

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM: STUDIES IN PROVERBS

Sunday AM Adult Bible Class, Summer 2013

Proverbs helps us to see how a spiritual perspective can be applied to even the most routine aspects of life. On a deeper level, it teaches the importance and nature of God's wisdom. It shows us the difference between worldly intelligence and spiritual understanding, and it illustrates the difference between mere self-interested cleverness and genuine godly wisdom.

The opening section of Proverbs (chapters 1-9) emphasizes the importance of God's wisdom and discusses the ways we are tempted to turn to the world for wisdom instead of to God. The next portion of Proverbs (chapters 10-24) contains the main collection of the actual "proverbs", most of which are isolated one- or two-verse thoughts. The last part of Proverbs (chapters 25-31) is a somewhat more focused collection of "proverbs" that was added later to the original collection.

Tentative Outline & Schedule:

Week	Topic	Passage
Week 1 - June 2	Seeking Spiritual Wisdom	Proverbs 1-2
Week 2 - June 9	Wisdom & Discipline	Proverbs 3-5
Week 3 - June 16	Wisdom & Perspective	Proverbs 6-7
Week 4 - June 23	Wisdom Has Set Her Table	Proverbs 8-9
Week 5 - June 30	Foundations Of A Righteous Life	Proverbs 10-12*
Week 6 - July 7	Self-Control In Its Various Forms	Proverbs 13-15*
Week 7 - July 14	Perils Of The Proud	Proverbs 16-18*
Week 8 - July 21	Sluggards & Their Kin	Proverbs 19:1-22:16*
Week 9 - July 28	Sayings Of The Wise	Proverbs 22:17-24:34*
Week 10 - August 4	Spiritual Wisdom In Relationships	Proverbs 25-27*
Week 11 - August 11	Spiritual Survival In A Fleshly World	Proverbs 28-29
Week 12 - August 18	Spiritual Mysteries & Spiritual Treasure	Proverbs 30-31

* In studying these sections of Proverbs, we shall select related verses to study from the given passages, rather than doing an expository study as in the other weeks.

The class on Proverbs will be the second in a series of three classes connected by the concept of perspective. The book of Job, which we studied in Spring, teaches perspective on the troubling questions of life. Proverbs provides spiritual perspective on daily living. The book of Colossians, which we shall study in Autumn, helps us to develop an eternal perspective.

Bibliography

The following books can also be used by those who wish to study the book of Proverbs further on their own. You're welcome to see me if you'd like recommendations.

David Atkinson, *The Message Of Proverbs* (Bible Speaks Today)

Derek Kidner, *Proverbs* (Tyndale OT Commentary)

Ross & Gaebelien (editor), *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, volume 6

Bruce Waltke, *The Book Of Proverbs* (2 volumes, NICOT)

J. Robert Wright (ed.), *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song Of Solomon* (Ancient Christian C.S.)

- Mark Garner, June 2013

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM: STUDIES IN PROVERBS

Notes For Week One: Seeking Spiritual Wisdom (Proverbs 1-2)

Proverbs opens with an extended exhortation on the importance and nature of God's wisdom. God offers us the chance to benefit from his transcendent perspective and his deep understanding, yet he also allows us to choose whether to accept or reject his offer of spiritual wisdom. He hopes we will listen to him, yet he graciously lets us make the choice for ourselves.

Prologue To Proverbs (Proverbs 1:1-9)

God's offer of spiritual wisdom is extended equally to the young and to the old, to the learned and to the uneducated. There is no one who cannot find considerable benefit from listening to God's perspective and values; and there is no one to whom God will not willingly give this opportunity. Our own attitude determines how much we might benefit from his wisdom.

The book of Proverbs offers to help believers attain wisdom and discipline (1:1-3). Its wisdom is both spiritual and practical, offering us the chance to develop a more spiritual perspective while at the same time learning how to live a "disciplined and prudent life", to "walk in the light, as he is in the light" (1 John 1:7). Neither Proverbs nor any other portion of Scripture pretends to offer excitement, earthly glory, or earthly gain; so we are implicitly faced with the question of whether more spiritual goals are of interest to us. God's wisdom is certainly different from the world's.

Spiritual wisdom is of value to all who listen; and it is offered to all, both to the wise and to the "simple" (1:4-6). The wisest humans are still far remote from God's perspective, and will always have much to learn - in fact, it is a sign of genuine wisdom to admit how much one does not know. The simple - those who have not yet developed either good judgment or bad judgment* - can significantly alter the course of their lives by choosing God's wisdom over worldly wisdom.

* Most versions, including the KJV, RSV, and NIV, use "simple" in verse 4 to describe such a person. The NASB uses "naïve". See the note below for a comparison between Proverbs' use of "simple" and "fool".

The book of Proverbs thus has something for everyone. Its practical teachings cover a wide range of situations, so that any reader will find large numbers of "proverbs"* that will apply to his or her life. Beyond that, the book of Proverbs teaches us the nature of godly wisdom, and often it implicitly calls us to reconsider our views on the nature of wisdom itself.

* In everyday usage, a "proverb" usually means a short, often pithy statement that uses a simple but memorable figure of speech to make a point, either practical or philosophical. The Hebrew word translated "proverb" literally means a comparison, but over time it had come to mean any wise or witty saying.

The awareness (or fear, see below) of God is merely the beginning of knowledge (1:7-9*, see also 9:10). All our lives, we need humility and grace to grasp what God tells us. None of us can survive spiritually without remaining close to God's presence and voice, and no human or human organization is ever a genuine authority on spiritual matters. Thus "fools** despise (spiritual) wisdom and discipline", for the flesh not only hates to acknowledge God's superiority, but also hates having no 'standard' by which one's flesh can prove itself superior to others'.

* Most commentators and Bible versions with section headings start a new 'section' of the book after v. 7.

** The Hebrew word translated as "fool" in Proverbs means someone who deliberately or willfully rejects spiritual wisdom, and it thus is a stronger term of criticism than the mere "simple" (see above).

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What qualities of God's wisdom make it worthwhile for everyone? What does this tell us about what God means by 'wisdom'? Why is the fear of the Lord only the 'beginning' of wisdom? What are the implications of this? Besides humility, what else might we need in order to benefit from God's wisdom?

The Temptation Of Worldly Wisdom (Proverbs 1:10-19)

God never denies - neither in Proverbs nor in the rest of Scripture - that there can be short-term fleshly benefits to rejecting his teachings and following worldly advice. Even the literal situation in this passage is only an image of the many ways that worldly wisdom can tempt us. But as the image makes clear, following worldly wisdom comes at a cost, to others as well as to ourselves.

Worldly wisdom competes with God's by making its own promises (1:10-14). The imagery of a gang assault on a helpless victim emphasizes the way that worldly wisdom promises quick, easy results. Worldly wisdom is not as concerned with truth, with integrity, with long-term consequences, or with anything that does not produce some kind of distinct, worldly gain.

Worldly wisdom seeks worldly prizes and uses worldly methods. By no means are the religious innocent of such things. Churches and believers simply gloss over their worldly desires and methods with a veneer of spiritual language and slogans. When we emphasize numerical results above the fruit of the spirit, or when we use guilt, fear and pressure to motivate others, we might as well be unbelievers who don't care about what it costs to get the things that their flesh desires.

The cost of worldly wisdom is not measured in terms that "fools" readily listen to (1:15-19). The realm of the worldly features mutual exploitation and oppression: "evil men and imposters will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Timothy 3:13). Even in its more subtle forms - deceit, emotional manipulation, inability to reconsider one's values - worldly wisdom creates unhealthy relationships and deadens the soul even when it accomplishes worldly goals*.

* The image of a net spread in full view of birds has been interpreted and applied in various ways. The obvious meaning is that sensible birds are not fooled by a trap that is set while they are watching - thus we should realize the obvious trap set for us in the crass temptations of worldly wisdom. A different interpretation sees a warning to the would-be trapper, as it is nonsensical to think that our worldly methods are so clever or sophisticated, when in reality their true nature is obvious to the discerning.

Those who live by worldly wisdom, even when pursuing ostensibly religious objectives, merely waylay themselves with their ill-advised schemes and plots. Indulging in hatred and slander against public figures or 'heretics' erodes one's own soul and bring about spiritual death. Using guilt or anxiety to get others to conform to outward standards blinds all involved to the real spiritual blessings of the gospel. These and other forms of worldly wisdom can bring considerable harm to others, but they bring the greatest harm to those who practice them.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why is worldly wisdom so appealing? Why does God allow it to be so tempting? What forms of worldly wisdom can seem 'religious' or otherwise justifiable on the surface? In what sense do those who follow worldly wisdom 'waylay' themselves?

Seek Wisdom While We Can (Proverbs 1:20-33)

The book of Proverbs often personifies wisdom as a woman calling out to those who could learn from her words. In this passage, Wisdom looks pityingly but unyieldingly at those who have not

listened to her, and who thus have paid a high spiritual cost for their decision. God will not force his presence on us, nor will he force his wisdom on us - in all cases, he will wait patiently.

Wisdom herself* now speaks, asking how long it will take for us to listen to her call (1:20-27). Lady Wisdom's open invitation emphasizes some key aspects of God's spiritual wisdom. As with everything else of importance to God, it is personal, designed to help us to know God himself as opposed to accumulating impersonal facts. And God's wisdom is always available, any time that we are ready to set aside our reliance on human authorities and worldly methods.

* There are basic similarities between the woman "Wisdom" in Proverbs and other ancient personifications of wisdom (e.g. from Egypt). But Wisdom's character in Proverbs differs considerably from any of these, reflecting the difference between the nature of the living God and the nature of other ancient 'gods'.

Wisdom* pityingly reminds us of the many blessings that humans have rejected, because of their lack of interest in her gracious invitation and their insistence on pursuing the world's forms of wisdom. Lady Wisdom knows her own value, and she will not change her offer - she will not offer us what our flesh desires, but instead longs to give us what our souls and spirits need.

* Some commentators see in 'lady Wisdom' a representation of the Holy Spirit. There are indeed some similarities worth noting, but it would be a mistake to take the parallel too far.

Rejecting Lady Wisdom also brings unnecessary struggles. Those who use worldly wisdom often do obtain what they desire, yet are not as fulfilled or as satisfied as they hoped to be. Even Christians can frantically pursue numerical results or an idealized lifestyle, never understanding why these cannot bring lasting contentment. Wisdom pities these silly humans, yet laughs at them too. "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? ... The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them." (Psalm 2:1, 4) God is secure in his own nature and wisdom - human plots and theories pose no threat to him. He laughs at our pride even as he longs for the worldly person to "become a 'fool' so that he may become wise" (1 Cor. 3:18).

Wisdom also cautions us not to put her off for too long, or else someday "they will call me but I will not answer" (1:28-33). There are times when it is too late to seek spiritual wisdom, not because God permanently withdraws himself, but because our hearts can become too hard to listen. Calling to God for help must be accompanied by at least a modicum of humility, or else all his wisdom cannot help us because we will not accept it or understand it.

Varying pitfalls await those who reject wisdom. The simple (with no sense of right and wrong) drift into waywardness, not realizing that this can quickly become spiritually fatal. The fool (who willfully chooses worldly wisdom over spiritual wisdom) becomes complacent. Because God is so gracious, he loves fools and gives them many chances to come to their senses. Some do, but many others mistakenly take God's patience as a sign that they don't need to change.

Worldly wisdom often leads to short-term gain, and at times the world even knows how to protect us from certain kinds of short-term, earthly dangers. But safety from spiritual harm comes only when we follow God's wisdom. To keep our souls healthy and secure, we often have to risk or even give up worldly ambitions and pleasures. Worldly teachers (even many 'religious' ones) deny this, but lady Wisdom - like God himself - will never hide the truth from us.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why is "wisdom" presented as a person, and as a woman? What characterizes her invitation? Why is her invitation so often rejected? Why does she react as she does to being rejected? Is this the same as God's reaction to being rejected? What blessings does she offer? Why aren't they better appreciated?

The Source Of True Wisdom (Proverbs 2:1-22)

Only God himself can always provide true, genuine wisdom. Only God has a perfect, complete perspective and perfect, sincere compassion for us - and so only he is always both able and willing to tell us the full truth. This realization always seems to come slowly for us mortal humans, yet it is worth our time to consider it and to understand its many implications.

Seeking God's wisdom takes time and self-discipline, but it is a worthwhile endeavor (2:1-8). The search for godly wisdom takes patience on God's part as well as on ours. God sees our errors and misconceptions with excruciating clarity, and he sees all the negative consequences of human folly; yet he is ever patient in his grace and his compassion for us. Thus we ought to be willing to remain patient as we go through the lifelong process of slowly adjusting our fleshly minds to a more spiritual point of view. The call to "search for it as for hidden treasure" reminds us that what we are seeking is worth the trouble, if we understand what we are being promised.

We notice also a familiar phrase, in the assurance that we can "understand the fear of the Lord". There is perhaps no precise way to define this in our language, yet the concept is neither complicated nor terrifying. The most basic characteristic of God is his absolute transcendence in comparison with our universe and our dimension, his ability to act entirely as he pleases (except insofar as he is constrained by his own character) in the affairs of the physical universe. The fear of the Lord is, essentially, the simple but genuine realization that this really is true.

Even many Christians never truly accept this: they treat God as a good luck charm or a slogan that they can use as they please, they think that their behavior or rituals obligate God to act in some predetermined way, churches think that humans must go through them to get to God - all such things as these show that they have not at all grasped "the fear of the Lord".

The book of Proverbs* helps us walk on the "good path" (2:9-15). It is not an easy path, and it is not filled with exciting worldly rewards. But it is pleasant for the soul, bringing security, contentment and comfort. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you ... and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:28-29)

* After the general discussion of wisdom (chapters 1-9) come the actual "proverbs of Solomon" (10:1-22:16) plus some "sayings of the wise" (22:17-24:34) collected with them to make up the original book of Proverbs. A couple of centuries later (see 25:1), several more chapters of sayings by Solomon and others were then added, completing the book of Proverbs as we have it now.

God's wisdom also saves us from the consequences of adultery (2:16-22). This image, which we shall see again, includes literal adultery but also applies to spiritual adultery in general. The Old Testament often uses adultery as an image for seeking other 'gods' and worldly pleasures, and it warns us that the latter is a path that leads to death. As with the rest of Scripture, Proverbs tells us honestly what is involved with the choices we make, and then leaves the decision to us.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why is it worth the patience needed to gain spiritual understanding? Why is God willing to be patient with us? Explain "the fear of the Lord" in your own words. How does it connect with wisdom? What does 'adultery' symbolize? Why does God allow us to choose whether or not to listen to him?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 2013

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THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM: STUDIES IN PROVERBS

Notes For Week Two: Wisdom & Discipline (Proverbs 3-5)

God never pretends that we can obtain spiritual wisdom easily or quickly. To understand things from a spiritual perspective calls for discipline and patience. Yet this is not an arbitrary cost imposed by God; it is, rather, a consequence of our mortal, fleshly nature. God himself is full of grace, and he stands ready to pour out his understanding any time that we are ready for it.

The Lord Disciplines Those He Loves (Proverbs 3)

God provides us with spiritual wisdom in order to draw us close to him personally, not simply to fill us with knowledge for knowledge's sake. Since his hope for us is personal, his means of teaching us are also personal. In particular, he will use discipline of various kinds to teach us. In Jesus, we have New Testament teachings that help us to understand this idea even more fully.

Whenever we are close to God, we are close to wisdom (3:1-10). The familiar exhortations to "trust in the Lord with all your heart", "let love and faithfulness never leave you", and "not be wise in your own eyes" are not merely commands about outward behavior or accumulating factual knowledge. It is by staying close to God's presence that we allow him to teach and guide us as part of knowing him, as part of our relationship with him. It is God's presence, not rules or facts, that "will bring health to your body* and nourishment to your bones".

* Literally, "bring health to your navel", an uncommon Hebrew figure of speech for the body as a whole.

So, striving to follow God's understanding rather than our own is an inherently personal process. Studying Scripture is an important part of it, yet there are those who intensely study the Bible only to convince themselves that their own human ideologies and methodologies are better than everyone else's. Prayer is indispensable to a healthy relationship with God, yet there are believers who pray regularly only as a time-consuming ritual with little personal involvement.

God's love, God's wisdom, and God's discipline all fit together (3:11-18). When we see these as God intends, we realize that they are neither opposites nor competitors, but that they are one. A healthy relationship with God is not 35% love, 35% knowledge, and 30% discipline, or any other mix - it is 100% of all these things. Instead of trying to 'balance' them in our relationship with God, we should try to understand these qualities better - though this is difficult for mortal minds.

Discipline in the New Covenant is also interwoven with love and wisdom, and it is relational. In Hebrews 12:4-11 (which quotes Proverbs 3:11-12), we have the image of a human father doing his best, given his limited knowledge, to discipline his children lovingly. Discipline has nothing to do with upholding some abstract standard, but with what is truly best for the child. The father's wisdom is not academic, but instead comes from his understanding of his child's needs.

Understanding God's promises is also an element of our relationship with him. Believers and skeptics alike, for their own reasons, too often see the promises in Proverbs (and elsewhere in the Old Testament) as assurances of the earthly blessings we desire in return for our outward obedience. God does promise to bless us in this world, but in ways he knows are true blessings, not by dispensing the crass baubles that the flesh and the fleshly mind crave. He does promise to provide us with all that we need - and usually then some, to free us from anxiety - because his presence brings life and protection. But his greatest blessings are spiritual and relational.

