not. Think about how difficult it might be to put the following English aphorisms into another language. *A stitch in time saves nine*, or *A penny saved is a penny earned*, or *An apple a day keeps the doctor away*. Common to these are their rhythmic nature and *sound alike* pattern, which are what makes them memorable. Another language cannot always capture these qualities, even though the gist of the proverb may be plain. So it is with these Hebrew proverbs, which are pithy (typically only three or four Hebrew words to a line) and full of alliterations, catchwords, poetic meter, etc.—not to mention allusions and metaphors that belong to their cultural setting, not all of which are easily captured in English. (Fee and Stuart, How to Read the Bible Book by Book, p.146)

As we read the book of Proverbs we will encounter:

- **Parallelism:** (same idea expressed slightly differently in the second line)
*A fool's mouth is his undoing,
and his lips are a snare to his soul. 18:7*
- **Antithetical parallelism:** (second line contrasts with the first)
*The plans of the righteous are just,
but the advice of the wicked is deceitful. 12:5*
- **Emblematic parallelism:** (a figurative illustration is used)
*As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes,
so is a sluggard to those who send him. 10:26*

- **Better-than proverbs:** (the choice between wisdom and folly is illuminated)
*Better to have a little with the fear of the Lord,
than great wealth with turmoil. 15:16*

At the heart of the book of Proverbs is a wisdom that is God himself. The framework for the proverbial wisdom found in Proverbs is a world ordered by God.

Apart from God there is no true insight into the world. God is the only source of true wisdom. The theme of the fear of the Lord reverberates through the whole book. After all, if wisdom depends on understanding the world correctly, how can that be achieved if one does not acknowledge that God himself is a fundamental part of the cosmos? Everything must be understood in relationship to Yahweh himself. (Longman, p.55)

As we read and study the book of Proverbs we will learn and laugh about ourselves. If we have courage, we will apply the wisdom of God to our lives and our church. The result will be that God will bless us as we live life as he intended it to be lived. We have 12 weeks to learn about walking the path of wisdom. As with any homegroup, to gain anything, it is vital to come prepared, having spent time in our study. What is especially crucial in a study of a practical book like Proverbs is that we come ready to talk about how we are applying the wisdom of the book to our lives. May God be blessed and may our lives become more righteous as we work through the wisdom found in Proverbs.

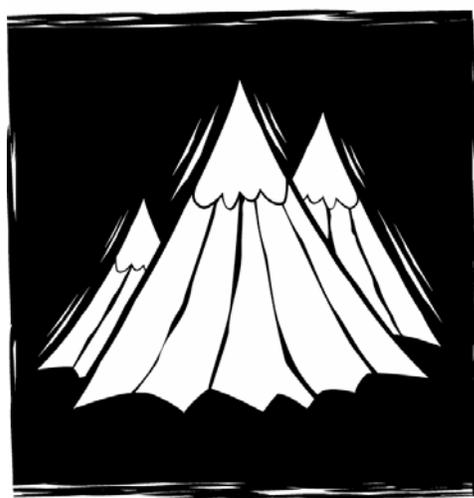
Study One

The Fear of the Lord and Wisdom

Proverbs 1:1-7

At the very beginning of the book of Proverbs we find what many commentators have called the motto of the book: *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.* (1:7) As one of the most practical books in the Bible, Proverbs offers two approaches to life: the wise path or the foolish path. This is why Proverbs 1:7 goes on to say, *but fools despise wisdom and knowledge.* The end result of these two paths is self-evident.

He who walks in wisdom is kept safe.
28:16, or *Fools die for lack of judgment.* 10:21



Read Proverbs 1:1-7 in several translations. What do these verses tell you about the purpose and intent of the book? To whom is the book addressed? Does this brief introduction to the book motivate you for our study of Proverbs?

A quick reading of Proverbs may lead one to think that the book is not very *spiritual*.¹ Only about 10% of the verses mention the Lord. As you read the Proverbs, however, it becomes very clear that the only way in which wise living and decision making is possible is in the context of the *fear of the Lord*. Tremper Longman makes this observation.

The entire book is drenched in theology. A proverbial observation becomes a thermometer of one's relationship with Woman Wisdom, who is Yaweh, and a command or admonition is a command or admonition that is implicitly from the Woman herself. (Longman, p. 112)

¹ Derek Kidner points out, *When we open the book of Proverbs at random and take samples of its wisdom, we may gain the impression that its religious content is thin and indefinite. . . . A hostile reader might even go further, and ask whether the real God and master in the book is not man himself and the real goal prosperity.* Kidner, p. 31

Read the following portions of Proverbs. How do they describe the relationship between wisdom and the *fear of the Lord*? (There are at least 18 references to the *fear of the Lord* in Proverbs. This is only a sampling.)

- 9:10
- 2:1-8
- 15:33
- 3:7
- 14:2, 26, 27
- 19:23

The idea that the *fear of the Lord* is essential for the attaining of wisdom is not unique to Proverbs.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. Psalm 111:10

The fear of the Lord —that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding. Job 28:28

For the biblical authors it is God who was the source of wisdom, and it is the fool who denies that God is the foundation for right living.

The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.' Psalm 14:1

Think about this phrase, *the fear of the Lord*. Does the language bother you? If so, why does it bother you? Write a definition of what you understand the *fear of the Lord* to mean.

What words could be used in place of *fear* and still accurately convey the meaning of these verses?¹

Think about the relationship between fearing God and wisdom. From a biblical perspective, and especially the verses we have looked at in Proverbs, why is wisdom and wise living impossible apart from the fear of the Lord?

The major hindrance to pursuing wisdom and taking the wise path is our desire to live independently of God and his direction in our life. Consider the following verses.

The way of the fool seems right to him. 12:15

A man's own folly ruins his life yet his heart rages against the Lord. 19:3

The fool says in his heart there is no God. Psalm 14:1

There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death. 14:12

The way of the fool seems right. 12:5

How have you seen this tendency manifest itself in your life? What have you learned from the proverbs we have looked at that would help you avoid foolish living independent of God?

¹ The scholarly discussions on *the fear of the Lord* are vast. Gerhard von Rad says of the phrase, *It contains in a nutshell the whole Israelite theory of knowledge . . . the statement that the fear of the Lord was the beginning of wisdom was Israel's most special possession.* (quoted in Murphy p. 256) Westmont Theology professor and SBCC icon Jonathan Wilson has pointed out that when you study the phrase, '*the fear of the Lord*' in the original Hebrew it actually means, '*the fear of the Lord!*'

It is important to ask why anyone would want to pursue the godly wisdom talked about in Proverbs. Read the following verses and take some notes. What are the benefits of pursuing the wise path? Why does life work best when we live it with this wisdom from God?

- 10:27
- 14:26-27
- 16:6
- 19:23
- 28:14
- 18:10
- 16:3

Many people tend to think of wisdom as something that accompanies your birth. You either have it or you don't. He is tall; she is so beautiful; he has such a high IQ; she is a *natural athlete*. Others think of wisdom as something one catches, somewhat like when one catches a cold. This is clearly not the picture we find in Proverbs. In Proverbs wisdom from God is something to be pursued, chased, desired, and fought for. While this will become clearer in the weeks ahead, think about your pursuit of this wisdom from God. What are you doing in your life right now to gain wisdom? Make sure your answer is practical!

One of the benefits of spending a concentrated period of time in one book of the Bible is that we have the privilege of getting to know the content of that book well and allowing it to seep into our lives. While this study guide will help us look at much of the book of Proverbs in some detail, try and develop your own plan for reading Proverbs in these next few weeks. Be ready to share your plan for knowing Proverbs with your homegroup.

Study Two

The Wise or the Foolish Path?

Proverbs 1-4

As we have already begun to see in our first study, the book of Proverbs describes two paths in life: the wise path under the direction of God or the foolish path where a person



lives independently as if there were no God. One road results in life and the other results in destruction. The Bible frequently exhorts us to choose the right path. Consider the words of Jesus.

