

**A Brief Introduction
to the
The Book of Proverbs**

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Introduction

Proverbs is the first book of the Bible to name its author at the very beginning. The very first verse of the book states, "The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel"¹

Proverbs is a very practical book. The problems and issues of life, youth, middle-age and old-age, are addressed, as well as giving clear directions for parenting. There are 31 chapters in the book which means we can read one chapter a day per month as an excellent addition to our daily quiet time. Most of those who have consistently practised this as part of their devotional time would say that it enhanced their time with God and improved their Christian lives.²

While the Book of Proverbs is wisdom for all age groups, in many places it is specifically directed to youth. It deals with the problems of youth and speaks to everyday situations found in school, at home, in communities, and other situations. It deals with real issues and no one will ever outgrow the need for this kind of plain-spoken wisdom, relating to day-to-day life.

Of course, proverbs are also found exist outside the Bible, In fact, proverbs may well exist in every culture and Canada is no exception. We have many proverbs. Here are just a few examples:

"First things first."

"A stitch in time saves nine."

"Don't cry over spilled milk."

"Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater."

"Hind sight is 20/20."

"People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones."

"Don't put all your eggs in one basket."

1. Definition of a Proverb

A proverb is a short sentence conveying moral truth in a concise and pointed form. According to one dictionary, a proverb is, "a short popular saying...that expresses effectively some commonplace truth or useful thought."³ C. Hassell Bullock says,

In its basic form, the proverb is an ancient saying that takes wisdom and endows it with youthful vigor. In a few [stimulating] phrases the proverb capsulizes a practical idea or truth in such a way as to lift the commonplace to a new level of mental consciousness. It reweaves the threadbare idea and shows the ordinary to be quite extraordinary.⁴

¹ Unless otherwise noted all Scripture references are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

² Some have also included the Psalms in their daily reading. By reading one chapter of Proverbs and five Psalms per day, one can easily read through both books every month.

³ From dictionary.com.

⁴ C. Hassell Bullock. *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1988), 146.

W. A. L. Elmslie perceptively called proverbs “compressed experience.”⁵ Benjamin Galan states, “Proverbs are short, memorable sayings that generalize on human experience to communicate an experiential truth.”⁶

2. Characteristics of Proverbs

One characteristic of a proverb is that it is usually brief, which means it is to the point, short, and clear. Most of the proverbs are only two lines long:

“One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor,
but the way of the wicked leads them astray.” (Proverbs 12:26)

A proverb does not argue. It simply states a concept. It assumes certain things and states them very plainly. Its purpose is not to offer an explanation, but to directly and precisely express a truth. It assumes truth, “it catches our interest and burns itself upon our memory.”⁷ In other words, it attracts attention.

As a preacher, I am a little uncomfortable in admitting that the book of Proverbs demonstrates the fine art of the unsaid. Most people appear to believe that great ideas require many words to communicate. However, Proverbs proves this wrong. Robert Deffinbaugh says, “If a picture is worth a thousand words, so is a proverb.”⁸

The ability to speak big truths in few words is one of the marks of wisdom. It is the fool who wants to speak his whole mind, while the wise never tells all that he knows:

“A prudent man conceals knowledge, but the heart of fools proclaims folly.” (Prov. 12:23)

“The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.” (Proverbs 15:28)

“A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.” (Prov. 18:2)

The wise are marked by an economy of words, while the fool blurts out everything that is on his mind. Proverbs demonstrates this economy of words.

A proverb does not argue. It simply states a concept. It assumes certain things and states them very plainly. Its purpose is not to offer an explanation, but to directly and precisely express a truth.

⁵ W. A. L. Elmslie, *Studies in Life from Jewish Proverbs* (London: Clarke, 1917), 16. Quoted in *ibid*, 146.

⁶ Benjamin Galan, *Proverbs: Biblical Wisdom for Today* (Torrance: Rose Publishing, 2010), 1.

⁷ Robert H. Adam, *Hebrew Poetical Books (Course)*, Briercrest Bible College, 1988.