God's spiritual wisdom is imbued with grace, and this helps to clarify what he means by wisdom (3:19-35). God has worked through his wisdom from the creation of our universe* (and of course long before that). His understanding goes beyond the 'scientific' knowledge involved, because even at the beginning he intended to create humans - and to provide the means to redeem them from their inevitable sins. This is also why God has always been so concerned with the way we treat one another, more than with our adherence to abstract moral standards.

* Here there is perhaps a parallel to Hebrews 1:2's reference to Jesus' role in Creation. Commentators often point out parallels between the personification of Wisdom in Hebrews and the role of Jesus or the Spirit in the Godhead. These can be worth thinking about as long as we do not stretch the parallels too far.

God intends for wisdom and grace to work together, both in thought and in action. This is demonstrated in the exhortations (in verses 27-35) for us to be gentle, generous, and merciful. This - not judging or evaluating each other - is God's wisdom in practice. "The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere." (James 3:17)

Questions For Discussion Or Study: In what ways does God's presence itself bring wisdom? Does this help us understand what his wisdom is? How does discipline show love? Does this help us to understand what spiritual discipline means? What is God really promising in this chapter? How can grace and wisdom fit together in our lives?

Wisdom & Life (Proverbs 4)

Spiritual wisdom brings abundant life, what Jesus called life to the full. The life of the righteous is not always without trouble, but it is free from the kinds of pointless problems that the fleshly bring upon themselves. When faithful persons suffer in this world, it can never take away their greatest blessings. Moreover, it is much easier for God to use their struggles constructively.

In exhorting us to pursue God's wisdom, Proverbs tells us to do so "though it cost all you have" (4:1-13). Spiritual understanding and godly wisdom are of far greater value than the world's prizes, yet they cannot be purchased with worldly wealth. The cost is measured in terms of our pride, our preconceptions and biases, our self-centeredness and worldly ambitions. These things bring us certain worldly rewards, and so giving them up is a true cost of gaining God's wisdom.

So, setting priorities is one of the ways in which spiritual discipline and spiritual knowledge will go together. Our earthly minds are highly resistant to changing our beliefs and priorities. Yet when we are willing to set aside the preconceptions that the world has instilled in us, it not only frees us from a burden that impedes genuine understanding, it also enables us to make genuine changes in our lives that come from the heart, rather than from guilt, ambition, or competition.

The call to guard your heart, the "wellspring* of life", continues to develop these ideas (4:14-27). To be able to learn and appreciate spiritual wisdom, the brain alone is far from enough. There are many persons who develop their brains and fill their minds with knowledge, but it is at best knowledge for knowledge's sake, and all too often it is knowledge obtained in the pursuit of selfish ambition. "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Corinthians 8:1).

* This is the NIV's vivid expression - the Hebrew literally says, from it come the issues (sources) of life.

The mortal flesh is by its nature selfish, longing to have its desires fulfilled. There is nothing wrong with having desires, and there is nothing wrong with wanting the best for ourselves. It is

when we give in to self-deceit, convincing ourselves that our fleshly desires are somehow more important or more noble than others', that we get into spiritual trouble. Those who cannot see their desires for what they are soon feel entitled to what they have, rather than being thankful - and they constantly plan to get more, with an increasingly selfish and destructive perspective.

Thus "they cannot sleep until they do evil", that is, they lose all perspective. Persons with more money or fame or authority than they need or deserve feel that they are entitled to more, and resent those who will not accommodate their desires. This is behind many crimes - and it is also behind a lot of behavior that is legal, praised and exalted by the world, yet destructive to the soul.

Believers cannot avoid living in a world full of sinful influences. But Jesus said, "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him unclean? ... What comes out of a man is what makes him unclean" (Mark 7:18-20, compare Matthew 15:16-18). Many Christians try determinedly to shun obvious sinful influences (or to shield their families from them), only to fall under the influence of less obvious but equally destructive worldly perspectives.

Materialism, pride, hatred, and prejudice are just as spiritually destructive as immorality, drunkenness, and violence. Spiritual discipline and spiritual wisdom help us see all of these for what they are, to keep them out of our hearts even when we must have them in our ears and eyes.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why is spiritual wisdom worthwhile even if it 'costs all we have'? What kinds of costs could it involve to find spiritual wisdom? How do we 'guard the heart'? How do Jesus' teachings help us to understand this?

Wisdom Protects Relationships (Proverbs 5)

This passage uses the image of adultery to illustrate the hazards awaiting foolish persons who reject spiritual wisdom. Physical adultery damages and destroys relationships in a number of ways - and spiritual adultery does likewise. The temptations of both kinds of adultery can look attractive, but the short-term rewards are small compared with the permanent damage they cause.

Proverbs uses the attractions of the adulteress not only to deter us from the literal sin of adultery, but also to warn us about more subtle forms of spiritual adultery* (5:1-6). The licentious woman (or man) with physical charms and smooth speech has persuaded countless persons to go astray, yet such a person is desirable only on the surface. Believers and unbelievers alike have found out the hard way that the attractions of the opposite sex can become a nightmarish trap when they are not combined with genuine commitment and faithfulness.

* Besides the imagery in Proverbs, see also passages such as Isaiah 57:3; Jeremiah 3:6-9, 5:7, 9:2, and 13:27; Ezekiel 6:9, 16:1-39, and 23:1-46; and of course the book of Hosea.

But for believers, the attractions of spiritual adultery can be even more dangerous, for they are far less obvious. It can even be difficult to see the contrast between appearances and reality when it comes to worship, ministry, or teaching. We too can judge by appearances, emphasizing numerical results and exalting human leaders who take credit for the hard work of others.

In our earthly involvements, it is even more difficult for believers to make the distinction between image and substance, for the world specializes in presenting the superficial, the trivial, the sensationalized, and the banal as if they were important and interesting. Advertisers, news media, politicians, educators, and entertainers all constantly reinforce our society's shallow

viewpoints and air their irrelevant debates. It is embarrassing when Christians allow themselves to become entangled in earthly controversies, celebrity worship, and fleshly competitions.

The adulterer regrets his lack of discipline only after he has fully tasted the worst of the consequences (5:7-14). There was a way out, as there always will be: "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." (1 Corinthians 10:13) The way out is often different, but it is always there. Walk on past the adulteress's door, count to ten before uttering harsh words, pray for someone instead of hating them, give the benefit of the doubt to the erring.

For the sake of a brief period of pleasure, the adulterer will face the loss of blessings far more worthwhile. This is not an angry punishment from God - the loss of blessings is a natural consequence, and God's warning is given out of compassion. Ruining human relationships also takes a toll on our relationship with God, because our self-centered excuses and rationalizations push God from our hearts. Likewise, straying from God will eventually harm our human relationships, as his Spirit will not be close by to help us forgive, forbear, and sacrifice.

The wise father* of Proverbs counsels his children to avoid adultery and to "drink water from your own cistern" (5:15-23). Literally, this vivid expression exhorts us to take or use only what is ours, whether in marital relations or otherwise. Developing the theme of literal adultery, Proverbs parallels a refreshing drink from a cistern with the abundant blessings that come from a faithful marriage in which both spouses can enjoy one another** without guilt or complication.

* Most commentators draw a distinction between Solomon, who authored the many brief 'proverbs' that begin in chapter 10, and the anonymous 'wise father' of the first nine chapters. Indeed, for all his wisdom, Solomon never seems to have imparted much of it to his own sons.

** A number of passages in Song Of Songs develop this idea in more detail.

There are also numerous spiritual parallels to this principle. Our spiritual 'cistern' is God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit; so the call is for us to look to the Godhead for our spiritual sustenance, rather than looking to this world for identity, purpose, or validation. This can take considerable discipline, though not usually in the way we usually think of it. "A man's ways are in full view of the Lord" (verse 21), so we can never fool God with our rationalizations for worldly thinking - yet God is not like the world, trying to manipulate or coerce us into doing his will.

Spiritual wisdom is not a matter of collecting facts or learning methods, nor is it a competition. Spiritual wisdom is equally obtainable to all - yet it is equally difficult for us all to value it instead of the world's superficial wisdom. God uses spiritual discipline - and hopes that we shall learn self-discipline - not in order to force facts into our heads, but rather to guide us into a more spiritual perspective. God's perspective stands starkly at odds with worldly perspectives, even (perhaps especially) with worldly sources of authority that are universally accepted by humanity.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why is adultery a suitable symbol for some common spiritual problems? How much of this passage is about literal adultery, and how much is about spiritual adultery? What ways out of spiritual adultery does God offer? What kind of discipline is involved? How, spiritually, do we "drink water from your own cistern"?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 2013*

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THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM: STUDIES IN PROVERBS

Notes For Week Three: Wisdom & Perspective (Proverbs 6-7)

Seeking spiritual wisdom is quite different from obtaining earthly knowledge, for it is not merely a matter of accumulating factual information. It calls for a different kind of discipline, based on knowing God rather than fleshly regimentation. And spiritual wisdom does not make us more intelligent or successful by worldly standards - rather, it gives us an entirely new perspective.

Daily Life & Spiritual Parallels (Proverbs 6:1-19)

One of the hallmarks of the book of Proverbs is that it demonstrates the ways that seemingly routine daily events can carry a spiritual dimension. We can apply spiritual principles to daily living, and often we can also learn spiritual principles from the commonplace aspects of earthly life. This passage contains three such examples that will illustrate both sides of this.

The first example describes a man seeking release from a self-inflicted entanglement (6:1-5). Literally, the situation involves an ill-advised pledge* made to a neighbor - the first man has impulsively agreed to something that now gives him a lot of anxiety and uncertainty. Although there is perhaps some practical financial guidance** here, the example (even on a literal level) is more about the ways that our words and actions so often get us into complicated situations.

* In the literal situation, the "pledge" is something very specific, not just a general 'pledge' to do something. The Hebrew phraseology describes a man who has, without reflection, put up something of his own as security for another man's debt - comparable to a co-signer for a risky loan in our economic practice.

** The Old Testament is somewhat ambivalent on the practice of putting up pledges (in the sense of the previous note). So if any economic guidance is intended, it is for us to be thoughtful, not impulsive, in our decisions. Making a pledge is not necessarily a mistake in itself - the problem here is the lack of thought.

Whether as the result of an insecure desire to please, an emotional response to a challenge, or an overly-enthusiastic sentiment, all of us sometimes commit ourselves to something that, on reflection, seems ill-considered. It is human nature to handle such predicaments either by agonizing fruitlessly over what we have done, or by concocting an elaborate scheme to extricate ourselves without acknowledging our original mistake - often making our problems even worse.

The remedy is, instead, to "go and humble yourself". Instead of making excuses or devising a pretext, the entangled man should just explain the whole thing honestly, and ask for grace. Even if his neighbor still is not gracious, God certainly will be. There are many spiritual parallels - many dilemmas in life come because we do not even consider the option of simply humbling ourselves, admitting we are in a bit over our heads, and asking for some grace.

The next passage contrasts the ant, known for its industrious nature, and the human sluggard (6:6-11). The simple ant* is an example of many things, including its capacity for acts of strength (proportional to its size) and self-sacrifice. But it is the ant's initiative and self-discipline that are highlighted in the example.

* The ant described here is a species of harvester ant, a family of ants also common in the Americas.

Ants do not wait for instructions or commands before performing useful actions*, and most ants spend their entire lives in useful labor. Like many animals, ants remind us that it is natural and healthy for each of us to find ways in which we are comfortable working, serving, and giving. We can wait for someone to 'tell us what to do', but it is usually better to take the initiative.

* Ants have a well-defined social order, but individual ants act on their own initiative, out of an understanding of their role (or responsibility) rather than being coerced

Literally, a sluggard is someone physically inert, without interest in personal benefit or in responsibility. This kind of sluggard is the subject of several amusing proverbs later on in the book. But there is also a spiritual sluggard, who may be quite active physically while remaining spiritually inert. The spiritual sluggard waits to be told what to think and what to believe, never developing his own understanding of God or of God's presence. The spiritual sluggard is thus impoverished spiritually, never having more than a second-hand relationship with God.

Next, Proverbs describes the troublemaker* who enjoys using the misfortunes, anxieties, and unhappiness of others for his own advantage (6:12-19). This kind of person can be equally at home in a secular setting or a religious setting, because human nature always offers opportunities to provoke dissension and discontent. Even believers who themselves are not troublemakers are often vulnerable to them, because they can easily turn our desire to please God into hostility towards those who do not seem to be living as we think they should be.

* The Hebrew word has no direct English equivalent, with the closest translation probably being "troublemaker", or perhaps "agitator". One commentator suggests "insurrectionist". It refers to someone who deliberately makes others angry or unruly, not just someone who himself commits wrongdoing.

The 'seven detestable things'* call us to avoid deliberately inciting factionalism, anger, hatred, and the like. Insinuation, gossip, deceit, and manipulation can quickly poison any relationship. In Jesus we ought to develop a godly perspective, so that even when we have differences among each other we still trust one another, extend grace to one another, and pray for each other to be blessed rather than attempting to "fix" other persons all the time. Worldly wisdom creates acts of the sinful nature while godly wisdom produces fruits of the Spirit.

* The 'six things' ... 'seven things' is a common literary device with no other special meaning. Similar examples appear in Proverbs 30:15-31 and Amos 1:3-2:8

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What situations spiritually parallel the man who made the ill-advised pledge? How does humility help in such situations? Does it guarantee the result we want? Can someone physically active be a 'sluggard'? Is there a remedy? Can this passage help us deal with 'troublemakers' who thrive on discontent?

Wisdom & Faithfulness (Proverbs 6:20-7:5)

Proverbs once more returns to the use of adultery as an analogy for spiritual waywardness. Combining imagery and practical advice, this passage calls us not to count on laws or memorized rules to keep us out of trouble, but rather to develop a trust and confidence in the values and principles that God's spiritual wisdom teaches us.

Proverbs often reminds us that God's wisdom is a guide to life both spiritually and in practical ways (6:20-29). Thus we are exhorted to write God's wisdom upon the heart, not merely in the

brain. This does not mean merely to expend extra energy to learn things, but rather to develop a new perspective on what it means to learn genuine wisdom.

"This is the (new) covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor or a man his brother, saying, 'know the Lord', because they will all know me ... for I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31:33-34; see also Hebrews 8:10-12.)

Godly wisdom is inherently personal rather than didactic, and it is inherently grace-filled rather than law-based. This is what makes it "living and active" (Hebrews 4:12), and it is why Proverbs calls it a lamp and a light. Unlike worldly wisdom, godly wisdom is practical without appealing to our selfishness, and it is spiritual without being irrelevant.

God calls us to live by the truth or to face the consequences - an idea easy to misunderstand (6:30-7:5). The negative consequences of sin or folly do not come from an angry God seeking punishment, but from an unforgiving world that happily seizes on any offense (real or imagined) to unleash its anger and hatred (the point of verses 30-35). God always loves us and desires to forgive us, but the world waits eagerly for our mistakes so that it will have an excuse to inflict harm on us. Needlessly risking the world's wrath is like scooping fire into our laps (verse 27).

True wisdom (that is, God) knows us and cares about us. Wisdom is our 'sister' and understanding our 'kinsman' because godly wisdom comes from God's own presence. Of course, we know that God's knowledge is perfect. But God is after something deeper and more personal than merely being acknowledged as God - he hopes to have our hearts joined with his. His love for us is an even stronger reason for us to trust him. This is the spiritual perspective he offers us.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What does it mean to bind God's words on our hearts, and to fasten them around our necks? Why does God want us to do this? What should we learn from the examples of negative consequences that come from sin? Why does Proverbs speak of wisdom and understanding as if they were human?

The Youth Who Lacks Judgment (Proverbs 7:6-27)

In this parable, we see an inoffensive but mindless young man who cannot resist the snares of an attractive but manipulative woman. The process by which she breaks down his resistance and judgment are parallel to the ways in which worldly wisdom can easily draw in believers by its appeals to our fleshly instincts. The defense to this is not rules or methods, but perspective.

First we see a waiting victim (7:6-9). On a literal level, a simple* youth unwisely wanders close to the house where the adulteress lives. He probably does not sense the true danger, but he also may willfully be 'trying his luck', hoping to gain something without paying too high a price.

* In Proverbs, someone "simple" (or "naïve" in the NASB) cannot tell right from wrong, as opposed to a "fool", who knows right from wrong but does the wrong thing anyway.

While even believers sometimes need to be reminded about the temptations of physical adultery, the spiritual parallels are even more significant. Just as this unwise young man deliberately

wanders close to a source of danger, many believers hover close to the edge of worldly behavior or attitudes that seem harmless because they do not involve obvious outward temptations.

If we allow anger to fester, nurse jealousies or resentments, look for scapegoats for our problems, or harbor disdain for those different from us, this puts us in exactly the same position as the silly young man just waiting for the adulteress to ensnare him. "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'do not murder' ... but I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment" (Matthew 5:21-22). Jesus taught this and similar lessons to help us see that hidden, 'inner' sins can be just as spiritually destructive as the more obvious outward sins.