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few will find it. Matthew 7:13-14

In Proverbs we find the words *path* or *way* almost 100 times. Wisdom is a way of life. Wisdom is a path that one chooses to follow. At the same time the *fool* makes a decision to follow a completely different course in life. A way of life that leaves God's instruction out of the decision making process. In the weeks ahead we will spend time looking at proverbs that instruct us in particular areas of life. Our study will become more topical. We will see God's wisdom concerning the use of our tongues, our money, and our relationships concerning family and sex. But in the study before us we will concentrate on the big picture.¹

As we have already seen in our introduction, Proverbs is not simply a compilation of individual unrelated sayings. Chapters 1-9 are a series of rather lengthy discourses from a father to his son.² The father is instructing the son about life. He is told how to avoid dangerous situations and achieve the success that comes from attaining wisdom. Read Proverbs 1-4. As you read, make notes and underline your Bible (if you write in your Bible) when you find the words *way*, *path*, or *road*. What do you notice about this path of godly wisdom?

¹ We will have another *big picture* study in study 4.

² Tremper Longman says of the discourses in Proverbs 1-9, *My best guess is that there are seventeen speeches.* (Longman, p. 23)

This picture of a path or road is used in John Bunyan's classic book, *Pilgrim's Progress*. The book is an account of a pilgrim's journey from the City of Destruction to the heavenly city. Along the way, this pilgrim, named Christian, encounters many temptations and pitfalls as he attempts to stay on the right road. We find a similar picture in Proverbs 1-9.¹

The path is a rich metaphor for one's actions in life. It implies a current point of origin (where you are in life now), a destination, and key transitional moments (forks in the road). In fact two paths are open to the son. The father warns the son of a path that is variously termed "crooked" (Prov. 2:15) and "dark" (Prov. 2:13). . . . The opposite of the evil, dark path is the right path, the path that leads to life in the fullest sense. They threaten, warn, and reward the son so he will adopt this course of action. But the greatest incentive is that God is with those who are on the right path. He protects the path from the dangers that threaten to overwhelm the son. (Longman, p. 25 &26)

Look over Proverbs 1-4 again. Make a list of the tactics that the father and *wisdom* use in encouraging the son to stay on the right path. What reasons and arguments for staying on the right path are employed? Which of their encouragements do you most need to apply to your own life? Why?

In Proverbs 2:1-5 we find 8 imperatives that describe how we should approach the truth of God. Fill in the goal of each direction the father gives to the son.

Accept my _____

Store up my _____

Turning your ear to _____

Applying your heart to _____

Call out for _____

Look for it as _____

Search for it as _____

¹ At many points in our study of Proverbs one will find parallel teaching and metaphors in the Psalms. *Teach me your way, O Lord; lead me in a straight path.* Psalm 27:11, *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.* Psalm 119:105, *He guides me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.* Psalm 23:3, *Show me your ways O Lord, teach me your paths.* Psalm 25:4

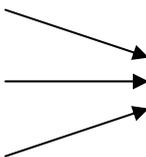
What do these 8 commands have in common?

According to Proverbs 2:6-8 what are the benefits of staying on the right path?

Apply this to your life. How have you experienced the benefits and joys of staying on the right path with God?

Focus on Proverbs 3:5-6 for a moment. What does it mean in **your** life to follow these 3 steps to wisdom? Be ready to share some real life, practical examples with your homegroup.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart
lean not on your own understanding
in all your ways acknowledge him



he will make your paths straight

These opening chapters of Proverbs make it very clear that wisdom from God is to be pursued at all costs.

Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my words or swerve from them. Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her and she will watch over you. Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding. Prov. 4:5-7

Pastor Warren Wiersbe comments on how difficult this pursuit of wisdom is in our culture.

Obtaining spiritual wisdom isn't a once-a-week hobby, it is the daily discipline of a lifetime. But in this age of microwave ovens, fast foods, digests and numerous "made easy" books, many people are out of the habit of daily investing time and energy in digging deep into Scripture and learning wisdom from the Lord. Thanks to television, their attention span is brief; thanks to religious entertainment that passes for worship, their spiritual appetite is feeble and spiritual knowledge isn't "pleasant to [their] soul" (Prov. 2:10) (Wiersbe, p. 36)

Reflect on this statement. How has our speedy and shallow culture affected your pursuit of God's wisdom? What can you do to change this and become more diligent in your pursuit to *get wisdom*?

Using the metaphor of a path, describe your life. Has your path been straight or crooked? How have you taken a detour and gotten off the path? What have been the consequences?

Why is it so attractive to get off the path of wisdom that God has set out for us?

Study Three

As Iron Sharpens Iron

Proverbs 27:17

The subjects addressed in the book of Proverbs are vast. The topics can appear to be disjointed as we move from verse to verse. As we study some of the various issues that require wisdom we must always remember the bigger backdrop of the book. Proverbs posits two broad approaches to life. The wise path is lived in the *fear of the Lord*. The foolish path is lived without God, taking no account of his wisdom and instruction. The instructions that we find are very practical, earthy, and at times, humorous. We do not find in Proverbs an esoteric and lofty spirituality that is deep and ponderous. What we do find is street-level, nitty gritty advice on how to live wisely with a wisdom that comes from God. Robert Hicks explains,

In summary, what Proverbs is trying to do is to make all of us a little street smart. To live righteously from the perspective of the wisdom literature is not to be a monk, isolated in a cave somewhere. It is to be where the action is, in the mess and stench of life, engaging and enhancing the lives of others, because that's what godly living in a fallen world means. What Proverbs gives us is not high-minded abstract principles of life, which was the Greek way, but life experiences of real people. (Hicks, p. 18)

Our topic this week is wisdom concerning friends and companions. Proverbs has a great deal to say about our relationships and how they can affect our lives.

*He who walks with the wise grows wise,
but a companion of fools suffers harm.*
13:20

*He who keeps the law is a discerning son,
but a companion of gluttons disgraces his
father.* 28:7

*A righteous man is cautious in friendship,
but the way of the wicked leads them
astray.* 12:26



The beginning of Psalms starts with the same sentiment.

*Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the
way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.* Psalm 1:1

Before going on in our examination of Proverbs think about the friends and companions you have had in your life to this point. How have they influenced you? Have your friends helped you to walk the wise path in life in *the fear of the Lord*? How have you seen the truths of the Proverbs above play out in your life?

What are the warnings about companionship and friendship that are found in the following proverbs?

- 6:16-19
- 14:20
- 19:4-7
- 16:29-30
- 22:24-25
- 14:7
- 24:21-22

How have these warnings been born out in your own experience and Christian life? Which of these proverbs hits most closely to home?

One of the dangers that comes with having friends who have chosen the wrong path in life, where there is no fear of the Lord, is that those friends will often attempt to entice others to follow their foolish ways. Re-read Proverbs 1:8-19. What are the tactics of the friends in these verses who say, *Come along with us*. (1:11)

We normally think of negative peer influence affecting mainly young people. Is this always the case? Think as an adult. How have other adult friends sought to entice you to walk the foolish path?

Let's turn to the positive side of friendship found in Proverbs. Commentator Derek Kidner lists several characteristics of a good friend in Proverbs. (Kidner, p. 45)

1. Constancy

*A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend that sticks closer than a brother.*¹ 18:24

A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity. 17:17

Do not forsake your friend and the friend of your father . . . 27:10

There are many fair-weather friends in Proverbs (14:20, 19:4, 6, 7). But in the proverbs above, consistency, loyalty and faithfulness are encouraged as crucial characteristics of a good friend. Do you have friends like this in your life? How have those friends encouraged you to walk with God?