⁸ Robert L. Deffinbaugh, *The Way of the Wise* [document online]; available from <https://bible.org/series/way-wise-studies-book-proverbs>, 10.

It assumes truth, “it catches our interest and burns itself upon our memory.”⁹ In other words, it attracts attention.

Though most Proverbs contain relatively few words, those words are well chosen. McKane comments,

The wise man is the master of compressed, polished, [concise] utterance; he gathers his thoughts into memorable forms of expression. The function of the Proverb is to illumine, and not to present a barrier to intelligibility.¹⁰

Many of the Proverbs contain a note of humour. An example is when the sluggard convinces himself that he cannot go to work because “...There is a lion in the road!...” (Prov. 26:13). It is not easy to forget the graphic description of the beautiful woman without discretion who is, “Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout...” (Proverbs 11:22)

The Proverbs remind us that an idea worth communicating is worth communicating clearly and distinctly:

“The wise of heart is called discerning, and sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness...The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious and adds persuasiveness to his lips.” (Proverbs 16:21, 23)

Those who would like to communicate wisdom by means of a proverb will make their message “short and sweet.”

There are some Proverbs that at first seem puzzling or confusing. Many Christians are confused by the apparent contradiction in these two Proverbs:

“Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.” (Proverbs 26:4-5)

It is not coincidence that these two Proverbs are found side by side. The apparent contradiction is intentional. It requires us to reflect on those verses much more seriously than we might otherwise. This “confusion” and mystery stimulate us to go the extra mile in our study.

Someone has said that the book of Proverbs is to other forms of literature what radio is to television. Television gives us both verbal and visual data, “but it does all the work *for us*” (emphasis added).¹¹ We grow more and more passive as we watch TV. Reading Proverbs is like listening to old-time radio dramas. We are not given every detail of the story as we might like, but what we are given raises both our interest and our imagination. Our mind is actively engaged as we read. We want to understand what is being said. All of this is part of the genius of the proverb.

The proverb is a form of Hebrew poetry but is vastly different from the poetry we read today. While our poetry is often organized around rhyming words, Hebrew poetry is based on the

⁹ Robert H. Adam, Hebrew Poetical Books (Course), Briercrest Bible College, 1988.

¹⁰ William McKane, *Proverbs* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 267.

¹¹ Deffinbaugh, 11.

similarity of thoughts arranged in parallel statements. These are called parallelisms. Several types of parallelism are common in Proverbs and our study will be improved if we understand at least a few of the types of parallelism found in the Proverbs.¹²

- a. Contrast – when the author contrasts a line with its corresponding line.

Proverbs 10:4:

“A slack hand causes poverty,
but the hand of the diligent makes rich.”

- b. Comparison – a comparison is made between two lines.

Proverbs 10:26:

“Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes,
so is the sluggard to those who send him.”

- c. Continuation – each successive line presents a progression in thought.

Proverbs 22:17:

“Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise,
and apply your heart to my knowledge”

- d. Specific – each line adds more specific details to the first line.

Proverbs 4:1:

“Hear, O sons, a father’s instruction,
and be attentive, that you may gain insight”

- e. Intensification – the second line rephrases the first line in a more assertive or intense, even extreme, way.

Proverbs 30:18–19:

“Three things are too wonderful for me;
four I do not understand:
the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a serpent on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a virgin.”

The emphasis in intensification is usually on the last identified item. In the above example, this would be “the way of a man with a virgin.”

¹² Robert V. McCabe, *Interpreting Proverbs* [document online]; available from <http://www.oldtestamentstudies.org/my-papers/other-papers/wisdom-literature/interpreting-proverbs>.

3. Nature and Theme of Proverbs

The book of Proverbs is first and foremost a book of wisdom. It is one of three books of wisdom literature in the Bible. The other two are Job and Ecclesiastes.¹³

In the book of Ecclesiastes the royal preacher – Solomon – tells the story of his futile search for happiness under the sun. He reaches the conclusion that all is vanity. In Proverbs he teaches us how to avoid the path of wrong living that he himself followed.

The theme of Proverbs is found in Proverbs 1:7: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” Proverbs 9:10 reinforces this, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.” Clearly the theme of the book is walking and living in the fear of the Lord.