The simple young man is soon confronted with a crass temptation (7:10-20). The literal situation is sordid and familiar - the clumsy efforts of the woman to appeal to the man's base instincts, the obvious signs of danger, the thrill of something illicit. There is no appeal either to the mind (aside from the flimsiest of rationalizations*) or to the heart (though the world sometimes rationalizes lust as coming from 'the heart'), just the fleshly senses. And she makes clear that any commitment is all on the young man's end - she wants only fun, not a meaningful relationship.

* The mention of "fellowship (or peace) offerings" in verse 14 could either mean that the adulteress is presenting herself as having made things right with God, or (probably more likely) that she has made an offering to a pagan idol that, on the authority of that idol, makes it acceptable for her to commit adultery.

Again, though, note the spiritual parallels. The world encourages us to think of everyone in terms of outward appearance and false earthly loyalties instead of as unique souls; it inflames our fleshly passions for its own interests; it exalts competition, aggressiveness, judgment, and self-interest instead of genuine grace and understanding; it demands that we worship its celebrities and join in its controversies, while giving nothing of lasting value in return.

The simple young man is soon drawn irrevocably into the snare (7:21-27). His intelligence compares unfavorably to that of animals, who usually know better than to engage in deliberately self-destructive behavior. Of course, this man will have 'fun' for a short time, but he is deceived both by the likelihood of long-term consequences and by the woman's lack of genuine concern for him. The spiritual parallels are equally sad.

When Christians do not resist the world's temptations to be judgmental or hateful, they become Pharisees who do not realize the spiritual harm that self-righteousness can do. When Christians allow the world to induce them to focus on outward accomplishments, power, or popularity, they either become bossy busybodies who inflict insecurity or guilt in others, or else will they are forever "blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (Ephesians 4:14). Spiritual wisdom saves us from such snares - not by better rules or methods, but through a new perspective emphasizing the fruit of the Spirit.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Can Christians learn any basic lessons from this literal situation? What practices are the spiritual equivalent of the young man wandering close to the adulteress's house? What inducements does the world use to tempt us into idolatry, hatred, and similar sins? How can this help us to avoid falling into a snare?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 2013*

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THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM: STUDIES IN PROVERBS

Notes For Week Four: Wisdom Has Set Her Table (Proverbs 8-9)

God makes his spiritual wisdom equally available to all, without charge or hindrance. He does not coerce or intimidate anyone into accepting it, nor does he manipulate anyone into following his ways. Long before any of us were born, he made sure that he could offer his wisdom and his presence to each of us. Meanwhile, the world offers us its own brand of wisdom.

Waiting At The Entrance (Proverbs 8:1-21)

Returning to the image of wisdom as a woman, Proverbs portrays her standing in public places where she can offer understanding to all who pass by. This imagery reminds us that God has always made genuine wisdom readily available. It also reminds us of the true benefits of spiritual wisdom, which has its value in ways that the world cannot understand or measure.

Lady Wisdom* returns, calling aloud to all who wish to learn from her (8:1-4). The imagery deliberately uses mixed metaphors - wisdom calls from the heights, speaks at the crossroads, and waits at the gates of the city entrance - to emphasize the universal offer of God's wisdom. We do not need wealth, special training or qualifications, or important connections to know God, to live in his presence, or to learn his Word. His offer is free to all of humanity.

* For more on this image, see the Week One notes, as well as further notes and discussion questions below.

The ideas and principles that matter most to God are equally possible for us all to understand - and are equally difficult for all of us to accept in our hearts. There is no shame in admitting that God's values are difficult to live by - but there is also nothing noble in trying to obscure this by using frantic activity or pretentious theology to obscure how hard it is to accept God's wisdom.

Lady Wisdom is generous and sincere, two attributes of God that are always reflected in true spiritual wisdom (8:5-11). God's wisdom is truthful and straightforward; he says, "come, let us reason together" (Isaiah 1:18). God does not use manipulation or guilt to persuade us, but tells us the truth openly and clearly, then allows us to make up our own minds. This attribute of God is under-appreciated since it is so different from the practice of humans, even amongst believers.

God's wisdom is of much more lasting value than any knowledge or possession of the world. Its value is on a different scale altogether, so it takes patience and humility just to see the benefits of spiritual wisdom, and more so to appreciate them. And because God's wisdom costs nothing, defying our desire to put a price tag on everything, we tend either to discount its value or else to set up a more worldly form of wisdom, based on results or theology, as if it came from God.

Despite earthly appearances, God's wisdom is the true treasure, worth more than silver, gold, rubies* or any other earthly riches. It is more worthwhile to develop God's perspective and to live by God's truth than to accumulate material possessions or human authority - but we must truly believe this, or else we shall never even make a sincere attempt to live by God's wisdom.

* Gold and silver were valuable in the ancient world both for their practical value and for their (arbitrary) monetary function. True rubies are not known in secular history prior to the Roman era, and thus most commentators believe that the word translated "rubies" refers to other valuable red gemstones.

Lady Wisdom does not promise what our fleshly minds desire, but instead points out the spiritual blessings of spiritual wisdom (8:12-21). We see again the phrase 'to fear the Lord' (said earlier to be "the beginning of wisdom"), and Wisdom gives us more detail on what is involved. To fear God (truly to acknowledge God's transcendence and majesty) implies that we will accept his values. To hate evil does not mean to hate evildoers, but to shun evil practices in our own lives - not merely the obvious outward sins but also deeper sins like greed, envy, prejudice, and hatred.

Spiritual wisdom leads to good counsel and sound judgment. This is completely different from our human practice of airing and pushing our petty opinions ("a fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions" - Proverbs 18:2). Spiritual counsel and sound judgment may appear the same at first ("the spiritual man makes judgments about all things" - 1 Corinthians 2:15), but the purpose is much different. God allows us to make our choices without pressure or guilt - he merely tells us the truth and lets us decide what to do.

Using spiritual wisdom is different from using worldly wisdom. Spiritual wisdom can be used by anyone, from rulers to slaves, the educated and the uneducated. Spiritual wisdom blesses not only the one who practices it, but also those around him or her. While God provides us with all that we need in this world (and usually much more than we need), the greatest wealth he brings is spiritual - the "riches and honor" that are fruit of spiritual wisdom are "better than fine gold".

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does wisdom make her offer so publicly and in so many ways? What does this say about God himself? What characteristics of wisdom are emphasized in this passage? How do these reflect God's nature? What types of "riches" and "wealth" does spiritual wisdom offer? How can we tell what these mean?

God's Eternal Wisdom (Proverbs 8:22-36)

God's wisdom differs from ours not merely on a factual level. His perspective is transcendent and eternal; for he has seen everything that happened in our universe, and much more besides. And when he created this world, he instilled his wisdom - and his entire nature - into his creation. Therefore, following in his wisdom means to seek a more eternal and unworldly point of view.

Wisdom, like God himself, was alive before this world began (8:22-26). Wisdom's description of her 'birth'* is figurative, implying only that she was alive with God before our universe existed, and not intending to inspire speculative theology. Her 'birth' does, though, provide several reflections of God's own nature. We tend to think of God exclusively insofar as he interacts with our universe; but he lived long, long before our universe existed.

* Verses 22 and 23 contain several terms difficult to translate, and that are in any case probably not meant literally. "The Lord brought me forth" (NIV) could also be 'possessed me' or 'perhaps obtained me'; "his work(s)" (NIV) could be 'ways' or 'realm'; "appointed from eternity" (NIV), could be 'set up' or 'designed'. It is thus more helpful to think in terms of broad ideas rather than in terms of forensic descriptions.

Mortals cannot fully grasp God's eternity. Instead of using inadequate analogies or clever theology, Wisdom simply asks us to be humble. Even the worldly could benefit from this if they saw the size and complexity of the physical world. Simple humility, even if unaccompanied by love or faith, could solve many of the world's problems. And when humility is combined with love and faith, then we know what spiritual wisdom is. Human knowledge is simply inadequate to solve the most important questions of life, whether in the world or in the search for God.

Wisdom was a "craftsman" at God's side while he created our universe (8:27-31). This imagery reminds us of all the ways that God's wisdom is woven into his Creation, both in ways that

humans consider 'good' and in ways that humans consider 'bad'. God is a spiritual, transcendent being; and we each have souls and spirits that are also inherently eternal and transcendent. This world is by its nature perishable - and accepting this is an important part of our spiritual health. Creation combines beauty and majesty, blessings and pleasures, with reminders of our mortality and vulnerability. The truly wise neither deny this nor fight it, but accept it and learn from it.

There are numerous New Testament parallels to this imagery of wisdom, such as the allusions to Jesus' role in creation: "through him all things were made" (John 1:3); "through whom he made the universe" (Hebrews 1:2)*. Like the imagery in Proverbs, these passages deliberately leave many questions unanswered, for their purpose is not to provide the factual details that our fleshly minds crave - instead, all of these are more ways of reminding us that God's nature is expressed in what he made and how he made it.

* Consider also passages such as Ephesians 2:10, Colossians 1:15-16, and 1 Peter 1:20.

Wisdom is further portrayed as "delighting in mankind", for this was God's favorite part of his Creation, the part that was "very good". We can only understand God's creative wisdom if we consider what he has done in making humanity. Both the weaknesses of humanity and its capacity for compassion and mutual aid are a part of God's design.

"Now then", says Lady Wisdom, it is well worth seeking out God's type of wisdom, even if it necessitates some extra humility or extra effort to do so (8:32-36). There is great promise in Wisdom's call, but it is not a cheap promise of quick, easy results or meaningless fleshly distinctions. It takes patience, combined with humility, both to understand what wisdom offers and to allow godly wisdom to take root in our hearts and slowly displace the colossal stockpile of lifeless fleshly wisdom that we have accumulated without even realizing it.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: In what sense was wisdom "born"? What is the purpose of this and the other images of its origins? How is God's wisdom woven into the things he has created? Are there any practical implications of this? Why does true wisdom delight in humanity? Why is patience necessary in seeking spiritual wisdom?

Two Invitations (Proverbs 9)

The extended introduction to the book of Proverbs concludes with two invitations, one from wisdom and one from folly. Wisdom's invitation is generous, unconditional, and sincere. She makes clear both the cost and the benefits of following her ways. Meanwhile, folly makes her own appeal, calling to those who want quick, easy results regardless of their value.

For those who truly desire godly wisdom, everything has been prepared, and is ready and waiting for us (9:1-6). The imagery of a generous hostess points out the nature of God's offer to us, and there are some worthwhile parallels* to the parables in Matthew 22:1-14 and Luke 14:16-24. God has great riches and true riches to offer us, and he is not merely willing, but is indeed quite eager to share them with everyone who wants them. At the same time, he will not coerce or manipulate anyone into accepting his gifts.

* One of the major differences is that in Proverbs wisdom is always personified as a female. In this passage, even her servants (verse 3) are clearly identified as female, both in the Hebrew and in most English versions. In Proverbs, wisdom is deliberately presented as a kind of female shadow or reflection of God the Father, as a way of clarifying that God's 'maleness' should not be interpreted in a worldly way.

God generously offers spiritual blessings that cannot be valued in earthly terms, and that cannot be obtained by money. Only those who do not value them do not receive them, yet sadly this constitutes the majority of those whom he created. Yet this simply re-emphasizes God's grace, patience, and generosity. Moreover, he has poured forth a vast supply of worldly blessings that, if used with anything remotely approaching moderation and humility, are more than sufficient for everyone. It is humanity's fault, not God's, that we fight over the worldly blessings instead of sharing them, while ignoring the even more valuable spiritual blessings.

This is also reflected in Lady Wisdom's description of a life of spiritual learning (9:7-12). The overall theme is the centrality of humility, both in our relationship with God and in our relationships with one another - which in turn emphasizes that God's wisdom prioritizes relationships above self-improvement. And the humility goes both ways - those who reject God's wisdom are simply to be left alone to come to their senses later, while we share God's wisdom with those who are eager for it. "Do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces" (Matthew 7:6).

As Wisdom offers her house and her table to us, folly calls out to us, too (9:13-18). Folly is also personified as a woman, but of a very different nature. "The woman Folly is loud", and she is undisciplined - likewise, her offer is loud, obvious, flashy, and shallow. Yet she claims a kind of sophistication, too, to cover up the actual crassness and cheapness of her goods.

Thus her appeal emphasizes that "stolen water is sweet"* and "food eaten in secret is delicious", trying to redefine selfishness and bestial cravings as if they were subtle and sophisticated - a technique still widely used by disciples of Folly today. Yet we are not called to condemn her or those who fall into her net. They will only harm themselves spiritually, and it is more than enough for us to remain humbly self-aware of our own inconsistencies and preconceptions.

* Literally, this refers to the value placed on water sources in many areas of the ancient world, and the fights that often occurred over them (a biblical example occurs in Genesis 26:19-22). But flowing water can also be used as a metaphor (or sometimes a euphemism) for sexual relations, as in Proverbs 4:15-18.

Responding to wisdom thus takes first of all humility, and also patience with ourselves and with others. Spiritual wisdom fulfills the needs of the soul and the spirit, not the desires of the flesh or the ambitions of the worldly mind. Every one of us must allow our earthly selves to be slowly cured of our worldly misconceptions and false loyalties, graciously healed from our many acts of folly both intentional and unintentional, then patiently filled with new, spiritual perspectives and priorities. The process is neither fast nor fun, but once we learn a little humility we find that the path to spiritual wisdom is full of pleasant, if often subtle, spiritual blessings.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why are both wisdom and folly personified as female? Does this say anything about God's nature? What does it say about human nature? How can we become more aware of God's generosity in our lives? Are there any ways that we can help others to put a higher value on spiritual wisdom? How can we learn to see the world's false forms of 'wisdom' for what they really are?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 2013*

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THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM: STUDIES IN PROVERBS

Notes For Week Five: Foundations Of A Righteous Life (Proverbs 10-12)

As we reach the book's main collection of "proverbs", there is a shift from the general discussion of spiritual wisdom to an assortment of examples. Some of these examples have immediate practical uses, but most also have spiritual parallels that can be even more significant. Occasionally a proverb is deliberately paradoxical, to make us re-think our assumptions.

A Proverbs Sampler (Proverbs 10)

As we begin reading the actual "Proverbs of Solomon*", we see several re-occurring themes. Proverbs does not aim to make our daily lives perfect or problem-free - instead, it draws on seemingly routine experiences to show how almost any area of life can teach spiritual principles. Likewise, we see that spiritual principles can be applied in many different situations.

* The sayings in Proverbs 10:1-22:16 and 25:1-29:27 are attributed to Solomon, while the other portions of the book are either anonymous or are attributed to other sources.

The frequent uses of the terms "righteous" and "righteousness" help us to understand God's idea of righteousness (10:1-11). The basic picture of a righteous person is someone who provides blessings to others while allowing God to meet his or her own needs. The actions and speech of the righteous person bring joy to his or her family*, help to those who have needs, and a positive example to others (verse 7). The righteous trust God to look after them in whatever ways God considers important, instead of fighting and competing for what their flesh desires.

* Note that in verse 1 there is no significance to the wise son 'only' bringing joy to his father, and the foolish son 'only' bringing grief to his mother. This is just a literary device to make the saying concise and easily remembered. This is characteristic of many proverbs - they are not meant to be analyzed forensically, but to be understood in terms of general spiritual principles.

By contrast, the foolish* harbor illusions about the value and importance of their earthly desires. Their short-sighted obsessions often result in their own harm; and even when they get what they desire, it is rarely as fulfilling as they expected. Note too the emphasis on the righteous person's effect on others. Righteousness to God has little to do with religious ritual or personal accomplishment, but with being a blessing to others instead of being a seeker of ill-gotten treasures or a "chattering fool" who constantly tries to prove his superiority to others.

* As always in Proverbs, a "fool" knows better but chooses to do wrong. Someone who truly does not know better is usually referred to as "simple" (most versions) or "naïve" (NASB).

Proverbs sharply contrasts two different ways to live - though in practice we all shall frequently be inconsistent with our choices (10:12-18). The examples remind us that we face big choices, such as choosing whether to spend our time pursuing understanding or to spend it pursuing wealth, and little choices, such as choosing whether to nurture hatred or to forgive an offense.

Another aspect of this is the contrast between short-term and long-term consequences. A fool cannot resist the momentary thrill of expressing anger or hatred, while a righteous person knows that it is better in the long run, even for himself or herself, to learn to forgive even if it is hard at the time. With bigger decisions, the stakes are increased even more.

Proverbs often discusses the use (or misuse) of the tongue (10:19-21, 31-32). Humans often rely on using many words to get their way, to demonstrate their knowledge, or to divert attention from mistakes, but this invariably just adds new offenses to the original problems (verse 19*; consider the application to prayer in Matthew 6:7). The blessing of human speech should be used to meet genuine needs of others, not to exalt ourselves or to push self-centered agendas.

* Some commentators point out an alternate interpretation of verse 19, seeing it as a warning that a sin cannot be covered up no matter how many explanations (or words) we try to use.