2. Candor

Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses. 27:5-6

3. Counsel

Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart, and the pleasantness of one's friend springs from his earnest counsel. 27:9

As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another. 27:17

Candor and counsel go together. A good friend, a wise friend is one who is honest, comforting and challenging. It is all too easy to have friends who will only tell us what we want to hear. A good friend will sharpen us in our life and relationship with God. Just as two pieces of iron that are rubbed together will knock off the rough edges and produce a sharp blade, so two friends who are *rubbing* off on each other will produce sharpened God-ward lives. How have you seen this dynamic work in your friendships? In what ways have your friends *sharpened* you?

¹ On March 8, 1857 the famous London preacher Charles Spurgeon preached on this text, *There is a friend that sticks closer than a brother*. Spurgeon delivered a powerful sermon equating that *friend* with Jesus, who is, *a faithful friend—a friend in every hour of need and every time of distress*. (Spurgeon, p. 88)

How would you go about finding friends that sharpen and encourage you spiritually?

Taken as a whole, the Proverbs that talk about friendship and companionship say that we become like the people we are around. If you want to live a life that is on the path of wise godly living you need to have friends on the same path. If you have friends whose lives are bent on folly you will find yourself being enticed and seduced into a life of unwise choices.

Do you agree that we become like the people we are around? How have you seen this dynamic in your own life?

Reflect and respond to this statement by Dallas Willard.

Anyone who says, “It’s just between me and God,” or “What I do is my own business,” has misunderstood God as well as “me.” Strictly speaking there is *nothing* “just between me and God.” For all that is between me and God affects who I am; and that, in turn modifies my relationship to everyone around me. My relationship to others also modifies and deeply affects my relationship to God. Hence those relationships must be transformed if I am to be transformed. (Dallas Willard, Renovation of the Heart, p. 182)

Before leaving the topic of friendship we need to look at an important aspect of the relationships being described in Proverbs. Love is a key component of the friendships described. Read the following Proverbs that touch on friendship and love. What is the relationship between friendship and love? How do these (and other) proverbs describe friendship—love?

- 10:12
- 17:9
- 15:17
- 17:17

What holds you back from developing and maintaining good friends who are on the path of godly wisdom?

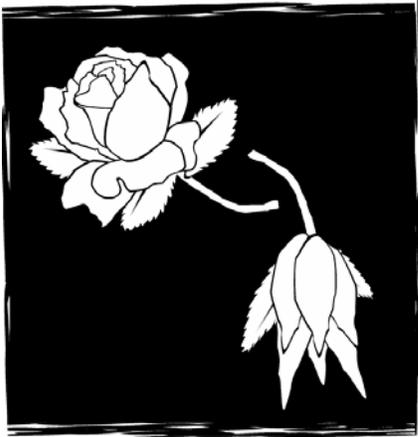
What do you plan to change in your life as a result of studying these proverbs?

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Four

A Tale of Two Women

Proverbs 5-9



In Proverbs 5-9 the vivid contrast between two ways or paths in life continues. As you read and ponder these chapters remind yourself that this is poetry written in a Near Eastern context roughly 3000 years ago! While the concepts in these chapters are not difficult, the literary style and images they contain may pose a challenge to the 21st century reader. In reading Proverbs as a book, and these chapters in particular, it is crucial to remember that the implied reader of the book is a young male. He is receiving instruction from his father.¹ While the truths of Proverbs are for men and women of all ages, the text is best understood if read from the perspective of a young man who is making important choices and charting his path in life.

In these chapters we come face to face with wisdom and folly who are personified as women: Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly. We have already met briefly Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 1:20-33. In these chapters Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly are most clearly seen in chapters 8-9. Woman Folly, who is very similar to the adulteress of chapters 5-7, makes a bold appearance in 9:13-18.

Read Proverbs 5-9, paying special attention to chapters 8-9. Take some notes and make some preliminary observations.² Make two lists that characterize Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly primarily from chapters 8-9, and 1:20-33. What is similar about these two women? What is different?

Woman Wisdom

Woman Folly

¹ The book of Proverbs reflects the time and culture in which it was written. While the bulk of Proverbs is instruction from a father to a son, there is still room for wisdom from his mother. *Listen my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching.* 1:8

² In Proverbs 1-9 it is not always clear exactly who is speaking. At times the father is speaking of wisdom in the abstract and at times of Woman Wisdom. At other times, most clearly in chapter 8, it is Woman Wisdom herself who speaks.

Why do you think wisdom and folly are personified as women and not men?

Notice that both these women desire a relationship with the young man —*Come in with me . . .* (9:4, 16). Both women have also prepared a meal. In Near Eastern culture the eating of a meal was an invitation to form a close relationship with that person. Meals in the context of this time meant more than grabbing a quick hamburger at *In-N-Out Burger* with someone. Compare Proverbs 9:1-2 with 9:17. What is the difference between the two meals that are fixed? What is the significance?

Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly do not describe literal women. They are metaphors that stand for something else. The key to their identities is found, in part, by the location of their houses. Wisdom has built her house, *hewn out its seven pillars, from the highest point in the city* (9:1-3), while Folly's house, likewise, is found at the *highest point of the city* (9:14). In the Near East temples were always built on the highest point of land. When we read these texts from the vantage point of the original readers it becomes very clear that these two houses represent two temples and that Woman Wisdom represents God and Woman Folly represents false gods. Tremper Longman helps us to understand this picture.

The location of her house makes it clear that Woman Wisdom stands for God. She is a poetic personification of God's wisdom and represents God, as a part for the whole. Thus, the figure Woman Wisdom fits a long list of other metaphors for God's relationship with his people, including warrior, shepherd, father, spouse, king and more. Woman Folly also has her house on the highest point of the city. When she calls to the men walking by, she is sitting "in her doorway on the heights overlooking the city." She too represents something other than herself: not true God but the idols, the false gods and goddesses that tempted Israel away from Yahweh. (Longman, p. 33)

Think about this picture and its meaning for our lives. The choice is deeply spiritual and God centered. It is a choice between God and false gods. In chapters 8-9 what are the **results**, positive and negative, of the woman with whom you dine?

Woman Wisdom = God

Woman Folly = false gods

How does this vivid metaphor help you to see the nature of your choice more clearly? Which woman have you chosen to have a relationship with? Why have you made the decision for this woman?

Give a practical illustration from your life of a time when you've given in to the Woman Folly. What were the consequences?

Respond to this comment David Hubbard makes about the nature of our choice.

The contrast, then, takes on the deepest possible significance. The choice is not good conduct verses bad, though that choice is life-shaking; it is at bottom the choice between true worship and false, between Yahweh whose sovereignty and order make wisdom what she is, and fatal attractions of immorality and idolatry for whom folly is the pitchwoman. (Hubbard, p. 130)

Before ending this study, spend some time considering the warnings against adultery and the adulteress in Proverbs 5-7. These discourses can be read at two levels. The most obvious and simple is a practical warning about the pitfalls of sexual sin and devastating consequences of adultery with another man's wife. Save your discussion and thoughts on this until study 9 when we will discuss marriage and sex. These sections can also be read as a warning to God's people to remain faithful to God and not commit spiritual adultery. Sexual sin and adultery was an image used often in the Old Testament to instruct God's people about their relationship with him.

Look all around you. Is there anywhere in the land where you have not been defiled by your adulteries? You sit like a prostitute beside the road waiting for a client. You sit alone like a nomad in the desert. You have polluted the land with your prostitution and wickedness. That is why the spring rains have failed. For you are a prostitute and are completely unashamed. Jeremiah 3:2-3 NLT

When the Lord first began speaking to Israel through Hosea, he said to him, "Go marry a prostitute, so some of her children will be born to you from other men. This will illustrate the way my people have been untrue to me, openly committing adultery against the Lord by worshiping other gods." Hosea 1:2 NLT

Why is adultery, prostitution and sexual sin a good picture of spiritual wanderings and spiritual adulteries?

Think about some of the crucial decisions you have made in your life. Share an example from your life when you followed Woman Folly and an example of when you followed Woman Wisdom.