4. Authorship and Date

The first collection of proverbs are found in the first nine chapters. The author of the first collection is “Solomon, the son of David, King of Israel” (1:1). In 10:1 there is another introduction (“The proverbs of Solomon.”) which appears to begin a second collection. The final collection which begins in 25:1 says, “These also are proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, copied.” In other words, these proverbs, which Solomon wrote, were collected and published during the reign of King Hezekiah approximately 283 years later.

Solomon wrote far more proverbs than what are preserved in the book of Proverbs. We see this clearly stated in 1 Kings 4:29-33:

“And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol, and his fame was in all the surrounding nations. He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish.”

Solomon was well-qualified to teach about wisdom as seen in his prayer in 1 Kings 3:7-9:

“...Solomon said, “...O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?””

God was so pleased with Solomon’s prayer that He answered, “I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you...” (1 Kings 3:12). As a result, “...Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt.” (1Kings 4:30) and “...people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon...” (1Kings 4:34).

¹³ However, some classify it as one of the five books of poetry along with Job, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, and Song of Songs.

Solomon is almost universally acknowledged as the author of the large majority of Proverbs. However, opinions do vary on how many other writers contributed to the book, Max Anders says there are three sections that are not authored by Solomon:

...the Sayings of the Wise in Proverbs 22:17-24:34, Proverbs 30, and Proverbs 31. He may have collected and compiled the Sayings of the Wise, but it is generally agreed that he did not write them. We do not know who wrote them, nor do we know anything about the authors of Proverbs 30-31. They are attributed to Agur and Lemuel, but we do not know who they are.¹⁴

Donald K. Berry suggests, there are at least five authors: Solomon (chapters 1-9; 10:1-22:16; and 25-29), "words of the wise" (chapters 22:17-24:22); "sayings of the wise" (chapter 24:23-34); Agur (chapter 30); and Lemuel (chapter 31).¹⁵

However, others propose there are only three authors – Solomon, Agur, and Lemuel. C. Hassell Bullock says, "It is our opinion that 1:1–29:27 is Solomonic in authorship, although some allowance may be made for editorializing in the process of compilation and final edition of the book. The authors of 30:1–33 and 31:1–9, although known by name, are otherwise unknown."¹⁶ I concur with Bullock and others that Solomon, Agur, and Lemuel comprise the authors of Proverbs.

Proverbs was probably written somewhere between 970 and 931 B.C.. Since Solomon wrote most of Proverbs, they clearly would have to have been written during his lifetime.

5. The Object of Proverbs

The first object of Proverbs is to instruct the believer in the basic principles of life, to help them avoid wickedness and evil and instead live in righteousness and peace. The Proverbs focus on living a practical life and the Psalms on the devotional life. In the Psalms the Christian is on his knees. In the Proverbs the Christian is on his feet, walking, living, doing, working, being. Believers are to live in a way that is practical to life. The godly life is a practical life because it is going to be seen in practice.

Wisdom and folly are presented as opposites in the book of Proverbs. Walk in wisdom, not in the ways of the foolish. Wisdom as seen in Proverbs is God-centred, not man-centred. The practical life is seen when we wisely and intelligently centre our lives in God's world and in submission to His will. Lewis Timberlake says, "Wisdom is not high IQ. It is the best use of knowledge."¹⁷ Biblical wisdom is knowing, understanding and living out the Word of God.

¹⁴ Max Anders. *Proverbs (Holman Old Testament Commentary)* (Kindle Edition). (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2005), location 310.

¹⁵ Donald K. Berry. *An Introduction to Wisdom and Poetry of the Old Testament* (Digital Edition). (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1995), 222-223.

¹⁶ Bullock, 171.

¹⁷ Source unknown.

6. Topical Studies of Proverbs

One of the most meaningful ways to study Proverbs is to look at some of the subjects or topics which are addressed in the book. One chooses a certain topic and reads through the book to find those verses which deal with that topic.