The righteous can find refuge in God regardless of what the world does to them (10:22-30). Unlike the things we obtain by worldly competition or selfish desires, God's blessings come with no trouble (verse 22). The prizes offered by the world are at best mixed blessings, but the things God gives us are always for our good or our enjoyment, and come by grace. "I do not give to you as the world gives" (John 14:27). God's blessings and the fruit of righteousness bring spiritual stability. A focus on God provides direction and meaning that will survive the troubles of this life: "the righteous will never be uprooted", even when the storms sweep away the wicked (verse 25). The righteous must still go through the storms, but they can stand firm spiritually.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: In what ways does righteousness bless others? How can this help us see what God considers righteousness? What promises does he give to the righteous? How do the desires and actions of the foolish harm them? Does this always happen? How do the teachings on the tongue connect with these other ideas?

Spiritual Wisdom & Spiritual Security (Proverbs 11)

This earth has always been hazardous and confusing for those who seek to follow God's wisdom rather than worldly teachings. There is no way for us ever to obtain guaranteed peace and safety in worldly terms. But by adopting God's perspectives and priorities, we can make our souls and spirits safe from harm - and this in turn helps us deal much better with our earthly troubles.

Many proverbs look at the interplay between righteousness, wealth, and security (11:1-9). Proverbs often teaches us the inevitable disappointment of worldly goals. Wealth buys a lot of worldly privileges, but it is useless in establishing a relationship with God or in obtaining genuine peace or security (verse 4). The desire for worldly power and wealth simply complicates our lives needlessly (verse 6*). And when we use worldly force in the name of God, we do not sanctify our methods or agenda - we merely defame the name of God.

* In 11:6, the unfaithful are literally 'captured' or 'ensnared'. There is a different Hebrew expression that is also translated as 'trapped' in 12:13 (see notes below).

The righteous are not rewarded in worldly coin, but they can always experience the blessings of blamelessness. The faithful suffer, but they do not have to reproach themselves for having caused their own misfortunes. Believers will be mistreated, but "blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you ... " (Matthew 5:11). Of course, even the faithful often commit sins, but we do not have to carry around the full burden of guilt for them: "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him" (Romans 4:8, quoting from Psalm 32:2).

The choices we make each day can bring either good fruit or bad fruit (11:10-23). This is not the same as numerical results or fulfilled desires, which can arise equally often from faithful living or from sinful living. But spiritual wisdom can only produce fruit of the Spirit, and fleshly false

wisdom can only produce fruits of the 'sinful nature'. "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit." (Matthew 7:18)

The faithful do not receive more earthly blessings than unbelievers do - but they can make the best of everything. Their most casual conversation can encourage others, they can serve others with no thought of reward*, and they themselves can appreciate the smallest of God's blessings, which go unnoticed by those without spiritual discernment. By contrast, the sinful sadly waste even the blessings they are given, squandering them, failing to appreciate them, or taking them for granted. Note especially the graphic image in verse 22, which also emphatically rejects the worldly tendency to praise and cater to physically attractive fools.

* Note the sad irony in 11:10 and 11:11 - although most persons refuse to live selflessly and honestly, they are still very happy when they know that honest, conscientious persons are in positions of responsibility.

Building a spiritual perspective involves the heart and the mind working together (11:24-31). These proverbs emphasize generosity and concern for others, which in turn call for us to understand and care about the problems and concerns of others, rather than focusing on self and on our own agendas. A key to this is the ability to understand and value life for its own sake. The fool values material things and competitive distinctions, while the truly righteous person respects and nurtures both physical life and spiritual life (e.g. verse 30*).

* The phrase "he who wins souls" is literally 'captures (or takes) lives', that is, someone who draws others in to a new way of thinking that will give them life.

Jesus said, "ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find" (Matthew 7:7); and the theme of seeking and finding is also echoed in Proverbs. In both cases, the promise is not a guarantee of desired worldly gifts but rather the converse of "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). The foolish look for sinful or selfish rewards, and they both find them and incite others to do the same. The righteous bring subtler blessings to themselves and others.

Even believers face trials, discipline, and hardship on earth (verse 31, see 1 Peter 4:18). But if we continue to seek life, we shall always have it in God. The unrighteous will face negative consequences that, even if they are long deferred, will ultimately be certain and final.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What kind of security does righteous living bring? Does it have any correlation with earthly security? Can the unrighteous obtain any kind of security? How do we learn to value life for its own sake? Does this bring us security?

Words & Deeds (Proverbs 12)

One of the hallmarks of Proverbs is its emphasis on the use and misuse of the tongue. Using humor, instruction and warnings, Proverbs calls us to consider carefully how we use the blessing of our capacity for speech. Yet it also reminds us that words and deeds should never be seen as opposites, for our actions and our speech are both part of an inseparable whole.

Like much of the Old Testament, Proverbs promotes a consistent life in which godly words, actions and thoughts fit together (12:1-12). In pursuing this kind of integrity, discipline is a necessary element - that is, self-discipline (verse 1), not enforcing discipline on others. As these proverbs point out, we are all actually quite consistent in our own way, however much we may try to hide our true natures. The foolish and sinful may well attempt to offer advice (verse 5) or to perform acts of service (verse 10), but they will often be insincere, affected, or manipulative.

To learn spiritual wisdom necessitates looking past appearances and seeking reality, especially spiritual reality. The faithless pursue illusions or "fantasies" (verse 11) and chase things that, while hyped and worshiped by the worldly, have little real value. Those with spiritual wisdom accept and appreciate what they have, regardless of whether it is valued or appreciated by others.

"Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34, Luke 6:45) - the tongue and the heart are inextricably intertwined (12:13-23). In any given situation, we can either be quick to speak or quick to listen. We can jump into a debate with our own irrelevant point of view, or we can try to understand the problems and be conciliatory. We can boast and spout off to draw attention to ourselves, or we can praise someone else. We can nag and pester others to do things the way we want them to, or we can patiently learn from others.

All such cases reveal what is in our hearts as much as what is in our minds. And the proper use of the tongue can help us to avoid unnecessary trouble. Speaking the truth does often bring its own problems, but as believers we can at least avoid the pointless entanglements that inevitably come from boasting, petty criticism, and deceit. "An evil man is trapped* by his sinful talk, but a righteous man escapes trouble" (verse 13). And though "no man can tame the tongue" (James 3:8), it is not hard for all of us to find ways we can use it more constructively.

* This is an interesting contrast with 11:6 (see above). Whereas in 11:6 the unfaithful are 'trapped' in the sense of 'entangled', the word in 12:13 is different even though it is also translated 'trapped'. Here, it refers to being struck with the heavy part of a primitive trap (think of a large mousetrap) that was meant to strike and kill an unfortunate trapped animal. So the implication is that sinful talk will strike back even harder.

True spiritual wisdom, spiritual discipline*, and spiritual understanding guide us along a path that leads to life (12:24-28). It is not always an easy path to follow, and the rewards are not the same rewards that the world offers. Though God will meet our genuine needs here, we may or may not find our earthly desires fulfilled. Instead, his promise is that we can share in life and light when we stay on the path of spiritual wisdom.

* This is the implication of verses 24 and 27. The image in verse 27 suggests a lazy man who stumbles across valuable game but will not take the trouble to cook it - an image for those who have full access to spiritual wisdom but lazily accept the world's teachings and perspectives instead of learning God's.

"Along that path is immortality" (literally, 'no-death', as in KJV/NASB). The true goal of God's Word is, always was, and always shall be his desire that all of his can live in his presence and can be with him both in this world and beyond. When we grasp this, it helps us better to see the foundations of a righteous life - they are not things that exalt or benefit self, but rather are things that lead to outpourings of grace, truth, compassion, and other spiritual fruit.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What does 'integrity' mean in general? What would it mean in a spiritual context? Do words and deeds always fit together? Why is it so hard to use the tongue properly? How does James 3:1-12 illustrate points made in Proverbs? How can we appreciate life and God's presence in the midst of worldly distractions?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 2013*

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THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM: STUDIES IN PROVERBS

Notes For Week Six: Self-Control In Its Various Forms (Proverbs 13-15)

As Proverbs describes the aspects of a righteous life, it also teaches us that self-control is a crucial part of developing many of these qualities in our lives. Characteristics like self-control, self-discipline, and patience are difficult for all of us to obtain, yet we all have the potential to learn them and to benefit from them. Many of the proverbs in these chapters help us see how.

Self-Control: The Need (Proverbs 13)

A great many proverbs in the book follow a similar pattern, contrasting the spiritual fruit of a quality that pleases God with the negative effects of the opposing worldly characteristic. One of the reasons for this is to help us to see the benefits, even in routine daily situations, of cultivating spiritual self-control - if nothing else because it helps us avoid so much unnecessary trouble.

One aspect of developing self-control is the ability to distinguish between our needs, our hopes, and our desires (13:1-12*). Here and elsewhere, Proverbs discusses all three of these. Each one of us watches the world's unending parade of diversions, merchandise, opportunities, and other such things that we need, desire, or hope for. It is simply human nature to yearn for a wide variety of things, some of which we can have and some of which we shall never have.

* There are connections between some of these verses that are not evident in English translations. The Hebrew word "nephesh" is usually translated as 'life' or sometimes as 'soul'; but in certain circumstances it can also mean something similar to our word 'appetite', and Proverbs sometimes uses that to ironic effect.

It helps a lot when we learn to start telling the difference between the things we truly need, the things that provide genuine hope, and the things that are mere desires of the flesh or the fleshly mind. Having desires is, in itself, just part of being human. It is when we fail to examine our desires, to see that many of them are not genuine needs, that our desires become dangerous - leading to violence (verse 2), frustration (verse 4), false pretenses (verse 7), and many more obvious problems such as envy and the like. Self-control can help us avoid such disorders.

We can always trust God to meet our genuine needs, whether physical or spiritual. But this means that we must allow him to determine both what we need and when we need to have it. "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." (Matthew 6:34) This is where hope, such an important aspect of our relationship with God, comes in. Hope fulfilled is a refreshing and faith-enhancing "tree of life" (verse 12). But when we rush to get what we think we need, without waiting for God, we often find that any resulting satisfaction and security are short-lived indeed (verse 11*).

* In the Hebrew text, the reference to things obtained by 'dishonest' or 'unsound' methods is literally, 'by a puff of air'. This verse is quite similar in intent to our saying, "easy come, easy go".

The problems of life affect us all, faithless and faithful, wise and foolish - but the wise and faithful handle their problems and others' in a better way (13:13-25). As Proverbs often teaches us (for example, in verses 13, 17, and 18), many of life's problems are avoidable, caused by our own folly or our own mistakes. But many problems are unavoidable, caused by anything from the actions of our ancestors (verse 22) to the rampant injustices that infest every society (verse

23*). Seeing the difference helps us remain calm and self-controlled when others are not. Instead of trying to control everything else and everyone else, let us learn to control ourselves.

* Some commentators propose an alternate interpretation of this verse, as it is also rendered in the KJV, suggesting that the poor lose their crops through poor judgment rather than injustice - an interpretation that fits in rather too neatly with the ways that too many believers look at the poor.

Many proverbs also remind us that our self-control - or lack thereof - can have a major effect on others. Panic induces panic, selfishness inspires selfishness, hate produces hate, anger provokes anger, greed causes greed, pride inflames pride. Many times in history, a small problem has become an enormous tragedy or disaster because of the way that a crowd can be stampeded by a small number of persons without self-control. And in private lives this can happen just as easily.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What kinds of problems are caused by a lack of self-control? What other problems are made worse by lack of self-control? Does self-control help to deal with unavoidable problems? Do such problems help us develop self-control?

Self-Control: The Potential (Proverbs 14)

In emphasizing the need for self-control in so many different aspect of life, Proverbs does confront all of us with our weaknesses. Yet it also aims to encourage us, by showing that every one of us has the capacity to learn self-control and to experience the good spiritual fruit it brings. God is fair; the things he calls for are equally demanding yet equally accessible for us all.

We can all find spiritual wisdom, once we recognize what it is and where we can find the real thing (14:1-9). Self-control and the other values that Proverbs teaches do not require any money or special education to develop, nor are they only found in a certain place. The self-controlled, godly person learns to fear the Lord - that is, simply to accept that God is far greater than we are (verse 2), to tell the truth always (verse 5), and to show good will to all (verse 9).

To develop these qualities is hard for any of us, and all the more so when a lack of self-control can be more satisfying in the short-term. Sorting through our desires and distinguishing them from our genuine needs, though an essential part of developing self-control, can lead to uncomfortable realizations*. Yet God's fairness is seen in that this is equally hard for us all. There is no one who has all the right beliefs, a complete absence of ungodly thoughts, or a perfect understanding of God's will and priorities. It is difficult, but equally so for us all.

* This is the meaning of verse 4: if a farmer does not keep oxen to help with the harvest, then he saves himself a lot of mess and expense in taking care of the animals - but then there is no harvest.

Moreover, we can all know ourselves, we can all see ourselves for what we really are, and we can all recognize our true spiritual needs, as opposed to our earthly desires (14:10-20). Our deepest joys and sorrows are ours alone (verse 10), and we all know from hard experience how quickly the bad times can turn into good times - and vice versa (verse 13). We all have secrets of the heart - from evil thoughts to noble aspirations, from desperate fantasies to heartfelt longings.

Our true desires, though, are those of the soul. And these are all healthy desires - the desire to be loved, to be at peace, to be secure. The "simple" cannot discern their true desires, so they pursue things on the surface, without ill-intent but with extreme gullibility (verse 15), bringing disorder and confusion. The "fool" actively denies his soul's gentle desires to seek things the flesh craves, leading to violence (verse 16-17), hypocrisy (verse 20), and the like. Proverbs advises wise, self-

controlled believers to "fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen" (2 Corinthians 4:18). For "there is a way* that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death" (verse 12).

* The word translated 'way' combines the idea of a path with the idea of one's own conduct and attitudes.

Above all else, our souls all desire grace (14:21-35). Our souls desire both to receive grace and to share it - the most spiritually powerful act we can perform. Moreover, we can all be gracious. Generosity (verse 21, verse 31) is one of many practical steps we can take. To be generous does not require wealth, only the self-control to realize what we actually need and what we could constructively share with others. Jesus' striking example of the widow with her two coins (Mark 12:41-44, Luke 21:1-4) illustrates the contrast between his thinking and ours.

Self-control also leads to patience (verse 29), honesty (verse 25), diligence (verse 23), peace (verse 30), and other spiritual fruit. None of these qualities needs to be (or can be) purchased; and they all require no special education or training - only the choice to value them and nurture them, which any of us can do. Verse 33 reminds us that even fools are aware of what constitutes genuine wisdom; they merely choose not to live by it*. The greatest truths and the greatest virtues are equally and freely made available to all by a just and fair God.

* The metaphor in the Hebrew of this verse is not fully expressed in most translations - when wisdom 'reposes' or 'rests' in the heart of the discerning, the Hebrew verb implies a resting place found after a period of searching, as if wisdom had visited person after person until she finally found one willing to let her in.

Although self-control can leave the flesh (and the fleshly mind) feeling constrained, it brings the soul's release from all of our restless attempts to outwit, out-compete, out-envy, out-argue, out-fight, and out-pretend our fellow beings. Like all forms of spiritual fruit, self-control nurtures other forms of spiritual fruit, and harmonizes with other spiritual fruit, rather than competing with them for our attention (recall Galatians 5:22-23 and 2 Peter 1:5-7*).

* The kinds of spiritual fruit mentioned in 2 Peter 1:5-7 are often misinterpreted as a progression instead of the harmonious whole that they really are. That passage does not teach us to develop first one quality and then another, nor is there any 'order' to the topics - in repeatedly calling us to 'add to', the passage is simply emphasizing the need always to grow spiritually and to produce more spiritual fruit of all kinds.

"A heart at peace gives life to the body", allowing us to get the best out of the good things and to deal with the bad things in stride. Understanding godly wisdom can lift us out of the worldly habit of evaluating one another based on outward appearance or worldly 'talent', to help us to see one another as God does - as spiritual beings created most of all to love and help one another.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What things does God ask us to do that are equally possible (or equally difficult) for everyone? What things does he ask that might be easier for some than for others? Where do the things of most importance to God fit in?

Contentment & Self-Control (Proverbs 15)

The simple virtue of contentment is an indispensable part of developing self-control. Many of these proverbs show us how a grateful acceptance of what we have can help so much in curbing our excess desires, instilling grace and kindness in our treatment of others, and in moderating our responses to the unexpected. Once more, this is something that anyone can learn to practice.

Being content to live in God's sight is a good start (15:1-11). We often remind unbelievers that, "everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give an account" (Hebrews 4:13); yet this is very much a reminder to believers that our hearts also are completely

open to him. If the mysteries of death and eternity* are open to God, how much more can he see into our little human hearts (verse 11). Yet instead of fearing this or evading it, "let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence" (Hebrews 4:16); we should simply learn to go before God without pretense, to ask him for the self-control and other spiritual fruit that we need.

* In the Hebrew text, verse 11 begins "Sheol and Abaddon ...", literally translated as, "death and destruction", but in its meaning much closer to what we mean when we say "heaven and hell". Sheol was the abode of the 'good' dead, while Abaddon or Destruction was the fate of the 'evil' dead.

We can also become content to be on his path, the path of grace and peace, even when we are sorely tempted to be drawn into the world's ugliness. It helps to realize that we have a house full of treasure (verse 6) that, as emphasized in Proverbs, is of infinitely more value than worldly goods. Christians eagerly profess this - yet too often turn right around and show that their real yearning is for worldly things. Contentment with the things we already have can bring us the self-control to resist the temptation of materialism and the other prominent idols of our society.