Be ready to share with your homegroup important decisions you are facing or will face soon. As you think about these upcoming decisions what would it mean for you to follow God's path, the way of Woman Wisdom?

Reflect on this study and Proverbs 5-9. How have the graphic images of adultery, and the poetic invitations of Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly helped you to visualize the choices in your life? How have you responded in your Christian life to this type of biblical literature?

Study Five

Wisdom and Words

Proverbs is a book that gives advice on how to live a successful life through the application of wisdom from God. The book contains realistic, earthy, practical teaching on the issues of life that the believer encounters on a daily basis. In this study we will look at the important topic of how we speak. Our words have tremendous power to heal or to hurt.



The tongue has the power of life and death.
18:21

He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin. 13:3

The authors of Proverbs were well aware of the power of the tongue and hence give a large amount of material on the subject. Words and how they are used are examined from a variety of angles and perspectives.

Great care is taken in the book not only with what is said but with how the message is communicated. Indeed, the sages who produced the book saved some of their most striking images to describe and advise their students concerning the difference between wise and foolish speech. (Longman, p. 145)

To begin our study read the proverbs below. They speak of the relationship between the condition of an individual heart and the words that come out of the mouth. Make some notes from these verses. How does speech point to what is going on inside a person?

- 10:20
- 12:23
- 16:23
- 26:23-26
- 15:2

David Hubbard summarizes the teaching of these Proverbs.

Within each person “heart” and “mouth” are tied together. The Bible, as poetic parallelism suggests, sees the connection as intimate. The mouth (or lips or tongue) is the channel of the heart, and the heart is the reservoir of the mouth. Thought and choice take place in the heart; we make them known only through the mouth. Speech, for the wisdom teachers gained importance because it was the conduit from one heart to another. Purity of tongue was proof of purity of heart; hardness of heart spilled out in harshness of tongue (10:20). The teachers had no clearer test for distinguishing the wise from the fool than the litmus of speech. (Hubbard, p. 215)

How have you seen this reality in your own life? How do you find that your words, language and speech roughly parallel the condition of your heart? When you are walking with God in obedience and love, how do you see this reflected in your speech?

Conversely, when you are distant in your relationship with God, how does this distance affect what comes out of your mouth? Give an example of both extremes. If you are having a hard time coming up with an example you may want to ask a friend, a roommate or your spouse to supply one for you!

Words are relational. We speak them to one another and they in turn have an affect on the hearer. Words also have a huge influence on families, circles of friends, relationships at work and our church body. As any elementary school child can tell you, gossip hurts. Read these proverbs on gossip. How do they characterize gossip? How do the pictures employed in these proverbs help you to understand gossip better?

- 10:18
- 11:13
- 16:27-28
- 18:8
- 20:19
- 26:20
- 26:22

How have you seen the destructive influence of gossip? Think about the church in particular. How could gossip wreak havoc in a church like SBCC?

Reflect on Proverbs 17:4.

Wrongdoers eagerly listen to gossip; liars pay close attention to slander.

According to this verse how can gossip be stopped in a church setting?

Closely akin to gossip we find proverbs that speak of lies, arguments, false and harmful words. Before going on to the positive use of our tongues, look at these proverbs. How have you seen them to be true in your experience? What are the harmful affects of these negative words?

- 12:18-19
- 25:18
- 15:1-4

As we have seen, one of the main characters in the book of Proverbs is the *fool*. Don't spend too much time here but take note of how a primary characteristic of what makes a *fool* a *fool* is how he uses his mouth.

- 15:14
- 10:8
- 10:14
- 15:2
- 18:6-7
- 17:28

In contrast to the negative harmful affects of words spoken by the *fool*, the words of the person who is pursuing godly wisdom are a wonderful gift. In the proverbs below we find three metaphors for the use of the tongue and how our mouths can bring *healing* to

another person (two are positive and one is negative). How do these metaphors or word-pictures help us to understand the nature of *healing*? Can you give an example of receiving, *healing* words in your life?

How could SBCC work to become a place where *healing* words permeate our life together?

*The tongue that brings healing is a **tree of life**. . . 15:4*

*Pleasant words are a **honeycomb**, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones. 16:24*

*Reckless words **pierce like a sword**, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. 12:18*

Most of us have had the experience of being burdened by the anxieties, frustrations and pains of life. While the words of a fool can add to our discouragement the words of one who pursues the wisdom of God can bring great encouragement. Ponder the proverbs below. How can our words be an encouragement to those who are in a difficult place in life?

A man finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word! 15:23

An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up. 12:25

The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life. 10:11

Before going on in this study call someone on the phone and offer a kind word. Begin the conversation like this, *I know this is a bit abrupt, but I wanted to call you and encourage you.* . . Fill in the blank and then hang up! Share the results with your group.

Before leaving this topic of our words and speech consider the classic New Testament passage on the tongue, James 3:1-12. How does James 3:1-12 remind you of what we have been learning in Proverbs?

James gives us six rapid-fire illustrations about the tongue and our speech. What is the point of each illustration?

- bits in the mouths of horses
- rudders and ships
- sparks and forest fires
- poison and a body
- fresh water and salt water
- figs / olives / grapevine

Consider the life of a Christian. How is the use of the tongue unique in the life of a disciple of Christ given his / her;

relationship to God

relationship to the Church

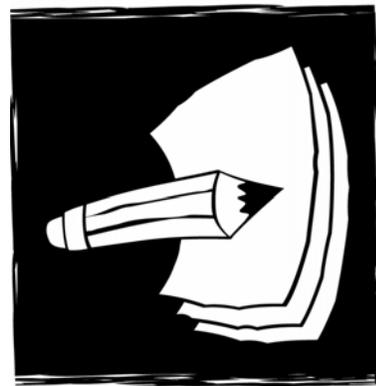
How has this study affected you? What do you need to change about your speech to follow the wise path to life?

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Six

Wisdom and Instruction

Imagine that you are trying to find a small town somewhere in the Midwest. It's in a rural area, and some of the route is mapped, but some is not. If you were unclear about the directions, would you stop and ask? If you were told you had taken a wrong turn, would you backtrack and re-direct your path?



The analogy is a little obvious. Our *map* in the Christian life is God's guiding wisdom, and one of the ways he has chosen to reveal this wisdom is in the instruction that comes from those who abide in Him. These *instructors* may be ones we know from Scripture, or our brothers and sisters in this Christian life. How often do we *seek* instruction? How well do we *receive* it when it is offered?

The book of Proverbs is replete with encouragements and admonitions regarding the ability to receive instruction in our walk of faith, and the dangers of not doing so.

Read the following Proverbs:

Encouragement

Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise. 19:20

Whoever gives heed to instruction prospers. 16:20

He who listens to a life-giving rebuke will be at home among the wise. 15:31

As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another. 27:17

Whoever heeds correction gains understanding.

Whoever heeds correction shows prudence.

Whoever heeds correction is honored. 15:32, 5, 13:8

Admonition

He who hates correction is stupid. 12:1

He who hates correction will die. 15:10

A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed.
29:1

Stop listening to instruction my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge. 19:27

He who scorns instruction will pay for it. 13:13

List those things gained by the one who listens to, and receives, instruction.

What are the consequences that come to the one who rejects instruction?

We will notice in our reading of the above proverbs, that the word *instruction* basically covers three categories of ascending importance: advice, correction, and rebuke.

*Listen to **advice** and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise.* 19:20

*Whoever heeds **correction** gains understanding.* 15:32

*A **rebuke** impresses a man of discernment more than a hundred lashes a fool.*
17:10

Throughout the Bible, we read stories from the lives of those who make a simple choice—to receive godly counsel, or reject it. The aftermath of those choices are laid out for us, for our instruction. With the above categories in mind, read 1 Kings 12:1-19. Outline the chain of events in the space below.

What decision did Rehoboam make that changed everything? Why do you think he made the decision that he did?