Enjoying what we have is much easier when we realize that God wants us to do so, and that he has given us every reason to do so (15:12-18). God is quite pleased when his children find joy and even pleasure in the things he has given them. He only becomes displeased when we fight to get more or envy what he has given others: "are you envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20:15). God will deliberately withhold from all of us some things that we desire but do not actually need, in order to teach us humility and gratitude - in themselves blessings of great value.

Having a little while surrounded with love is better than material prosperity without love or peace - and this wise teaching (verses 16-17) echoes many of Jesus' own teachings, which we all too often neglect in our obstinate desire to prove that we know more than God knows.

So when we are content with what we have and with who we are, we can then become more self-controlled in many respects (15:19-33). We become more willing to change course if our way is "blocked with thorns" (verse 19), yet we can also stay on course when we know it is right, even if it does not bring the results our flesh desired (verse 21). We are able to look at all situations more honestly, and can also listen to what others say, without becoming frustrated or discouraged when we hear a wide variety of different viewpoints (verse 22).

God wants the hearts of his children to be filled with joy - not fun, which does not last, but joy, which does. And he knows what truly brings joy - which is why the "fear of the Lord", when correctly understood, is so beneficial. We are all constantly pulled by the lure of the world's false wisdom, and our own flesh's belief that it knows better than God does. We should not be dismayed by such feelings, for they are universal. God asks only that we develop the self-control to resist them and to trust his ways even when they lead us into the unknown.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What does it mean to be content? How can we tell if we are content with something? What New Testament passages help us learn contentment? How does it lead to self-control? Are there any practical steps we can take to become more content? In what areas of life is contentment spiritually important?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 2013*

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THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM: STUDIES IN PROVERBS

Notes For Week Seven: Perils Of The Proud (Proverbs 16-18)

Just as the various fruits of the Spirit are inter-related, each one helping us to develop others, so also many sins are inter-connected, and one sin can lead to other sins. Pride is particularly hazardous to our spiritual well-being, because it can blind us to so many other sins and dangers. Proverbs thus contrasts the proud and the humble in many different ways.

Pride & Humility In God's Presence (Proverbs 16)

Humility is of considerable value to God, but pride is respected and rewarded by the world. God does recompense both humility and pride, but he does so spiritually, not necessarily with the crass rewards and punishments of the world. Our hearts are always open to God, and he can always see whether we are proud or humble, in spite of the pretenses we put up for the world.

So many things in life come down to understanding the human heart and sensing the presence of the Lord (16:1-9). The fundamental error of the proud of heart is that God's presence is not real to them, even when they loudly proclaim a belief in God. No one who senses the nearness of the living God can fail to be humbled by his presence. Instead of being proud and self-willed, the truly wise man lives in love and faithfulness* (verse 6).

* The Hebrew phrase translated "love and faithfulness" implies that these qualities will be demonstrated to others. (This parallels Proverbs' depiction of "righteousness" in terms of one's effects on others.)

The awareness that "the Lord determines our steps" (verse 9, see also verse 1) is fundamental to the life of a believer. We do not need to know where our steps take us, nor do we need to know when we shall arrive. We need only entrust our way to God, by living so as to produce grace, truth, and love in the lives of others. God can guide a gentle heart anywhere, whereas he can do nothing with someone who has a brilliant mind but a stubborn, self-willed heart. Yet God can use anything and everything - so even the proud may find themselves being used by God, though this will usually be against their will and in ways they would not have wished for.

The path of the proud can lead to many different fates in this life, some profitable and some not; but spiritually it can only lead away from God (16:10-20). The mini-collection of proverbs about serving the king (in verses 10-15) asks us to pause and consider both the parallels and the differences between earthly affairs and seeking God. The best qualities in an earthly ruler are those such as honesty and integrity, because while talent, intelligence or energy can be used either to help or to harm, spiritual virtues can only be beneficial. Conversely, the subjects of an effective king understand that they need to give the king their full attention and loyal service.

Serving our heavenly king is, of course, important on a deeper and more spiritual level. God is better than even the most virtuous of earthly kings*, and he provides a suitable example for those who exercise earthly leadership or authority in any manner. And our acceptance of God's power should, of course, be on a deeper and humbler level than our allegiance to any earthly authority.

* At the time that Solomon wrote these proverbs, he was a king worthy of emulation in many respects. Yet there is a sad irony in these words, in light of the oppressive and idolatrous despot that he later became.

The fall of the proud is sometimes obvious to all, but at other times the rot and decay take place only in their souls while outwardly they prosper. It can be quite satisfying to observers when the proud of the world are undone by their own presumption and overreaching (verse 18), but this happens only in relatively rare circumstances. More often, the proud plunder the humble (verse 19); and they pay for it only in their character and their souls. For the sake of our own souls it is far better to be lowly in spirit*, but to do this tests our faith. Too often, resentment of the proud and rich is merely envy - for if we saw their spiritual condition we would pity them instead.

* The meaning of this phrase is similar to that of "poor in spirit" in Matthew 5:3. In both cases it describes someone willing to help carry the spiritual burdens caused by the world's sorrows or injustices, someone who would prefer to be wrongly treated rather than be a prosperous oppressor of others.

So much of the time, there is a way that seems right and a way that actually is right (16:21-33). But to find the right way, we have to seek it by spiritual wisdom, not worldly analysis. The proud man can always rationalize his selfishness and preserve appearances, sometimes for an entire lifetime. The humble do not pursue their interests at the expense of others, but strive to build up others (verses 21, 24) and to teach others in a constructive manner (verse 23). The humble, discerning believer brings life and light to others, knowing that genuine love cannot co-exist with pride: "Love ... does not boast, it is not proud" (1 Corinthians 13:4).

The proud man uses his experience and his knowledge of life to gain advantage for himself, but the humble person uses the experiences of life to gain spiritual wisdom that will bring fruits of the spirit into the lives of others. The humble are straightforward, not deceitful or pretentious (verses 28-29) and not aggressive or impulsive (verse 32). The world does not respect those who give a lifetime of faithful, humble service to God, but the Lord himself is well aware of how much faith that takes (verse 31).

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How does God's view of pride differ from the world's? How does God's view of humility differ from the world's? How should believers view the proud? How can we keep ourselves from becoming proud? What costs are involved in being humble? Are there any rewards for humility?

Testing The Heart (Proverbs 17)

Life has many ways of bringing out what is in our hearts. We may be successful in concealing pride or other sins from the world, even for considerable periods of time; but God always knows what is in the heart. When we develop spiritual discernment and understanding, then events and circumstances around us can help us to see the spiritual needs in our own hearts.

Just as metals can be tested and refined by fire, so also the furnace of life will test our hearts (17:1-8), "so that your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine ... " (1 Peter 1:7). The Lord tests the heart (verse 3) in many ways. We are tested by our personal circumstances and possessions, which constantly call us to adjust our values and our expectations in accordance with spiritual truths (verses 1*-2). A large part of the test is the fact that the proud and dishonest do often prosper on this earth (verse 8).

* Verse 1 contains a sharply satirical figure of speech - the 'feasting' is literally "strife offerings".

We are also tested by relationships, especially those of our families and close friends (verse 2, verse 6). The humble believer looks out for the interests of his family and friends, rather than trying to manipulate or exploit them. The humble are willing to take time for others even when

they themselves are pre-occupied or busy. And we are tested by our surroundings, the conditions in the world that may not even directly affect us, and by our attitudes towards the suffering and injustice on this earth. All too often, even believers are callous towards those who suffer unfairly (verse 5); and this is a direct effect of taking the wrong kind of pride in who we are.

Often the proud simply harm others, but in many ways the proud person is looking for trouble for himself or herself as well (17:9-20). It is human nature to revel in strife, whether for the thrill of causing an argument or for the perverse satisfaction we can take in seeing others angry with one another (verses 11, 14, 19). Although it can indeed be entertaining to see fools in conflict over something trivial (verse 12), the godly response is one of pity, not relish. And when Christians feel obliged to jump into the latest political, religious, or sporting controversy, they squander time, energy, and credibility that could be better used to help others to see God's grace and light.

Being callous to injustice is often accompanied by spiritual-sounding rationalizations, along the lines of the ways that Job's friends disheartened him - to God's displeasure, though they thought they were righteous and moral. The true friend does not hesitate to show love, grace, and compassion even when things are at their worst (verse 17), and is always willing to listen and to understand things more fully (verse 10).

So often in life we face a choice between pursuing the expediency of the moment versus developing a more deeply spiritual perspective (17:21-28). The fool and the proud have wandering eyes (verse 24), searching endlessly for easy rewards and showing no concern for dishonest methods (verse 23) or unjust consequences (verse 26). The humble and godly keep spiritual wisdom, not desired results, in view (verse 24). This takes faith, for we must believe that the rewards of spiritual wisdom, though intangible to the world, are of greater value than silver or gold. The peril of the proud is not so much possible earthly punishment as the inevitable and frightening decay of their souls.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What kinds of results are there to the 'tests' of our hearts? How does God respond to the results of these 'tests'? Are there other things that test the heart that are not mentioned here? Did Jesus say anything about the ways our hearts are tested? How might we try to hide the pride in our hearts?

The Proud, The Humble, & The Tongue (Proverbs 18)

Amongst the many ways that pride and humility can come out, the tongue is especially revealing. The proud tongue will exalt self and will use its abilities to pursue fleshly ends, while the humble tongue will bring spiritual fruit into the lives of those around it. As we learn to be humble, our speech changes accordingly. Conversely, our speech can help us see our need for humility.

Human speech is one of God's many gracious gifts to us, yet it is easily misused (18:1-14). And the difference between use and misuse is often a matter of pride or humility. "From the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34, Luke 6:45); and although the proud can disguise their speech with flattery and worldly polish, their speech still reveals the contents of their hearts.

The value of what someone says never comes from its rhetorical skill or elegance, but from its substance (verse 4). Does our speech reveal the deep waters beneath the surface of things, or do we simply use flowery language or pretentious technique to cover the shallowness of our ideas? Are we determined that others should hear our trivial opinions on the latest earthly controversies

and debates (verse 2), or are we trying to understand things of more lasting importance? Do we revel in knowing and blurting out bits of gossip and trivial factoids (verses 8, 13), or do we seek to point others to God himself? "The fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook" (verse 4), because it brings forth what was hidden, and makes life and nourishment available to all.

The proud take false comfort in earthly appearances and fleeting treasure (verse 11) - their wealth, their power and authority, their fame and popularity. But "what is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight" (Luke 16:15), and so the humble and faithful put their hope and security in God himself (verse 10) - not in the earthly treasures he may or may not give us, but in his name and his presence. They are "longing for a better country - a heavenly one" (Hebrews 11:16). And so "humility comes before honor*" (verse 12, see also 15:33). The humble may never be honored in this world, but they are honored and blessed in God's sight.

* English translations of this verse may be ambiguous. The Hebrew phrasing expresses a sequential process - when someone is proud, it will be followed by their downfall (either earthly or spiritual); but when we humble ourselves, it will be followed by being honored in God's sight.

Our use of the tongue is tied in with the nurture of humility and discernment (18:15-24). Spiritual discernment involves not only an understanding of practicality, but also an awareness of God's values. The worldly consider themselves wise and clever when they can gain an advantage by some tactic they have learned (verse 16*), but the humble believer uses his knowledge only to produce spiritual fruit.

* Verse 16 is not an endorsement of using gifts or favors to win influence, but rather a statement about human nature. See also 15:33. In Scripture, the powerful and wealthy are called to act fairly and impartially rather than to do favors for those who can repay them (for example, Luke 6:32-34).

Accepting the limits to our knowledge is a key part of learning discernment and humility. Many questions can never be resolved beyond all doubts by recourse to human knowledge, logic, or authority (verse 17). The proud approach this by yelling a little louder, gathering a few more factoids to support their case, or paying a little more money to push their point of view. The humble do not resent the uncertainty of the world, nor do they fight against it, nor do they get upset that many others may think differently than they do.

Though the tongue reveals what is in the heart, it also tends to pull the rest of our lives along with it (verse 21). With the proud, "the tongue ... corrupts the whole person, sets the entire course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (James 3:6). Therefore, the humble and spiritually wise concentrate on finding love and mercy where they can, even in unlikely places. The humble value spiritual blessings (verse 22) over material things, are not hardened to the troubles of others (verse 23), and stick close to their friends, even in times of need - knowing that God is the one who is always close to us, ready to give us grace and peace (verse 24).

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why did God give us the capacity to speak? How can we tell whether we are using the tongue properly? Is it true that, "no man can tame the tongue" (James 3:8)? How does speech reveal pride and reveal humility? What other things in our hearts does it reveal?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 2013*

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THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM: STUDIES IN PROVERBS

Notes For Week Eight: Sluggards & Their Kin (Proverbs 19:1-22:16)

Proverbs has much to say about "sluggards", persons who just can't seem to stir themselves to effective action when called for. Yet this problem goes well beyond the more obvious forms of human laziness. Proverbs calls the believer to a life of steady spiritual consistency, not one of inconsistent extremes. Perhaps more importantly, the book helps us to see how we can do this.

Disorders Of Indiscipline (Proverbs 19)

"One who is slack in his work is brother to one who destroys*" (Proverbs 18:9) - that is, idleness and violence, laziness and aggression are actually closely related. Believers are called to pursue lives of quiet, consistent self-discipline. The sluggard and the rash man both suffer from the same inability to work patiently and steadily, instead seeking quick, easy results.

* In the KJV, this verse ends "him that is a great waster". This uses the word "waste" in its old sense of 'destroy' (as in 'lay waste'), which is what it meant at the time. The NKJV updated it to "a great destroyer".

There is a kind of family resemblance between the sluggard and some other problems that may at first seem unrelated (19:1-15). One hallmark of the 'sluggard*' is self-defeating behavior, for a lack of effort or discipline often leads to a lack of things we desire or need (verse 15). Verse 24's memorable description of a sluggard with his hand stuck in the dish reminds us of the many times that just a little more effort or a little more patience would have made a big difference.

* The NIV, NASB, and RSV usually use "sluggard" to translate this word. The KJV most often uses 'slothful'. Other versions may simply use 'lazy person' or 'lazy man'.

Yet other proverbs about the rash and impatient (verses 2, 11-13) reveal a close similarity with the sluggard. In both cases, the root problem is an unwillingness to use steady, honest, consistent effort to pursue life's goals. The sluggard despairs of anything that requires effort, while the rash person demands immediate satisfaction and tries to force the issue. It is the nature of this fallen world that, "by the sweat of your brow you will eat your food" (Genesis 3:19). In feeling that they should be exempt from this, the sluggard harms himself and his own family, while the reckless person will frequently indulge in rage or violence. But in both cases a little patience*, a little grace, or a little more self-awareness could make a big difference.

* In verse 11, the Hebrew text literally describes how wisdom and patience can "soften the face".

Greed and materialism, narrow perspectives that focus on competing for money and other fleshly prizes (verses 4, 6-7), stem from the same root flaw. The greedy person sees life as a fight for a limited supply of treasures, and thus rationalizes sins such as selfishness, envy, and deceit. The greedy think they deserve special rewards, refusing to trust God to provide for their true needs.

A godly perspective on earthly living helps us to avoid these disorders of indiscipline (19:16-29). Proverbs particularly emphasizes the need for a lifetime habit of learning. But the sluggard, the rash, the greedy, and other such characters hate the idea that we shall always have more to learn about God, about ourselves, about human nature, and about this world (verses 16, 20, 25, 27). Accepting this need, though, helps us to avoid hasty judgments or evaluations, since we know that appearances or impressions can always be misleading. And this in turn helps us to become more gracious and patient with others (verse 17, and verse 11 above).

True faith brings contentment, a willingness to allow God to determine what we actually need. "It is the Lord's purpose that prevails" (verse 21); and if we truly believe this, we shall let God give us what we need when we need it (verses 22-23), and shall neither resent what others have nor act aggressively to satisfy our desires. But the lazy, the hateful, and the greedy are often described in verse 3: "a man's own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against the Lord."

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What are some common forms of indiscipline? What do they have in common? What are some sins that they lead to? What general remedies does Proverbs offer? How can we develop a steady, patient approach to life?

Knowing Our Weaknesses (Proverbs 20)

So many of humanity's problems stem from the simple inability to accept who we are, just as God created us. No human is powerful enough or wise enough to produce anything of genuine value without learning patience and discipline, and without cooperating with others. We should not expect to overcome obstacles all by ourselves, nor should we stand by idly while others try.

Realizing that there are no secrets from God will help in many ways (20:1-15). In emphasizing that we cannot keep our actions and thoughts secret from him (verses 5, 9, 14*), God does not wish to instill guilt or fear, merely humility - the humility to realize that we depend completely on his grace, and the humility to accept his call to live in love and peace. We are all special to him, but none of us is a special case to him. God gives blessings to all, but privileges to none.

* This comical verse is a satire on our hypocrisy in all its forms, not merely in the literal example of the marketplace. It points out that hypocrisy is so often motivated by the desire to gain something (including intangible things such as authority or popularity) with a minimal amount of honest effort.

The consequences of our actions and decisions are also no surprise to God. The sluggard's failure to plow and sow inevitably leads to a poor harvest (verses 4, 13*). This is true spiritually as well - a lack of discipline and effort in daily life can have spiritual consequences even more worrisome than the material consequences. While our economic situation is often affected by situations beyond our control, our spiritual condition is largely determined by our own attitudes.

* The second part of verse 13 literally says to 'keep your eyes open' in order to have 'food to spare'. This advice is good both economically and spiritually.

God, as the great king (verse 2, verse 8, also 19:12) is never deceived by our pretensions to perfection, our rationalizations for our laziness or violence, or our claims to know everything we need to know. As always, he just asks for some humility, not guilt or terror.

We can develop a more spiritual perspective simply by learning from daily life (20:16-30). This is not painful or costly, taking only the humility to question or re-evaluate the things that 'everyone knows' or 'everyone does'. For example, if we get pre-occupied with sinners 'getting away with it' (verse 22) or make boastful 'spiritual' promises (verse 25), we are really impressing others with a false form of human religion rather than living out the gospel of grace. Likewise, even believers may fear growing old instead of valuing the experience it brings (verse 29).

"No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful" (Hebrews 12:11), and yet God's discipline is rarely as painful as we expect it to be. God's discipline is based on the desire to forgive sins, not the desire to punish them. Yet even when the trials of life are painful, in Jesus we can know that God will use them to produce good spiritual fruit (verse 30).

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What does God know about us that the rest of the world does not? What might we change if we really understood that God knew about it? Why do we think we can ignore God's ways and still produce good fruit? How can a new perspective on daily living help us to change these habits?

Trusting In God's Ways (Proverbs 21)

Since we focus undue attention on obedience for obedience's sake, we often do not appreciate the extent to which God tells us things simply for our own well-being. Both the things we desire and the means we use to obtain them are often destructive to our souls. Further, the rewards craved by the worldly rarely bring security or contentment. All this calls us to greater trust in God.

The godly way of innocence is often inconvenient, but it is always the right path (21:1-15). Once we get past the preoccupation with short-term results, we can appreciate the blessing of living by grace and mutual aid instead of competition and rivalry (verses 2-3). But the craving for results and rewards - and the feeling that we deserve them - leads us to succumb to the false appeal of worldly methods, enticing sluggards and hotheads alike to give in to folly (verses 4-8).

Only through God's grace and hope can we pursue true justice (verse 12)*. Even 'religious' persons often give in to worldly methods and rationalize such practices as violence (verse 7) in the name of 'justice', favoritism and dishonesty (verse 14) in the name of 'opportunity', and callousness (verse 13) in the name of 'righteousness'. Giving in to such things is really just another form of laziness - the unwillingness to understand others, to accept constraints that are common to everyone, to submit to living by grace instead of personal virtue or superiority.

* The Hebrew phrasing is slightly ambiguous, but it is best understood as "The Righteous One" being God.

True victory, like true justice, rests with the Lord (21:16-31). The worldly trust in a wide variety of things, but only God is always reliable (verses 30-31, compare Psalm 20:7-8). Living in this world constantly presents us with choices that, though very different on the surface, so often come down to a choice between God's priorities and our earthly agendas or desires. And this in turn comes back to the nature of this earth, that it is an inherent aspect of our mortal nature that none of us is exempt from the common temptations, constraints, and weaknesses of humanity.

Proverbs emphasizes the futility of fighting God, mainly because it is foolish and irrational. The sluggard who thinks he can succeed without any real effort is almost certainly going to be disappointed, while the humble person who accepts responsibility will receive what he or she needs (verses 25-26). The violent and selfish may well accumulate earthly treasures, but can neither fully enjoy them nor find the deeper fulfillment and security that come from living as God calls us (see 20:17). "You have expected much, but see, it turned out to be little" (Haggai 1:9). And outward religious actions cannot make up for hatred or anger in the heart (verse 27).

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How can we tell whether we are on "God's path" or our own? In what ways are we most likely to stray? Is there a common factor that can help us recognize when this happens? What kinds of victory does God offer us?

Expectations & Success (Proverbs 22:1-16)

God gives lavish promises to those who are willing to follow in his ways. When we first understand what God truly means by these promises, it may be disappointing to the flesh. But in

God's promises, our souls find exactly what they most long for. Ironically, our flesh does not come off badly at all if it follows in God's paths - it just has to adjust its expectations.

"The Lord is the Maker of them all", whether by human standards they may be rich or poor, attractive or ugly, righteous or unrighteous (22:1-9). It is human nature to look at the outside of a person and develop corresponding expectations of that person in terms of their worldly abilities and identity. But it is God's desire to give life and true blessings to everyone who will accept them (verse 4), and in turn he calls us to become generous with what we have (verse 9).

This world's blessings are divided unequally and unfairly. But God offers his greatest blessings in equal measure to everyone who values them. His grace and truth contradict the false wisdom of the world's authorities, news media, and academic experts; and his ways expose the folly of the world's endless fights between the self-interested and the self-righteous. Yet the world's fleshly expectations even induce many believers to trust the foolish opinions of the world's loud and self-important voices instead of Jesus' quiet testimony about grace, peace, hope, and love.

We cannot fix all the injustices endemic to this fallen world, but we can generously share the blessings we have been given (verse 9). To be blessed by God is not a sign of privilege, but one of responsibility. "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded" (Luke 12:48). With just a little more generosity and sensitivity, we can become a source of blessing to those around us, sharing with a suffering world the blessedness of living by grace and love.

Seeing clearly, from God's viewpoint, keeps us from being sluggards, hotheads, or materialists (22:10-16). It helps us set aside excuses (such as the sluggard's desperate efforts to evade work in verse 13) and to accept daily discipline in every stage of life (verse 15*). God disciplines us only in its most beneficial form (Hebrews 12:4-13). The bulk of God's discipline - the simple necessity of putting time, effort, and responsibility into our daily living - is nearly painless.

* Proverbs' references to the use of "rods" for discipline do not advocate this literally. Like much else in Proverbs, it is a down-to-earth metaphor, here emphasizing our spiritual need to drive out folly from our hearts. Our deepest forms of folly usually require emotional sacrifice, not physical suffering, to dispel.

Our outward choices will ultimately show whether we seek earthly rewards or spiritual fruit (verses 11-12). "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:21) Believers are called to pursue the deeper needs of the soul, to live by grace, and in turn to help others to do so. We may need to risk or sacrifice worldly opportunities for the sake of God's priorities (verses 9, 16), since they often sharply contrast with ours, as shown by the nearly universal human practice of showing favoritism towards those who least need it or deserve it.

Jesus does call us to set aside laziness, rashness, and greed, in order to obey him and follow him. But, "my yoke is easy" (Matthew 11:30); for he does not call us simply to adopt a set of rules, new or otherwise. Instead, he consistently calls us to develop new perspectives and priorities, which will gently but inevitably lead us into making outward changes that, when they come, will feel natural and unforced. This is what it means to walk in the light.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: If God truly made everyone and loves us all equally, what implications does this have? To what extent can Christians make the world less frightening or unfair without resorting to force or other worldly methods? What are some things that 'everyone' in our society believes, but that could be wrong in God's eyes?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 2013*

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THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM: STUDIES IN PROVERBS

Notes For Week Nine: Sayings Of The Wise (Proverbs 22:17-24:34)

This collection of teachings from anonymous ancient wise men reinforces some of the points made by Solomon in his own proverbs. This passage generally develops its thoughts more fully, adding an additional dimension to ideas we have studied earlier in the book. It particularly emphasizes the development of a more spiritual perspective on the everyday world around us.

Reliable Words, Sound Answers (Proverbs 22:17-29)

These "sayings of the wise" are designed to help the discerning believer to survive spiritually and to help others do so, in a world that itself is full of unbelief and folly. At times, this is as simple as avoiding obvious mistakes and self-destructive behavior. At other times, it means that we must reconsider or even resist beliefs and practices that are nearly universal in earthly society.

These "thirty sayings*" were added to the collection of Solomon's own proverbs**, and cover some similar ideas (22:17-21). Their overall theme is the importance of learning and sharing spiritual wisdom. When our beliefs and attitudes are founded on 'true and reliable words', then we can provide 'sound answers' and edifying advice to others. The point of spiritual learning is not to show who is the wisest, but rather to enable us all to help each other draw closer to God.

* The description of this section (22:17-24:22) as "thirty sayings" probably references an older Egyptian book called *Wisdom Of Amenemope*, which was noted in the ancient world for its thirty-chapter structure. Proverbs is deeper yet more concise, thus needing only thirty "sayings". See the suggested commentaries for proposed outlines for the "thirty sayings" and basic parallels to Amenemope's work.

** The original book of Proverbs ended after our chapter 24. A couple of centuries later, the final seven chapters were added under the direction of King Hezekiah.

Genuinely caring for society's outsiders is difficult, for the world accustoms us to see things from the perspective of the powerful, the loud, and the dominant (22:22-23, see also 22:16). This distorted perspective is reinforced by politicians, the news media, advertisers, and others through emotional controversies, manufactured crises, and endless hyping of products and events, which reduce us to mere members of some demographic group rather than treating us as individuals.

It is a consistent theme in Proverbs to keep in mind the needs of those who have no power or influence of their own. We do not and cannot solve all of their problems, but simple compassion can go farther than we realize. Many persons do suffer unjustly, and most of the world's celebrities and authorities are no more worthwhile than others who will always be obscure. Accepting this is a powerful realization that can gradually guide us into natural change.

There is a natural link between common sense and self-control (22:24-29). Common sense warns us not to be hot-tempered or to make speculative financial decisions (verses 26-27*), and just a little self-control helps us avoid using self-centered cleverness rather than honesty (verse 28**). And when we have something truly worthwhile to offer, God will make sure that is used constructively (verse 29), though not necessarily in a way that will bring earthly fame or wealth.

* This is the point of the example of making an ill-advised pledge. See also the notes on Proverbs 6:1.

** Moving a boundary stone to enlarge one's property at another's expense was a common trick that someone with sufficient influence could get away with. It is closely parallel to the ways that wealthy and

powerful persons in our own 'democratic' society are able manipulate and exploit the legal system and the political system, in ways not available to the average person. See also Proverbs 23:10-11.

Spiritual wisdom helps us make wise decisions by not indulging short-sighted desires. Once we stop listening to the world's self-interested screamers and self-appointed experts, it is not hard to see that the world's puny prizes are not worth risking the spiritual security that comes from living by God's values. This is why so many worldly persons resort to loudness, manipulation, and pressure to try to get us to conform - the things they want us to do are illogical and self-destructive. God can speak softly and lovingly, because he knows that he is telling us the truth.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Does this passage emphasize attitudes, outward actions, or both? How do these teachings connect with earlier proverbs? Is there a common theme in the teachings of this passage? How should we apply them?

Appearances & Reality (Proverbs 23)

Many things in this world have appearances that do not reflect their true nature. Often this is even deliberate, especially in human society; for many persons have reasons to present themselves or events in a distorted light. At other times, this is just the nature of things in a perishable world, in which nothing lasts and nothing can ever provide permanent security.

The image of the lavish but deceptive banquet parallels the shallow rewards and opportunities that the world offers us every day (23:1-8). The world jealously guards its treasures; so they always come at a cost, even if they look 'free'. Worldly wealth, power, fame, and popularity are not given to those who have genuinely valuable abilities or who offer truly worthwhile services - they are, rather, offered to those who are willing to worship society's idols and conform to society's conventions. Even when there is no cost to the wallet, there is a cost to the soul.

The short-lived nature of worldly rewards makes this trade-off spiritually inadvisable. "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" (Matthew 16:26). The point is not that we must do without worldly things, but that the spiritually wise will refrain from seeking them out, knowing that God will provide what we actually need. When the worldly dangle their treasures in front of us, "his heart is not with you" (verse 7), for the worldly demand a return, and are always calculating what is 'owed'* to them, whether it is tangible or intangible.

* This is the point of the first part of verse 7. An alternate translation is sometimes seen: "as he thinks within himself, so he is", based on different assumptions about the Hebrew text. But the straightforward translation fits the context better.

While we are in this world, God calls us to watch, listen, and learn, so that we are not deceived by appearances (23:9-28). We are not to force unbelievers to change outwardly to be obedient to a God they do not yet know. Instead, we can show them that we find an inward joy in God's grace ("my inmost being* will rejoice") that transcends the short-term pleasure of worldly prizes.

* In the Hebrew text, "inmost being" is literally "kidneys", which in Hebrew is a figure of speech for the deepest part of the body. The KJV translates it "reins" for this reason.

The call not to envy sinners (verse 17) takes many forms. We constantly see sinners profit in this world, while humble persons suffer for their gentleness - which can make it excruciatingly difficult not to give in to aggression and selfishness. This is why verse 23 cautions us to "buy the truth and do not sell it", because many spiritual principles seem good only until we are called to put them into practice, like the little book given to John in Revelation 10:9-10.

These reminders are wide-ranging, but by no means complete: we are called to avoid exploiting the weak or poor (verses 10-11, see also 22:28), to accept discipline when it is called for (verses 13-14*), to avoid indulging in eating and drinking beyond meeting our actual needs (verse 20-21), to respect the life experience of faithful elders (verse 22), and to turn away from adulterous temptations (verses 27-28**). Notice that all of these merely call us to put into practice the things we believe to be true - they do not ask us to harm ourselves or to force our ways on others.

* This is not a literal call to practice corporal punishment - the exaggeration, 'punish him with the rod' is simply to remind us that even such physical punishment would not kill anyone, and thus that gentler means of discipline, while still hated by the flesh, can bring benefit without causing any actual harm at all.

** The water imagery in verse 27 emphasizes the prostitute's false promise and the ultimately unfulfilling nature of having intercourse with her.

This is reinforced by the image of the drunkard's dilemma (23:29-35). The drunkard went on a spree, probably embarrassing himself and offending or disgusting those who watched him. And now he feels miserable (*i.e.* with a 'hangover'). But the 'twist ending' is that all he can think of is that the quickest way to feel good again would be to get drunk all over again.

This downward spiral parallels many of the ways that the world drags believers down to their level. Once we get into the pattern of using money to solve our problems, we get caught in an endless cycle of materialistic decisions and rationalizations for them. Once we get into the habit of spewing out angry opinions about worldly events, we fall into an endless cycle of hatred and anger, while rationalizing or even practicing violence. And these hardly exhaust the parallels.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: When the world offers us something, is there a good way to decide what God wants us to do? What kinds of repayment other than money might the world ask for? How does the advice in this chapter fit in with these ideas? What temptations parallel the drunkard's dilemma? How does this help us to avoid them?

Perspectives On The Sinful (Proverbs 24)

Few things tend to trouble believers as much as the awareness that the world around us is so full of sins of every kind. Yet this is also another case of things not being as they appear on the surface. Believers are called to develop a perspective on sin and sinners that goes much deeper than a mere awareness of right and wrong. God is concerned with more than mere appearances.

We desire to see wisdom, faith, and grace overcome evil; but it can be a challenge to understand how this actually happens (24:1-10). In earthly contests and confrontations, evil and force and money quite often overcome wisdom and even truth; so we only deceive and confuse ourselves if we expect godly qualities always to 'win' in that respect. But wisdom can always protect our hearts, and that is a victory that matters much more to God than most of our earthly battles do.

Spiritual wisdom's rare and beautiful treasures (verse 2) cannot be purchased with the world's currencies nor be evaluated in worldly terms. As Proverbs often reminds us, spiritual blessings are worth more than money or jewels. This basic perspective - equally difficult to accept for the educated and the uneducated, the rich and the poor alike - allows us to make God's priorities our own without feeling pressured or forced into it. It also helps us to avoid the deadly envy of the worldly (verse 1) that leads Christians into anger, hatred, intimidation, and other such sins.

The firmest tests of our wisdom and perspective will come in times of trouble (verse 10). Faith worthy of the name will hold up when we are all alone, when we are faced with problems having

no obvious solution, when we are misunderstood or mistreated. This is when the true nature of our hearts will come out. The world's trials and injustices will never go away, so we need to develop the kind of faith and understanding that can help us live in a dark, fallen world.

Relationships with the worldly provide us with opportunities not only to apply spiritual wisdom, but also to develop it (24:11-22). The call to try to help the doomed (verse 11) while avoiding the violent without hating them (verses 15-16) reinforce common teachings in Proverbs, while looking ahead to the gracious perspective of the gospel. "Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear" (Jude 1:22-23).

Sometimes sinful persons do receive 'punishment' on earth for their sins. But our perspective towards a fallen 'enemy' must be different from that of the world (verse 17), and undue rejoicing about others' problems may even induce God to show them some extra grace (verse 18). God loves every one of his creations, even those who do evil. Even highly successful sinners will arouse our pity, rather than envy or hatred, once we come to see the way God truly views them.

Truth and perseverance often fit together (24:23-34). Impartiality and honesty are even more important to God than most Christians realize (verse 26) - and are even harder to practice than we often realize. There are many things that we accept or believe only because 'everyone else' does. We are not called to try to change these things by force, but we are called to understand things more deeply and to find ways to help others see things in their true light.