Two New Testament stories provide vivid examples of giving and receiving correction. Read Acts 18:24-28. Here we find Priscilla and Aquila, the dynamic husband and wife team correcting the gifted preacher Apollos. What was the result of the correction?

The second story is found in Galatians 2:11-21 where the apostle Paul confronts and corrects the apostle Peter. Why was this correction so important? What can we learn from both these stories about the method of correction in church relationships?

To whom do you gravitate when you are seeking advice? List the criteria that are important to you.

Ignoring wise instruction will usually land us in a place where we do not belong, outside of God's will for us. By God's grace, correction will most certainly follow. Whether it comes by the conviction of the Holy Spirit through prayer, the penetrating truth of scripture, or the direct words of a friend, correction is God's gift of re-direction. How well do we hear it?

Think back on a time when you received correction about something. In what form did it come to you (Scripture, prayer, a friend, a sermon, etc.)? How did you receive it? Give some examples of the effect on your life and how you applied it.

To summarize, ignoring wise instruction will lead to God's correction. To ignore correction will lead to rebuke – if we are fortunate! We are told again and again in Proverbs that the dismissal of a rebuke will lead to our destruction. Read the story of how David received God's rebuke (through the prophet Nathan) in the aftermath of his sin with Bathsheba in 2 Sam. 11:1 – 12:14¹. Outline the *flow* of David's responses below.

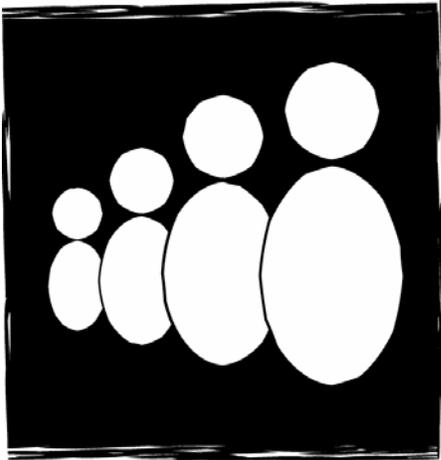
How are you challenged by this story?

What is the main obstacle in your life that prevents you from receiving godly instruction? What is your plan for its diminishment or removal? Share this with the rest of your homegroup, and spend time praying for one another!

¹ Extra credit: Read Psalm 51, for David's full response to God.

Study Seven

Wisdom and the Family



Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. *Psalm 127:3-5*

The book of Proverbs speaks a great deal about families. Marriage, sex and raising children are addressed in the frank style with which we are becoming familiar. In this study we will focus on the sayings that speak about parents and children, and the job of raising these children to follow the path of wisdom.¹

While it must have been quite different raising children 3,000 years ago in Israel (no TV, no X Box, no borrowing the keys to the car), the principles and truths for parents and their children found in Proverbs are timeless. Every parent wants to be a good parent and raise healthy kids. Christian parents want to bring up children who will *fear the Lord* and choose God's path for the direction of their life. In recent years, at least in America, many feel that the job of parenting has become much more difficult. The job of parenting and the job of being a child has changed because, in part, the shape of the family has changed.

- Fewer than 1/2 of all children born today will live continuously with their own father and mother throughout childhood.
- 70% of juveniles in state reform institutions come from fatherless homes.
- In 1990 57% of black births and 19% of white births were to parents who were not married.

Parents have become so frightened and perplexed about raising children in this new environment that we have seen the explosion of self-help books about children. Rodney Clapp, in his book *Families at the Crossroads*, makes this observation about the popularity of parenting literature.

Some manuals categorize them and predict their futures. Others advise us about childrearing techniques that will form and shape the kind of process we want our child to be. If any of them *worked* as effectively as they all are touted to work,

¹ The proverbs that deal with marriage and sex will be examined in Study 9.

there wouldn't be so many on the market. So why do we continue to buy such books? I think this vast literature reassures us in face of the strangeness, the alien qualities, of our children. These books say we can interpret and understand our children; their wildness can be tamed.¹ (Clapp, p. 142)

When compared to all the self-help books on raising children, the book of Proverbs may strike us as very simplistic. Proverbs does not make promises about children. It simply states the responsibilities of parents and the potential responses of children.

Read these proverbs. What do they say about the importance of a parent being an **example** to their children?

- 20:7
- 31:28
- 14:26

There is an assumption in Proverbs that the sage, the father and mother who attempts to lead their children in the path of God's wisdom, is in fact already walking that path themselves in the *fear of the Lord*. We know it is not possible for a parent to lead their children to the path of wisdom if they are not living God's way themselves. What does this tell us about the primary task of a parent?

Proverbs has an abundance of statements asserting that parents are to instruct and educate their children. Read the proverbs below. Make notes as you read and ponder. What do these proverbs say about the parental instruction and education of children? What surprises you?

- 1:8-9
- 2:1-5
- 6:20-23
- 7:1-2
- 4:3-4

¹ Rodney Clapp points out, *For all our scientific understanding, for all our child psychology, children—even modern children—remain mysterious.* (Clapp, p. 142)

The most famous proverb concerning the raising of children is Proverbs 22:6

Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.

Pastor Warren Wiersbe says that this verse has become something of a, *religious 'rabbit's foot' that many sorrowing parents and grandparents desperately resort to when children stray from the Lord.* (Wiersbe, p. 106) When reading proverbs such as this one it is important to remember, as was pointed out in the introduction, that these proverbs are not ironclad guarantees or laws, but rather general principles of life. Tremper Longman puts it like this.

Wisdom, then, is not a matter of memorizing proverbs and applying them mechanically and absolutely. Wisdom is knowing the right time and the right circumstance to apply the right principle to the right person. . . In a word, proverbs are principles that are generally true, not immutable laws. (Longman, p. 56)

How do these comments help you understand the proverbs that we have been pondering in this study?

This same plea for fathers to train and educate their children in the Lord is found in two pivotal parenting texts.

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. Ephesians 6:4

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. Deuteronomy 6:6-9

How do these scriptures place responsibility on parents? Do they give any practical advice on how this instruction can be done?

If you were fortunate enough to have Christian parents, reflect on their training in your life. How did they teach you the *fear of the Lord*?

Most parents will sacrifice time and money to keep their children in sports, music lessons, academics and social activities. These require lots of driving, a Saturday afternoon at the soccer field, buying a piano so that the child can practice, and helping in the evenings with homework. What would a parent have to sacrifice to bring up their children to follow the wise path of knowing God?

Respond to this statement by Robert Hicks.

I think all parents want to be able to surprise their children with gifts that excite and reflect the love they have for their child. But Proverbs puts its emphasis on properly adorning the child for public life. What should be seen in public when the child is grown are not the emerald rings or Corvettes that the parents have provided, but wisdom and knowledge about life. These are what should be around the neck or on the head of the adult child. These are the things that make children rise up and call their parents “blessed” (Proverbs 31:28). (Hicks, p. 136)

One of the more controversial teachings in the Proverbs is the instructions for parents to discipline their children. We live in an age where there is resistance to a proverb such as, *Do not withhold discipline from a child. If you punish him with the rod he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death.* (23:13-14)¹ Read the proverbs below about discipline. Answer these questions as you read. What is the **motivation** for parental discipline? What is the intended **result** of parental discipline?

- 13:24
- 23:13-14
- 29:15
- 3:11-12
- 22:15

¹ The popular and often quoted proverb, *Spare the rod and spoil the child*, is not found in the Bible. Proverbs 13:24 comes closest: *He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.*

- 19:18

In your discussion, try not to get bogged down in the issue of physical discipline. Whether or not you choose to spank, paddle or swat your children, what are the abiding principles of discipline you see in Proverbs? Why do you think so many parents in our era have left children to find their own way without parental discipline?

From your vantage point as an adult reflect on how you were disciplined as a child. Was discipline a positive or negative influence on you?

If you have children, what is your plan for the discipline and correction of your family?

When all is said and done, raising children remains an art. In Proverbs we do not find a detailed blueprint for *raising kids the wisdom way*. What we find are principles that must be applied to children, as individuals, to lead them in the path of wisdom. How are you doing as a parent? What have you learned in this study? What changes have you been prompted to make in your parenting?

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Eight Wisdom and Justice



The book of Proverbs will never be accused of being a lofty, esoteric, hard to understand spiritual treatise. It is down to earth, hard-hitting, simple and, at times, humorous in its descriptions. Proverbs makes it very clear that there are two ways to live life: the way of wisdom (based on the *fear of the Lord*), or the way of folly. In this study we will consider a large and somewhat diverse group of proverbs that could fall under the heading of justice and work.

Begin by reading the following proverbs that speak of justice and righteousness. What is the picture of wise living under the lordship of God that is presented in these verses?

- 18:5
- 15:25
- 21:15
- 22:28
- 28:4
- 28:5
- 11:1
- 20:23

How would you define *justice* from a biblical – proverbial point of view?

In the Bible *justice* is exemplified in how the righteous treat the poor. The Bible as a whole has a great deal to say about this issue. Consider these proverbs.¹ How do they expand your understanding of justice?

- 29:7
- 29:27
- 14:31
- 21:13
- 22:16
- 22:22

The proverbs on justice are expanded by proverbs on *bribes* and *ill-gotten* gains. What is being described is economic cheating. These proverbs are not difficult to understand. What do they have to say about contemporary business practices? Make application from the large corporation to your own check book and business dealings.

- 10:2
- 20:17
- 21:6
- 28:16
- 17:23
- 15:27

Apply what you are learning in these proverbs to your life. How could the justice that God desires be a part of your life and work? Try to think of a few practical examples of how you incorporate the heart of God into your life and work.

¹ Some of the proverbs in this study will touch on the issue of money and wealth. We will consider *Wisdom and Money* in more depth in study 10.

Work Ethic

Some of the most painfully obvious and at times funny proverbs are saved for the *sluggard*. Derek Kidner gives an apt description of the sluggard.

The sluggard in Proverbs is a figure of tragic-comedy, with his sheer animal laziness, *As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns in his bed.* (26:14), his preposterous excuses, *The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road, a fierce lion roaming the streets!"*(26:13), and his final helplessness. (Kidner, p. 42)

Read these proverbs describing the sluggard. How do they relate to the issue of work? How would following the wise path keep us from becoming a sluggard?

- 20:4
- 21:25
- 6:6
- 24:30-34

Kidner points out four characteristics of the sluggard. (Kidner, p. 42-43)

- 1) He will not begin things. 6:9-11
- 2) He will not finish things. 12:27, 19:24, 26:15
- 3) He will not face things. 20:4, 22:13
- 4) Consequently he is restless. 13:4, 15:19, 10:26

It is obvious how the practical aspects of a sluggard's life are in disarray. How is the life of a sluggard a reflection of his relationship with God? Think in terms of our day and age. Would it be possible for someone who was lazy and had the characteristics we have seen in the proverbs above to also have a warm, vibrant, growing spiritual relationship with God? Why? Why not?

Respond to this statement by Ronald Sailler and David Wyrzten.

Laziness could run a competitive race for the most underrated sin. Quietly it anesthetizes its victim into a lifeless stupor that ends in hunger, bondage and death. (The Practice of Wisdom, p.82)

The Righteous and the Wicked

Closely related to the proverbs on justice, work and the sluggard are a group of sayings that contrast the *righteous* and the *wicked*. Before reading some of these proverbs consider this statement by David Hubbard.

Our conduct, whether wise or foolish, has ultimate consequences. That is the major theme of Proverbs, and notably of 10:1-22:16. These proverbs assume an inevitable cause-and-effect relationship between human behavior and its outcome. **The Lord has rigged the universe for righteousness.** To go his way prompts reward. To go against it leads to failure. [emphasis added] (Hubbard, p. 141)

As you read these proverbs reflect on how, *The Lord has rigged the universe for righteousness*. How have you seen this to be true in your life? Which of these proverbs ring most true in your experience? Why?

- 12:7
- 12:3
- 13:9
- 14:32
- 15:29
- 10:28-32

Read Proverbs 11:1-11, 20-21, 23. Make two lists contrasting the righteous and the wicked from the verses in this chapter.

The Righteous

The Wicked

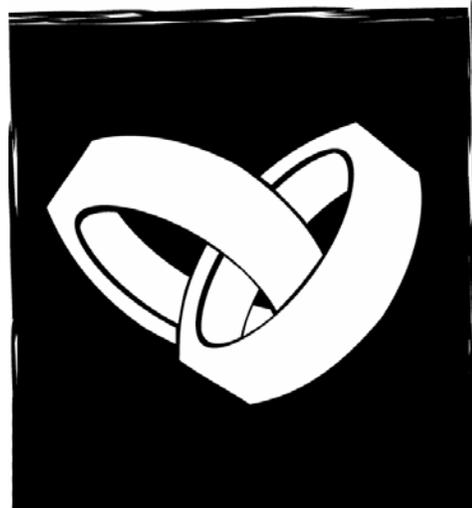
After looking at many individual proverbs in this study come back to the big picture. Summarize what you have learned in this study about God's wisdom in your life? What changes do you plan to make in your life as a result of these proverbs?

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Nine

The Wise Marriage

As we have noted several times in our study of Proverbs, the book in its original setting is addressed to young men. As a result there is considerable attention given to marriage and sex. There is no ambiguity in these proverbs about the benefits of marrying the right woman and the dangers of sexual relations with either a prostitute or a promiscuous wife of another man. Throughout the frank comments on the dangers, pitfalls and frustrations that may accompany male-female relationships, the beauty and desirability of a covenant marriage to the right person is held high.



He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the Lord. 18:22

A wife of noble character is her husband's crown, but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones. 12:4

The instructions and warnings we will look at in this study are understood from the male point of view. How is a woman to understand these proverbs? Should she be offended and think that she is excluded from the wisdom found here? Why aren't there warnings about women marrying the wrong men or the reality that a women need to be wary of the seductions of foolish men? If you are a woman and have felt frustrations and a sense of being excluded in these proverbs, listen to the counsel of Tremper Longman.

Certainly the book of Proverbs recognizes that there are bad men as well as bad women. Both are described under the names of fool, scoffer or mocker. It is not much of a stretch to think that the book of Proverbs would frown on a wise woman, as well as a wise man, marrying a fool. But we cannot escape the fact that Proverbs in its ancient setting is addressed to young men, and that the Old Testament culture was male dominant. Even so, I would deny that there is any hint that women are somehow inherently inferior to men. . . . I believe modern readers are invited to read the Proverbs by flipping the text to the other side of the relational equation. For example: *It's better to live alone in the corner of an attic than with a quarrelsome husband in a lovely home. (21:9)* (Longman, p. 132)

Let's begin our examination of the text on a positive note. There will be plenty of warnings to look at shortly. What is the picture of marriage painted in these proverbs?

- 18:22
- 19:14
- 12:4

The beauty of love between a man and a woman is portrayed as wonderful and mysterious.

There are three things that amaze me—no, four things that I do not understand: how an eagle glides through the sky, how a snake slithers on a rock, how a ship navigates through the ocean, how a man loves a woman. *30:18-19 NLT*

The longest and most complementary picture of a wife in Proverbs is found at the end of the book. Read Proverbs 30:10-31. How is this wife of *noble character* described? What is the result of her actions for the marriage?

Women, if you are feeling like the woman described in these verses is setting a pretty high standard that is difficult to live up to, consider Longman's advice.