We should also be able to see the injustices and cruelty of worldly society for what they are (verses 23-24). While it is not our place to impose punishment or to change things by force, it is spiritually healthy to see sin for what it is (verse 25*), even as we still love and care about those who commit sins. Moreover, our own self-interest should have nothing to do with our concept of right and wrong (verses 28-29). The worldly habit of deciding right and wrong based on what might affect us can lead only to self-righteousness, division, and numerous other disorders.

* The NIV's use of the word "convict" in verse 25 is an unfortunate word choice. The word in the Hebrew text means "reprove", "rebuke", or "correct", as it is translated in most other major English versions.

The image of the sluggard's vineyard teaches practical lessons about diligence and responsibility, yet the spiritual parallels are also important (compare verses 30-34 with Isaiah 5:1-7). Bad spiritual habits - letting others think for us, justifying deceit or manipulation, focusing on our agendas at the expense of others' needs - aggravate other existing problems and cause new ones.

Jesus' vineyard parables in Matthew 20:1-16 (the workers who came at different hours), 21:28-32 (the two sons who didn't want to work), and 21:33-46 (the scheming tenants) teach us to live with a sense of personal responsibility, a gracious attitude, and a willingness to make ourselves part of something much greater than ourselves. This is not meant to come from guilt or insecurity, but from a sound understanding of the things that truly have value in our lives.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does God expose believers to sin and danger? Can we use this constructively? What kinds of victories should we seek? What kinds of 'treasures' do we already have? How do Proverbs' teachings on our views of unbelievers show spiritual wisdom? What should we learn from seeing the sluggard's vineyard?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 2013*

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THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM: STUDIES IN PROVERBS

Notes For Week Ten: Spiritual Wisdom In Relationships (Proverbs 25-27)

In this life, we all develop many kinds of relationships. We shall interact with those in high earthly positions and those who are outcasts, with those who are similar to us and those who are very different. In all of our human interactions, there is a fundamental difference between the ways that the worldly view their relationships and the perspectives that Scripture teaches.

Neighbors & Rulers (Proverbs 25)

God's call for us to love our neighbors has many practical implications and applications. Then too, at times we all have to deal with those in positions of worldly authority. All of these interactions provide chances both to apply spiritual wisdom and also to learn spiritual wisdom. Our relationships with other humans also illuminate some aspects of our relationship with God.

This new section of Proverbs, written by Solomon but added to the book much later at the initiative of King Hezekiah*, opens with some thoughts on our dealings with the rich and mighty of this world (25:1-7). The proverbs about kings combine earthly advice (presenting a godly ideal for earthly leaders and/or advising the rest of us how to deal with them) with spiritual parallels, in which a human king can teach us lessons about our relationship with God.

* In his own lifetime, King Solomon wrote as many as 3,000 proverbs or sayings (1 Kings 4:32), of which only a fraction are included in the actual book of Proverbs. In Hezekiah's reign, about 200 years later, the king was guided by the Spirit to add more of these to the original inspired collection.

In this section, we are especially reminded of a ruler's responsibility for sorting out what is true and right from the lies and distractions of the world and the worldly (verses 1-5). A good human leader does not make decisions based on his own interests, agenda, or ideology, but rather seeks out the needs of his or her people in order to meet them. This also, of course, tells us about God's own character, for he cares about the spiritual needs of every soul he has created.

For our part, Proverbs anticipates one of Jesus' teachings (Luke 14:7-11) by cautioning us not to push ourselves forward, but rather to wait for our good character and useful services to be noticed (verses 6-7). "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." This is true both in our earthly lives and in our relationship with God.

A patient and trustworthy friend pleases God and blesses others (25:8-15). To be such a friend, we must see the treasure to be found in simple spiritual fruit, so that we do not use other persons for our own earthly purposes. The ability to keep a confidence (verses 8-10), for example, is underappreciated by the worldly, who revel in showing off when they have 'inside information'.

God appreciates simple reliability in daily affairs, even when the world ignores it (verse 13). Speaking soundly (verses 11-12, 15) and honestly (verse 14*) are more important to our spiritual well-being than we realize. In these areas, do we listen to the world's perspectives and shrug off God's advice, or patiently do what God values even when we don't receive praise or rewards?

* The same imagery is used in Jude 1:12 to describe false teachers. The common thread between the boaster and the false teacher is that both try to project an image of something that they are not.

Amongst the benefits of self-control is that it strengthens relationships (25:16-28). The graphic metaphor in verses 16-17 reminds us that over-indulgence can be a hazard in relationships just as it is in eating or drinking. A good friend knows to limit the demands he or she makes on others. And a good friend adjusts to the mood of others, as the sharp similes in verse 20* remind us. "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15).

* The middle of verse 20 can be translated either as "vinegar poured on soda" or "vinegar poured on a wound". In the first case, it would then refer to the act of mixing an acid with an alkali, which would render both useless; in the second case, it would emphasize the unnecessary pain caused by the action.

These and the remaining admonitions in this section - such as the memorable reminder to be kind to our enemies in verses 21-22 (quoted in Romans 12:20) - keep coming back to God's desire for us to love others as ourselves. Self-control, like so many other aspects of healthy relationships, comes much more easily when we love others. "Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:10).

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What general principles does Proverbs give us for dealing with powerful persons in this world? Does it matter whether such persons are honest or dishonest? How do patience, trustworthiness, and self-control affect those around us? Are these qualities important in all of our relationships?

Some Familiar Acquaintances (Proverbs 26)

We have often met the fool and the sluggard in our study of Proverbs. Whether we like it or not, one or the other of them will typify many of the persons whom we meet in this life. To gain an understanding of fools and sluggards helps us to deal with them more constructively, while also helping us to avoid becoming too much like them.

Dealing with those who are "wise in their own eyes" is a common, and often frustrating, aspect of life on our planet (26:1-12). There is no perfect method for this - in fact, Proverbs openly tells us that such persons sometimes pose an unavoidable dilemma (verses 4-5). If we 'answer a fool according to his folly' - that is, answer his opinions point-by-point, or perhaps allow him to churn up our emotions just as his are - then we become just as foolish, discrediting our own more reasoned beliefs or actions. Yet if we ignore his folly, resisting the temptation to correct his errors point-by-point, then the fool will retire with the belief that he has 'won' the encounter.

Enduring folly is thus rarely easy. But we are also given a sense of hope. For although the world does indeed honor and reward all kinds of fools, especially those who are 'wise in their own eyes' (verse 1); their disdain or opposition towards us is not always as harmful as we fear (verse 2). And the brusque, sometimes deliberately crude (as in verse 11) imagery in the rest of these verses reminds us of how much trouble a fool brings upon himself.

When we see the fool's spiritual bankruptcy for what it is, it is much easier to pity the fool instead of hating him. God persistently disciplines fools, in the hopes of instilling some common sense and an awareness of their responsibilities into them. Yet he will still love these fools whether or not they heed his wise advice - and he will love them just as much as he loves us.

Sluggards and other similar hazards of human society also present us with some dilemmas (26:13-19). The sluggard's excuses, inertia, and self-centeredness often tax our patience; yet he can also serve as a reminder for us to remain spiritually awake and diligent. Likewise, meddlers

(verse 17) and reckless deceivers* (verses 18-19) share some characteristics with the sluggard. The common theme is that of an unwillingness to accept basic personal responsibility - an essential spiritual quality that is, as we see so often in Proverbs, attainable for any believer.

* This verse is usually interpreted to refer to someone who deliberately misrepresents a dangerous or worrisome situation solely for the pleasure of instilling fear or confusion in others.

Another member of this same large but troublesome family is the gossip (26:20-28). Gossips are found in a much wider variety of habitats and demographic groups than we usually realize. For example, a great deal of what our society calls 'news' is in reality nothing but gossip, rumor, or opinion, very tantalizing in its appeal to the small-minded (verse 22) but largely irrelevant to our daily lives, and often spiritually toxic to those who absorb it.

Gossip by its nature produces mental idleness and intellectual decay, and in its worst forms it can produce active malice (verses 24-28). Delighting in the troubles of others - no matter who they are, no matter how strongly we think they 'deserve' their suffering - is an emphatic warning sign to any believer. "If a man digs a pit, he will fall into it" - malicious talk not only harms others, but is also an indulgence that is deadly to any meaningful relationship with God. If we ever find ourselves actively wishing for someone to suffer, it is a good idea to soften our hearts in any way we can - for example, we can pray to God to forgive both the 'sinner' and us.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What does it mean to be 'wise in one's own eyes'? Can we tell if this characterizes us? Is there a best way to deal with such a person? Does Proverbs teach us how to help sluggards, or just how not to be one? How are meddlers and deceivers similar to sluggards? How can we avoid spreading gossip and rumors?

Friends & Possessions (Proverbs 27)

God's blessings to us during our time on this earth will take a wide variety of forms - some are tangible and some intangible, some are permanent and some fleeting. In our interactions with others, we can either help one another to value all of these things more accurately, or else we can merely reinforce worldly perspectives on our possessions and blessings.

Proverbs often cautions us on how easy it is to squander our blessings (27:1-8). This can be as easy as speaking when we should be silent (especially boasting, verses 1-2) or being silent when we should speak (verse 5). This can also arise from impatience, either by stirring something up when we should be at peace (verse 3) or by restlessly seeking something new when we already have all that we need (verse 8). Blessings are also spoiled by deceiving ourselves or by deceiving others for the sake of appearances (verse 6*).

* The contrast in verse 6 is between a false friend who is skilled with flattery and a true friend who may not always speak sensitively, but who genuinely has our best interests at heart.

The antidote to many such disorders lies in knowing and appreciating what we have. Even a baby bird knows better than to leave a nest where it is loved and has what it needs (verse 8). Worldly society is not going to stop trying deliberately to make us dissatisfied with our lives, because too many influential persons have a strong self-interest in arousing our fleshly passions and desires. So it is up to us to recognize and appreciate the things of real value that we have.

Fortunately, we can do a number of things to help one another preserve our blessings (27:9-18). The Scriptures teach us the importance of mutual aid, both practically and spiritually (verses 9,

17-18). Jesus set an example by both meeting the needs of others and also calling them to a more spiritual perspective. The worldly (even amongst believers) view growth in terms of perfecting their earthly abilities and obtaining outward results, whereas Jesus focuses on sharing his grace, peace, and truth so that we all can draw closer to God's presence.

Jesus taught us not to wait to be told what to do, but actively to understand the needs of others, so that we can give them what they need (verses 9, 14). It is also wise to look ahead and think of the future (verse 12) instead of merely reacting to events as they take place. None of this takes special learning or talent, just the willingness to adjust our perspective from time to time. "Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment" (John 7:24). "He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth" (Isaiah 11:3-4).

Recognizing our blessings is, of course, necessary before we can appreciate them more fully (27:19-27). "A man's heart reflects the man" (verse 19), and our desires will eventually reflect what is in our hearts. One aspect of recognizing our true blessings is to learn to be satisfied with what we need, so that we can see everything else that God gives us as undeserved gifts for which we can be grateful, instead of resenting it when others have things that we do not.

Sadly, "Death and Destruction* are never satisfied, and neither are the eyes of man" (verse 20) - even believers often take the same attitude as the worldly, thinking that our good behavior somehow earns us extra worldly toys. And verse 22 reminds us that folly can only come out of the heart voluntarily - punishment or discipline cannot make someone wise. Though the wise benefit from discipline, a fool simply resents it.

* In Hebrews, "Sheol and Abaddon". See the notes on Proverbs 15:11.

The greatest blessings we have are not the earthly things that our flesh demands, but rather the things of lasting value that satisfy the soul. The agricultural imagery in verses 23-27 reminds us that the things that matter most are those that sustain life, with spiritual sustenance the most important of all. Even in earthly terms, wealth and power are worthless if we have no food and water. And spiritually, all of the world's prizes cannot compare with knowing God, having our sins forgiven through Jesus' grace, and having eternal security.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why do we often ignore our greatest blessings? Why do we sometimes damage them or lose them? What are the things that have the most value? Do we really believe that this is true? How can Proverbs help us to re-adjust our perspective? How can we help each other to do so?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 2013*

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THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM: STUDIES IN PROVERBS

Notes For Week Eleven: Spiritual Survival In A Fleshly World (Proverbs 28-29)

God made humanity in his own spiritual image, yet for a time he has placed each of us here on a perishable earth full of fallen souls. The inherent tension between our true nature and our present location sometimes leaves us with difficult choices, and living as God calls us to live sometimes necessitates earthly sacrifices. So it wise to develop a true faith in God's priorities.

A Sure Foundation (Proverbs 28:1-15)

It is easy to say that we trust in God, and all believers know that this is what we should do. But there is a big difference between a shallow trust in God that merely expects God to give us the things we desire, compared with a genuine faith that accepts and adopts God's spiritual priorities, even when they call for us to do things that the flesh would prefer not to do.

A true faith in God's Word brings a kind of peace that is not available to the faithless (28:1-9). The worldly often endure a vicious circle - lack of faith brings a lack of peace and contentment, which leads to sinful thoughts and actions, which can further erode someone's faithfulness and truthfulness. But a growing faith leads us to become more gracious, more honest, and more compassionate, which produce an inner peace that in turn can help faith continue to grow.

The kind of faith God seeks will also build confidence (verse 1*) - not the false confidence of the worldly but the true confidence of those who know that their real home is with God. Those who truly trust in God's values and perspectives are neither angered nor terrified by the world's distorted priorities. The faithful can live as they know God wills them to, yet remain gracious to those who don't. "Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe." (Philippians 2:14-15)

* Although 'bold' is used by most of the standard translations, the literal meaning of the word is closer to 'confident' - that is, the Hebrew text emphasizes an inner quality, not an outward one.

A genuine faith in God helps us not only to value justice, but also to understand what it really means (verse 5). The world's concept of 'justice' revolves around reward and punishment, while God's cares more about making everyone truly equal, giving everyone a fair chance. The world replaces God's laws with its own laws and rule (verses 4, 7, 9*), invariably written to protect the interests of those lucky enough to be able to write them (verses 2, 6, 8). Believers cannot change this; but we can be more compassionate to those whose needs would otherwise be ignored.

* The word translated 'law' in these verses is "torah", and it refers to God's law, not human-made laws.

A soft heart and an open mind will help us both to learn God's perspectives and also to continue learning even when we think we have a full knowledge of God (28:10-15). Our perspectives on wealth and poverty are one such example, because God's perspectives are often much different from those we are taught by the world. Our tendency to see wealth, fame, and power as signs of intelligence or even of God's approval is ridiculous (verses 11, 15) but widespread. Preconceptions like this lead to the weak and poor being ignored, patronized, and stigmatized.

Yet hard hearts and closed minds create deadly traps for the souls of the proud and stubborn, no matter how rich or powerful they are here. When the ungodly attempt to corrupt believers, we

are naturally distressed; yet they face the greater danger (verse 10). If we view everything only in terms of worldly advantage, then we shall be constantly upset (verse 12), because God never promises that the good things of this life will be fairly or consistently distributed.

But those who put their faith in God, and who humble themselves before God, have a security that cannot be purchased with this world's treasures (verse 14*). In this life, those who pretend to be flawless, and who blame their problems and mistakes on someone else, may often come out ahead in worldly terms - but if we truly believe that a relationship with the living God is more important, then we shall not envy them, for we know that we have greater treasure (verse 13).

* In the Hebrew text, the first part of verse 14 literally reads, "blessed is the person who always trembles". Some versions add 'before God' or change 'trembles' to 'fears God', since this seems to be the clear intent.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How does faith in God instill confidence? What kind of confidence does it give us? How does God's idea of justice differ from the world's? Why does it take faith to understand this? Why do we need a soft heart to understand God's teachings? Why do we need to have an open mind to learn them?

Truth, Grace, & Freedom (Proverbs 28:16-28)

If we measure our decisions in terms of worldly results or profit, then sooner or later we shall inevitably question God's wisdom. The deeper blessings like grace, spiritual security, and blamelessness can come only by believing and putting into practice the things that God has taught us in his Word - his perspectives, his priorities, and his compassion.

There has always been a link between truth and freedom (28:16-20): "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). God offers us freedom on a grander scale than the world does - freedom from being obligated by the world's fads and crises, freedom from being slaves to the cravings of our own flesh, freedom from worrying about what others think and do.

The tyrant (verse 16) and the murderer (verse 17), for example, may seem to be 'free' in a trivial worldly sense, in that they do as their flesh pleases without regard to the consequences. But such brutish behavior is actually a sign of insecurity and fear, not of confidence and strength. Such persons are enslaved to every whim of their own shallow minds and every impulsive urge of their undisciplined flesh, making them far from free in any meaningful sense.

A far more genuine form of freedom comes through contentment. The faithful (verse 20), the innocent (verse 18), and the responsible (verse 19) do not literally receive great wealth or extra sensual pleasures, yet their attitudes allow them fully to enjoy and appreciate the many blessings God does give them - blessings that others take for granted. This is part of what Jesus meant by "life to the full" (John 10:10). Freedom comes from being merciful, generous, and gracious.

In the long run, the rewards of fleshly folly are meager and pathetic (28:21-28). Verse 21 describes the tragedy of eroding our souls by using unethical or deceitful methods for the tiniest of gains. The false allure of greed (verses 22*, 27) arises from an inability to put material things in proper perspective, society's practice of putting a price tag on everything, and our own insecure impulse to compete in pointless ways (verse 25**) - all of which believers can resist.

* The text of verse 22 literally begins, "the person with an evil eye". Consider Matthew 6:23, Luke 11:34.

** The start of verse 25 has also been translated as "an arrogant (or proud) man" (e.g. NASB). The Hebrew literally says, "a wide soul", that is, someone with an exaggerated sense of his own importance.

Yet even materialism is only one of many ways in which we can outsmart ourselves. Whether in ministry, family, the workplace, or relationships, "he who trusts in himself is a fool" (verse 26); for none of us is capable, on our own, of knowing our true needs or of seeing through all of the world's hype and deception. And there is no need to resort to worldly wisdom or flattery (verse 23), because God has generously offered us all of the spiritual wisdom we could ever ask for. We just have to adjust our expectations and our values, replacing the fleshly with the spiritual.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What kind of freedom does God promise? How do faith, truth, and grace help us to find freedom? How does the world define freedom? Does it have anything in common with the freedom God offers? In what sense can believers be blameless? How do we outsmart ourselves? Can we avoid this?

Staying On The Path (Proverbs 29)

In this world, we are constantly tempted to give in to worldly perspectives and fleshly desires. And if we attempt to memorize a solution for every kind of problem or challenge that may arise, we shall soon become lost in rules and legalism. But by continually trusting in God's heart of grace and patience, we can we stay on the path of God's truth even when we face new problems.

Many of the temptations we face are obvious, but others are not so obvious at all (29:1-12). Most Christians accept the need to resist sensual temptations (verse 3), yet this can in turn become a source of the wrong kind of pride, one of many tests of humility that we shall face. We may well be able to move beyond this 'square zero' of spiritual wisdom and discipline, yet there will never be a time when we are free from sin.

So we shall always need to heed God's corrections (verse 1). This tests our honesty as well as our humility. Unethical behavior (verse 4*), flattery, and deceit (verse 5) may even help us compete with the worldly for their treasures, and these things often seem wise at the time, since the worldly will eagerly trade their secrets for a price. But even if we avoid the more crass forms of such behavior, we can still be tempted to use manipulation or similar techniques to obtain desired results in our 'ministries'.

* Literally, the Hebrew text of verse 4 refers to someone who asks for "contributions" - a euphemism that is all too appropriate today as well, both in secular affairs such as politics and in religious organizations.

Tests of our compassion occur just about every day. God understands that we cannot cure all the ills and injustices of our society, but he does ask us to care about those who suffer or who have little (verse 7). Once we develop a bit of genuine compassion, we can stop being resentful about giving up a little of what we have for the sake of others, and caring will become more natural.

Tests of our patience come in many forms, and many of them defy an easy solution. We shall constantly face fools who want to argue with us, and much of the time it is spiritually wiser to refrain from responding (verse 9), even if it lets the fool feel "wise in his own eyes" (26:5). The fool's divisiveness (verse 8) and anger (verse 11*) will also tempt us to respond 'according to his folly'. But the meager earthly rewards we may thus gain are usually not worth the damage to our souls. It can be very hard to show grace to fools, but just remember how badly they need it.

* The original text of verse 11 is slightly ambiguous, and some commentators see it as an assurance that the wise and righteous can control the fool's anger. But it fits the context better to emphasize that the wise can only control their own anger, and this is reflected in most of the standard translations.

A little humility improves our perspective on everyday issues, and a more spiritual perspective in turn leads to more humility (29:13-19). Despite differing appearances, earthly identities, and worldly positions, we all share a universal dependence on God's grace. "The Lord gives sight to the eyes of both (*i.e.* to poor and oppressor alike)" (verse 13) - that is, even the powerful of this world are completely dependent on God for their basic needs, even if they refuse to admit it.

Listening to God - as he speaks through his Word, through prayer, through others, through lessons in daily life - is how we develop such a perspective. It is made complicated not by God but by the worldly, who distort and exaggerate so many things, sometimes for selfish gain yet often simply out of confusion and fear. Before we can give them genuine help, we ourselves must learn spiritual discipline (verses 15, 17, 19) and seek God's perspectives (verse 18*). When God's teachings of grace, peace, and love conflict with the world's teachings or with the expediency of the moment, we must have the self-control to stay on the path.

* There are different viewpoints on the word the NIV translates as "revelation" and the NASB as "vision". But in all cases the verse simply emphasizes the wisdom that comes from God, rather than from the world.

God's gentle guidance will keep us on the path (29:20-27); "take my yoke upon you and learn from me ... for my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:29-30). Jesus' yoke is easy to bear when we trust him, not because we 'know' that he will always give us what we desire, but because we know he truly cares about us and about others as well. But "there is more hope for a fool" than for the impatient (verse 20), the proud (verse 23), or the wrathful (verse 22).

The snare of worshiping other humans (verses 25-26) lies behind many seemingly innocuous aspects of secular society, and the basic sin of idolatry leads to all kinds of other disorders such as division, envy, and hatred. Sadly, even believers will yearn for the favor* of the powerful or famous (verse 26) instead of loving everyone equally and trusting in the justice, truth, and peace that come from God. Note that two seemingly different sins - fawning over celebrities or authorities, and hating them - are just two different forms of worshiping individual humans.

* Verse 26 literally refers to seeking the 'face' of a ruler, implying the craving for favor, attention, and other such things. Compare this with verses such as Psalm 27:8 that talk about seeking the face of God.

The wise believer accepts once and for all that only God is the source of genuine justice, truth, understanding, and purpose in our lives. There is a fundamental contradiction between the world's wisdom and God's, and we should completely resist the viewpoints of the worldly (the figurative meaning of verse 27*) even as we give them as much love and grace as we can.

* There is a sad irony in this verse, in view of the ways that Solomon later allowed his physical attraction for idolatrous women to overcome his devotion to the truths of God (1 Kings 11). "What fellowship can light have with darkness?" (2 Corinthians 6:14). Solomon allowing his idolatrous wives to influence him is an example of what to avoid, while Jesus' willingness to eat with and talk to outcasts is a positive example.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Does God have a different 'path' for each of us? Do the worldly have a different 'path'? How are honesty, patience, humility, and compassion tested by daily events? How does humility build spiritual perspective, and vice versa? Why do even believers idolize humans? How can we learn to worship God alone?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 2013*

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THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM: STUDIES IN PROVERBS

Notes For Week Twelve: Spiritual Mysteries & Spiritual Treasure (Proverbs 30-31)

Although our present world is by nature physical and perishable, when it is observed through the proper perspective it can provide a great many spiritual insights. Even the most seemingly familiar aspects of life can reveal spiritual mysteries that broaden our awareness of God. This world also holds unexpected spiritual treasure that can deepen our appreciation of God.

Help For The Perplexed (Proverbs 30:1-14)

The last two chapters of Proverbs introduce some new authors with some new perspectives on topics that we've seen earlier in the book. This first passage addresses the common perplexity of someone looking for God in a world that often seems devoid of spirituality. These images and rhetorical devices are intended to illustrate the power and usefulness of simple spiritual truths.

By asking rhetorical questions like "what is his (God's) name?", the writer Agur* calls attention to the inherent difficulty that mortal beings have in seeking an eternal God (30:1-4). He emphasizes his own lack of understanding (verses 1-3)**, then steps back as if God were questioning a confused human (verse 4 parallels part of God's discourse in the climax of Job).

* Agur son of Jakeh, the author of chapter 30, is otherwise unknown in Scripture or in ancient history.

** The Hebrew text of the last part of verse 1 is subject to different interpretations, but it most likely expresses the writer's weariness, as in the NRSV and some editions of the NIV.

This gives us some important basic reminders. No matter how learned or 'religious' we are, many things about God will remain a mystery. We cannot control even our own lives, much less the lives and actions of others. So Agur describes both God's majesty over the physical universe and also his lordship over humanity ("what is ... the name of his son*?"), providing a counterweight to our fleshly tendency to rely on human will and human righteousness.

* Some early Christian commentators saw this as a reference to the Messiah Jesus, while most ancient Jewish commentators saw it as a reference to Moses and/or to faithful believers in general.

Then the writer poses a deceptively simple-looking request for the "two things I ask" (30:5-9). Knowing his human weakness, he does not promise anything to God, asking instead if he might be allowed to live without lies or falsehood, and to live with neither poverty nor riches. Both of these requests actually show a profound understanding of human nature.

Truth is a spiritual treasure, and avoiding falsehood - not only outright deceit but also hype, manipulation, flattery, misuse of God's Word, and the like - keeps us close to God. Instead of trying to determine how best to obtain desired results or gains, and consulting human experts on the subject, we do far better simply to accept God's priorities and to seek the truth from God. The spiritual benefits far outweigh the fleshly profits and excitement that we thereby give up.

Likewise, Agur's request to "give me neither poverty nor riches" shows that, in this respect, he is even wiser than Solomon. Those who have more than they need often begin to feel as if they have earned it or deserved it, and they often resent what they do not have rather than appreciating what they do have. Having too little can bring its own temptations - which is why Scripture so often tells us to look after the needs of the poor, and which is why Jesus so often used his

miraculous powers to remove suffering: "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me" (Matthew 11:5-6).

Throughout Scripture, we are urged to clean the inside first, rather than worrying so much about appearances and outward results (30:10-14). "The Word of God is living and active ... it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12-13); God is very well aware of how we truly feel towards others and of what we really desire. Many outwardly clean, 'religious' persons viciously judge others and care little about others' needs. God does not ask us to fix everyone's problems - just to accept others as our equals and to see their needs as equally important to ours.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does the writer speak at first as if he were confused about God? Are there things we should be uncertain about? What is the significance of the 'two things' he asks for? Should we ask for the same things?

Three Things & Four (Proverbs 30:15-33)

This new series of images further develops the theme of simple spiritual truths and their power. In each set of images, we see how a simple principle can show up in widely varied settings. The recurring 'three things ... four things*' pattern also invites us to find additional examples on our own, so that we can further develop our awareness of spiritual mystery and spiritual treasure.

* The point of this literary device is simply to call attention to the fact that there are many ways to illustrate a point of spiritual importance. There is no significance to the numerals three or four, and in all cases the implication is that many more examples could be added. Compare Proverbs 6:16-19 and Job 5:19.

The "things that are never satisfied" are a caution to all of us (30:15-17). When we give in to our self-centered cravings, it is both comical (as in the preliminary example of the blood-sucking leech) and sobering (in that they are like death or fire). It is human nature to rationalize our desires or even to persuade ourselves that they are from God. But the wise believer will take caution anytime he or she starts a thought with, "I want ..."

A much more positive point is made with the things that are "too amazing* for me" (30:18-19). The flight of birds has been a mystery to humans for millennia, and the way that snakes move without limbs has also intrigued generations of thoughtful persons. The point of these images is to help us see that God's hand is everywhere - his wisdom and life-giving power are behind every living thing; his love is in the blessings that our relationships can bring to one another; and his creativity, not ours, is behind the things that humans themselves have made.

* The NIV uses "amazing", while most other standard translations use "wonderful". In this context "wonderful" is used literally, to mean 'full of wonder'.

Then there is a new contrast, with the 'unbearable' things (30:20-23*). The transition verse (before the usual 'three things ... four things' formula) contrasts between healthy relationships between the sections (at the end of verse 19) with the selfish corruption of them by the adulteress (verse 20). For every wonder that God gives us, humans have ways of distorting it and cheapening it - sadly, this applies to our material blessings, our relationships, even our ministries.

* Some translations, especially the NIV, soften the meaning of the Hebrew text and unintentionally make it less clear why these things are 'unbearable'. The situations themselves are not the problem - it is the attitudes that are 'unbearable': a servant who thinks he deserves to be king, a wrongdoer reveling in his appetites, a quarrelsome and demanding wife ('unloved' is not strong enough), and a scheming maidservant.

Then it is back to the sublime, with examples of creatures that are small but wise (30:24-28). These four examples from nature - as well as countless others that could be added - both teach us and humble us, by reminding us not to focus so much on outward appearances.

Tiny ants are extraordinarily strong for their size. The vulnerable rock badger (or coney) has no natural defenses against predators, but it is an expert at concealment and escape. Locusts are fearfully efficient eaters, yet they have no officers and no leaders - they simply work together by nature. And a small lizard (probably a gecko*) can easily be caught with bare hands, yet it can slip into places (like a king's palace) in which most of us will never be allowed.

* Some older translations and commentaries interpret the Hebrew word to mean 'spider', but it is much more likely to mean a gecko or else a similar variety of lizard.

The section closes with images of stately strides, encouraging us to walk with God assured of his care for us, yet not reliant on our own powers (30:29-33). As the lion and the others here are confident for good reasons, we too can be genuinely confident when our confidence is in God's qualities, not our own. This is contrasted with those who 'play the fool' by exalting themselves, considering that their own righteousness or superiority entitles them to look down on others.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What effect is intended by the recurring 'three things ... four things' pattern? What specific lessons are taught in each set of images? Why are some of the images 'positive' and others 'negative'? What overall lessons can we learn?

A Mother's Advice (Proverbs 31:1-9)

In this short passage, a king recalls the godly advice his mother once gave him, advice that has stayed with him ever since. When he was young, the future king learned that he should always keep his responsibilities in mind, instead of his privileges. And, although his mother's advice on the subject was ambiguous, he also learned to be conscious of the needs of society's outcasts.

Although King Lemuel* discusses the responsibilities of kings, his thoughts give all of us something to think about (30:1-5). We all have responsibilities that affect others, and we all in some small way have areas of authority, or at least influence, that we can either use or misuse. Lemuel's mother taught him the importance of self-control - a king can either exploit his position for his own pleasure or profit, or else he can use it soberly and honestly to benefit others.

* King Lemuel (like Agur, above) is not otherwise mentioned in the Bible, and he was apparently a foreign ruler. Some commentators are uncomfortable with this, and try to identify him somehow with Solomon or someone else in Scripture. But there is neither a necessity nor a reason to do this.

All of us, not only kings, must frequently choose between self-control and self-indulgence. Even church leaders must constantly discipline themselves to meet others' needs instead of pushing their own agendas and programs. Family members can use their awareness of each other's needs and weaknesses either to exploit and manipulate one another, or to serve and love each other.

The king's mother also exhorted him to care for the less fortunate (30:6-9). Few leaders do this even in our 'democratic' society, since they face too many temptations and rationalizations to use their power to serve the powerful. The suggestion in verses 6-7 is ambiguous: is she telling her son that, if he cannot help the needy in some better way, at least to give them alcohol (or some other anodyne) to ease their pain, or is she satirizing the way that so-called leaders patronize the less fortunate by pretending to help them but in reality keeping them in a state of dependency?

Yet even if her 'suggestion' is ambiguous, her statement about the responsibility of leaders is very clear - speak for those who cannot speak, look out for the destitute*, and show absolutely no favoritism. And here again her guidance is wise for us to follow as well. Following these basic ideas would resolve a large number of the world's (and the church's) acrimonious debates.

* Literally, "sons of change" - those who are vulnerable, desperate, insecure, or fearful.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Does it matter that we do not know who King Lemuel is? How can his advice guide all of us, not just 'leaders'? Is there anything of particular importance to 'leaders'? Is there an overall theme to his mother's wisdom?

Laughing At The Days To Come (Proverbs 31:10-31)

This famous depiction of the "wife of noble character" has two significant dimensions. On a literal level, it reminds us to appreciate the many things that others, especially mothers and other family members, do for us without receiving any recognition or credit. And as we appreciate her (and perhaps re-evaluate some preconceptions), she also provides a broader spiritual example.

The anonymously written passage* celebrates the ways that this woman's life brings good, not harm, into the lives of others (31:10-16). She focuses on meeting needs around her, and she is ready and willing to take the responsibility that comes with making decisions. The passage describes a wide range of activities, from securing food** to making investments. When she sees a need, she determines how to meet it and then does what is necessary to fill it.

* The last two passages were placed in a different order in the Septuagint (the Greek-language OT). The last 22 verses are an "acrostic", each verse starting with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in order.

** The imagery in verse 15 is more vivid in Hebrew than it is in most English translations. It literally refers to her getting 'prey' for her family, suggesting the image of a lioness on the hunt.

This woman is devoted to service, not limiting herself to the needs in her own home (31:17-24). She indeed provides "vigorously" for her family, both in domestic ways and by making wise financial decisions. She also makes it a point to care for the poor and needy whenever possible, providing an example that it is possible to do this while still having, "no fear for her household".

And so the 'wife of noble character' is also an example of things with lasting value (31:25-31). Her wisdom and confidence teach us to appreciate the role conventionally played by mothers, grandmothers, and other women - while also calling us not to place boundaries on what they can do. On a spiritual level, her example is a general reminder to appreciate the things that last, rather than identifying women or anyone else by outward appearance or other shallow criteria.

Proverbs began by introducing us to 'Lady Wisdom', and it concludes with a description of her children and the way that they live their lives. As the opening imagery reminded us that God freely offers his wisdom and perspective to all who are willing to humble themselves, so now the closing passage reminds us of the wisdom and importance of living lives of simple self-control and genuine concern for our fellow humans.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What is the general significance of the 'wife of noble character'? What practical lessons does she give us? Is it significant that she is female? How can she serve as a more general spiritual example to everyone?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 2013

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