The description is apparently that of an ideal woman. After reading of this multitalented woman, one wonders whether the opening question "Who can find a virtuous and capable woman?" was intended to be answered with a "No one." The poet, then, may be creating an ideal for which to strive. (Longman, p. 140)

Always realistic, Proverbs also makes it clear that marriage to the wrong person can be exceedingly unpleasant. Marriage to the foolish woman or man, can make one's life miserable. Read these witty proverbs. What do the metaphors and word-pictures the author uses tell us about a difficult marriage?¹

¹ In chapters 1-9 of Proverbs we have seen the contrast between Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly (Study 4). In our present study we have the contrast between the good wife, and the prostitute and adulterous woman. Longman observes, *Now we can see how the wife is a human reflection of Woman Wisdom and the promiscuous woman is a human reflection of Woman Folly. To unite with the former pair leads to life, but to unite with the latter pair leads to death.* (Longman, p. 143)

- 11:22
- 12:4
- 21:9; 25:24
- 27:15-16

The strongest and most consistent topic in the first nine chapters of Proverbs is the father's instruction to his son. The father is concerned that his son avoids sexual sin. The father minces no words and marshals some of the strongest arguments in the book.

Against so high a view of marriage, sexual sin is presented in the darkest of colours. It is a squandering of powers that were designed for the founding of a true family that should be one's own, and close-knit, and divinely blessed. It is an exchange of true intimacy for a parody, a parting with one's honour and liberty. It is to throw away one's best years and possibly one's possessions. It is to court physical danger and social disgrace; and that is not all. Those who think to explore life this way are flirting with death. (Kidner, p. 50)

As you read the proverbs listed below consider the passion of the father's argument. As you look for the pattern of sexual sin you will notice at least 3 common elements: 1) temptation, 2) a warning to be wise, 3) consequences of the sin. Read and make notes about these 3 elements.

2:16-19, 5:1-23, 6:20-35, 7:1-27.

Temptation

Warning to be wise

Consequences of the sin

In reading these proverbs what surprises you? What corresponds to your struggles and temptations with sexual sin?

Most Christians are very aware of the horrible consequences of sexual sin. We know the answer to the sage's question, *Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched?* (6:27-28). We know that sexual sin destroys marriages, families, ministries and churches. In spite of this, sadly, sexual sin within the Christian community remains prevalent. Whether you are married or single, what are you doing to protect yourself in this area? What can Santa Barbara Community Church do to safeguard her members in the sexual arena?

Humans have an amazing ability to rationalize their foolish behavior. This is especially true in the sexual arena. The adulteress, and we would assume her partner, reflect this tendency to deny the sinfulness of sin in Proverbs 30:20.

This the way of an adulteress: She eats and wipes her mouth and says, "I've done nothing wrong."

How can we safeguard ourselves from ignoring or rationalizing away sinful behavior?

In the midst of sexual temptation, the father encourages his son in unabashedly erotic language to find sexual love, joy and satisfaction with his wife. Consider the verses below. Go ahead and blush! The images of a *cistern* or *well* point to female genitalia ready for sexual intercourse (5:15). The picture of the *fountain* and *streams of water* (5:16, 18) indicate . . . well you get the idea!

Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer—may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love. Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress? Why embrace the bosom of another man's wife? (5:15-20)¹

¹ The Bible is clear in affirming the goodness of sexual intimacy in the covenant of marriage. It is not the least bit prudish. Consider the sanctified eroticism of Song of Songs 4:12-15, 7:6-9.

Again, Longman provides us with an insightful summary.

Thus, the father presents the son with the first line of defense against the temptations of the strange, foreign woman: a healthy sexual relationship with his own wife. While a relationship with the strange woman leads to death, the relationship with one's wife leads to life. (Longman, p. 138)

If you are married, what are you doing to nurture a warm vibrant relationship with your spouse? Think in terms of both physical intimacy and your relationship in general. Come ready to share **absolutely nothing** with your homegroup! But make sure that you talk with your spouse.

How does the wisdom in this study run contrary to the thinking of our world?

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Ten

Wisdom and Money

Rich and poor have this in common: The Lord is the maker of them all. 22:2

There are over 50 sayings in Proverbs that touch on the issue of rich and poor, wealth and poverty: in a word, money. In approaching this study you may be assuming the wisdom on this topic is uniform, obvious, and easy to apply. This is not the case. Sometimes the teachings we find on money in Proverbs don't even seem to be compatible! As commentator Roland Murphy points out, *Proverbs can be at war with each other*. (Murphy, p. 262) The wisdom teaching on money is diverse and situational. As we have seen throughout this study, Proverbs is not a water-tight set of rules and propositions that are always true, but rather a set of general principles that must be skillfully applied to real life situations. Murphy explains.



As far as the book of Proverbs is concerned, there is no one answer to the problem of riches and poverty; several attitudes are portrayed and left in tension with each other.

No ethical rules are laid out to cover all the situations, and there is no consistency in the observations since different circumstances call for different observations. (Murphy, p.261)

For the New Testament reader, one of the more shocking assertions in Proverbs is the teaching that riches are good and in fact a blessing from God. Read the following proverbs. Take notes and be ready to discuss the general thrust of the wisdom found here. While these proverbs obviously do not give us the entire Biblical teaching on money, what sort of picture do they paint?

- 3:9-10¹
- 3:15-16
- 10:22
- 10:15

¹ Tremper Longman warns us concerning 3:9-10. *We do well, however, to remember that proverbs are snapshots of reality, generally true principles, but not promises. A statement such as Proverbs 3:9-10 is not a formula for success.* (Longman, p.120)

Many proverbs simply state an obvious truth about how wealth and poverty are attained.

Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth. 10:4

He who loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and oil will never become rich. 21:17

There is another group of proverbs that recognize the fleeting nature of wealth and that wisdom and a righteous life with God has eternal benefits. Respond to the proverbs below? How have you ordered your financial life and aspirations to reflect the truths of these proverbs? Be specific.

The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe. The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it an unscalable wall. 18:10-11

Evil people will get rich for the moment, but the reward of the godly will last. 11:18 NLT

Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death. 11:4

Don't weary yourself trying to get rich. Why waste your time? For riches will disappear as though they had the wings of a bird! 23:4-5 NLT

Wealth in Proverbs is usually seen as a blessing from God. But there is no doubt that wealth is of relative value and is far inferior to wisdom and right standing with God. Read the proverbs below. How do they stand as a corrective to anyone who might misuse other proverbs we have studied? What are you doing to insure that you won't become confused about the relative value of wealth?

- 22:1
- 15:16
- 16:16
- 28:6

Proverbs presents a balanced view of wealth in relationship to things that are much more important. Respond to this summary statement by Longman.

The first thing to notice about these passages is that they all are a ready admission that not everyone who is wise and godly will be wealthy or even live beyond a subsistence level. Proverbs recognizes that one can be poor or godly, or rich and a fool. Note also how many characteristics are more important than money. They include inner peace (15:16), relationships that are loving (15:17), and peaceful (17:1), honesty (16:8, 28:6), and a good reputation (22:1). These all flow from the even more central trait: wisdom (16:16)—also called the fear of the Lord (15:16), and godliness (16:8). (Longman, p. 128)

At the end of the book we find a prayer of the sage Agur.

Two things I ask of you, O Lord; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.
30:7-9

What causes the rich person to say, *Who is the Lord?*

We Christians think that if we were to become *rich* it would not interfere with our faith at all. We tend to think we *could handle it*, and still maintain our dependency and vibrancy with God. How do riches, even the limited riches you have as a privileged American, tend to pull you away from God? How have you seen this dynamic work out in your life? Come up with a recent example.

Why is it wise to ask God to give us a life that has *neither poverty nor riches*?
Can you pray that prayer?

In a study like this it is tempting to read a few proverbs and then quickly turn to the more accessible portions of the New Testament that teach about money. It would be easy to have our discussion begin to focus on such texts as James 5:1-6, 1 Timothy 6:6-19, 2 Corinthians 8-9, or the words of Jesus in Mark 10:17-31 or Matthew 6:19-24. We have not done that in this study for a reason. There is value in allowing the wisdom of

Proverbs to stand on its own for a season. Proverbs, and other wisdom literature in the Old Testament, approach the issue of money in a unique fashion, pondering it from a variety of perspectives and life situations. Since we are in wisdom literature, one other Old Testament text needs to be examined. Ecclesiastes 5:8-20 sounds a great deal like some of the proverbs we have read. Read Ecclesiastes 5:8-20. What themes do you see that are similar to what we have read in Proverbs? What is the writer's attitude toward money?

Analyze your attitudes and thinking about money. Has what we have seen in the proverbs above challenged your thinking? What have you learned that is new? Have you been challenged in your thinking by the proverbs in this study?

Study Eleven

Wisdom that Guides

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones. 3:5-8

In our last two studies we will remind ourselves of the big picture in the book of



Proverbs. What is offered in Proverbs is two ways to live one's life: the foolish path or the wise path. *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and knowledge. (1:7)* Proverbs is comprised of several long discourses (1-9) and numerous individual sayings (10-30) that reinforce the practical nature of following the wise path in the fear of the Lord, and that show the folly of disregarding God's instructions. The wisdom of Proverbs is the guidance of God. God wants to direct the lives of his people. Let's consider God's guidance, direction, and will for our lives. Read and meditate on 3:5-8. We will study these verses in some detail.

What do Christians mean when they say they are *trusting in the Lord*?

Trust in the Lord with all your heart . . . How have you trusted in God this week? Is it harder for you to trust God in the big things of life or the small particulars of daily life?

To trust in the Lord means that we should not, *lean on our own understanding*. Commentator Derek Kidner points out that, *Lean does not mean incline, but support yourself, rely*. (Kidner, p. 63) With this in mind, how do the words *trust* and *lean* help us to understand how God guides us?

To say that God guides our lives implies not only that we belong to God, but that he has a plan for our lives. Our text continues with this plea: *in all your ways acknowledge him*. These words sound very good and exceedingly spiritual. But what do they mean? What

does it mean at a practical level to acknowledge God in your life in all your ways?¹ How would this command fit into the larger counsel found in Proverbs?

When we acknowledge God in our plans the proverb tells us that, *he will make your paths straight*. How do you understand this metaphor of a *straight path*? Give an illustration from your life of how God's guidance straightened out your path.

The theme of God's guidance continues in verse 7: *Do not be wise in your own eyes* and is rendered in the NLT, *Don't be impressed with your own wisdom*. Can you think of a time when you were impressed with your own wisdom independent of God's? How does a Christian learn to not be impressed with himself?

In verse 8 we come full circle. Wisdom and God's guidance is the result when we *fear the Lord*. When we fear the Lord we will *shun evil*. List 3 ways that you are currently in the process of shunning evil.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Our text concludes with an illustration of what happens when we allow God to guide our lives. Commentator Allen Ross helps us to understand the picture of the body found in verse 8. *The healing that the fear of the Lord and avoidance of evil bring is first and foremost spiritual. Scripture often uses the physical body to describe inner spiritual and physical feelings.* (Ross, p. 917) Does this metaphor of *health to the body and nourishment to your bones* make sense to you? How have you experienced the reality of this illustration in your life?²

¹ Warren Wiersbe comments. *The Hebrew word translated 'acknowledge' in Proverbs 3:6 carries with it the idea of intimate communion and is used to describe the marriage relationship (Gen. 4:1, 19:8).* (Wiersbe, p. 138)

² The NLT renders verse 8, *Then you will gain renewed health and vitality.*

Read and scrutinize the proverbs below. What do they add to your understanding of God's guidance in your life?

- 16:3-4
- 16:9
- 19:21
- 20:24
- 21:30-31

What do the proverbs above have to teach us about the sovereignty of God?

A crucial element of accepting and applying the guidance of God found in Proverbs is self-control and personal discipline. We have already seen many areas where wisdom must be applied with an accompanying self-control. For example, as we have seen, discipline is required to be wise in the areas of money, sex and our speech, to name a few.

Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth. 10:4

Keep a path far from her [adulterous woman], do not go near the door of her house. 5:7

He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin. 13:3

Without discipline and self-control wisdom will never be attained.

Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control. 25:28

Read the proverbs below. How is discipline essential to live out the wisdom found in Proverbs?

- 5:12
- 5:23
- 12:15

- 13:18
- 15:32
- 10:17
- 12:1

You will notice in most of these proverbs there is a relation between discipline and receiving correction or advice. How are these related?

How have you seen the need for leading a disciplined life as essential for your success in living the Christian life? Is it possible to walk the path of wisdom in the fear of the Lord and lack self-control?

Respond to this statement from M. Scott Peck. *Discipline is the basic set of tools we require to solve life's problems. Without discipline we can solve nothing.* (Peck, The Road Less Traveled, p. 3)

Be ready to share with your homegroup several areas of your life where you have found success in spiritual / personal discipline. Where could your group pray for and encourage you be more self-controlled and disciplined?

Think through this study. Do you have a sense of God's guidance in your life? How would you describe this guidance?

Study Twelve What is Better?

The fear of the Lord leads to life, then one rests content, untouched by trouble.
19:23

A man's own folly ruins his life yet his heart rages against the Lord. 19:3

We have now spent twelve weeks in the book of Proverbs. The sagacity we have been exposed to has been hard hitting, practical, obvious, profound, and at times downright humorous! The path of wisdom is the direct opposite of the path of folly. Wise living results when we begin with the fear of the Lord. Folly is the result when we ignore God and go our own way. Throughout our study there has been a central theme in Proverbs that is implicit. It is better to live life God's way, the wisdom way, than to go it alone and end up on the path of folly and stupidity.

Think through our study of Proverbs these last twelve weeks. How is the wisdom of God presented? Why would anyone want to pursue this wisdom?



We can tend to forget the very practical benefits of following wisdom. Review some of your favorite proverbs from these last weeks of study. Don't try to be too spiritual here. What are some of the pragmatic, useful teachings you have been impressed with? Have fun as a homegroup reviewing Proverbs' greatest hits.

WHAT IS BETTER?

Read the proverbs below. How do they remind us that following the path of wisdom in the fear of the Lord is a great way to live life? What are the benefits of wisdom?

- 10:27
- 14:26-27
- 16:6
- 19:23
- 16:3
- 18:10

The teaching that life works best when we follow God's path and pursue his wisdom is obvious from the beginning to the end of Proverbs. There is a word in many proverbs that accentuates this truth. The word is "**better.**" These proverbs might be called the "**what is better**" proverbs. Usually the answer to what is better is provided in the proverb itself. Read the proverbs below. Think through how they illustrate God's wisdom in the practical areas of life. Make observations, take some notes and be ready to share your thoughts with your homegroup.

- 15:16-17
- 16:8
- 16:16
- 17:1
- 17:12
- 19:1
- 21:3
- 22:1
- 28:6

As you think about this idea of *what is better* consider your own life. How have you seen that God's wisdom is **better**? Try your hand at writing some proverbs of your own.

Better is _____ than _____. Try and write at least 8 of these personal proverbs. Have fun and rejoice that life with God is **better**!

Proverbs always presents the way of wisdom as the best path, better than any of the alternatives. In spite of this we are constantly reminded in the book that there are those who do not live in the fear of the Lord. They reject him and his wisdom. He is referred to as *wicked, sluggard, mocker*, but most often as the *fool*. How does one become a *fool*? Think through our study of Proverbs. What are some to the characteristics of the individual who chooses the foolish path in life?

How do the three proverbs below add to your understanding of how the path of wisdom and fear of the Lord is rejected?

The way of the fool seems right to him. 12:15

Blessed is the man who always fears the Lord, but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble. 28:14

A man's own folly ruins his life yet his heart rages against the Lord. 19:3

WHAT IS BETTER?

What are the benefits that you have enjoyed in your life by following God's instructions and wisdom? How would your life be different if you had rejected God's wisdom?

Think through these last 12 weeks in Proverbs. How has this book had an effect on you? What do you plan to change about your life as a result of working through Proverbs and these studies?