Verses may deal with the topic directly or indirectly. Some verses will deal with the positive aspects of the topic, others with the negative. We will consider only two of many possible topics for study.

a. The Fool

Proverbs lays before us a choice of two paths, and only two paths, we can walk in this life. There are two calls given by two women who have two houses. Each calls us to walk one of two paths, which lead inevitably to one of two destinies (Proverbs 7:27; 8:35, 36). Over seventy times in Proverbs, we are brought to this fork in the road and told to choose which path we will travel. One path is variously labelled as the way of the evil, wicked, angry, perverse, treacherous, sluggard, devious, and violent. Ultimately, it ends in death (Proverbs 1:19; 7:27; 14:12; 16:25).

The other is the way of righteousness, justice, understanding, and blamelessness. Ultimately, it issues in life (Proverbs 6:23; 8:35; 12:28; 16:17). This is the way of the Lord (Proverbs 10:29).

John Kitchen eloquently states, "If wisdom is a diamond set forth in multifaceted splendor, folly is a descending staircase, leading to ever deeper levels of grim futility, frustration, and finality (Proverbs 5:5)."¹⁸

As we will see in our study of the fool, his/her basic problem is that they stands alone. They believe they do not need anyone or anything and they recognize no other authority.

i. The Fool Defined

Proverbs 28:26 defines a fool this way, "Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom will be delivered." In other words, the person who lives life on his or her own terms and does his or her own thing, while rejecting what is found in God's Word. They trust their heart.

ii. What a Fool Believes

Two references are good examples. Proverbs 12:15 – "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice." and Proverbs 14:12 – "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death." How sad! The fool goes his/her own way and He demands their own rights, but these choices will result in tragedy, sadness and emptiness.

¹⁸ John A. Kitchen. *Proverbs (Mentor Commentary)* (Bercker: Christian Focus, 2006), 731.

iii. The Actions of a Fool

A fool is known by his/her actions. First, fools are unteachable. "...fools despise wisdom and instruction." (Proverbs 1:7). "A fool despises his father's instruction, but whoever heeds reproof is prudent." (Proverbs 15:5). They despise godly knowledge. "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?" (Proverbs 1:22). Fools avoid, even reject, the ways and knowledge of God. They have no desire to learn God's way.

Fools mock sin. Proverbs 14:9 says, "Fools mock at sin, But among the upright there is good will." (NASB) They laugh sin off, joke about it, justify it, excuse it, and rationalize it.

It is no surprise that fools speak foolishness. Proverbs 12:23 says, "A prudent man conceals knowledge, but the heart of fools proclaims folly." Proverbs 15:2 goes on to say, "The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouths of fools pour out folly." how do we know if a person is wise or foolish? Just listen to them for awhile.

Fools delight in trouble and even wickedness. "Doing wrong is like a joke to a fool, but wisdom is pleasure to a man of understanding." (Proverbs 10:23) Today we sometimes use the word mischievous to describe harmless fun, as in practical jokes. But in Proverbs it is seen as wickedness. A fool jokes about doing wrong.

iv. How to Treat a Fool

How should one seeking wisdom treat a fool? Proverbs gives us specific counsel. First, one should avoid the fool. Proverbs 9:6 says, "Leave your simple ways, and live, and walk in the way of insight." This does not mean to completely detach yourself from a fool, but rather avoid this person having significant impact in our lives. Proverbs 14:7 states, "Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not meet words of knowledge." Life is too short to spend time in empty, meaningless, even potentially harmful relationships. The goal of believers is to grow in wisdom and make this life count. As Proverbs 13:20 warns, "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm."

Second, do not try to reason with the fool. Proverbs 23:9 advises, "Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, for he will despise the good sense of your words." Compare this with Proverbs 16:22, "Good sense is a fountain of life to him who has it, but the instruction of fools is folly." Notice what appears to be a contradiction in Proverbs 26:4-5: "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes."

These verses might be considered contradictory if they weren't qualified by the accompanying phrases. We *should* answer a fool according to his folly if not doing so will leave him "wise in his own eyes" (v. 5). However, we should not answer him according to his folly if we will "be like him [ourselves]." (v.4) if we do so. In other words, it depends on the circumstances. Sometimes we should and sometimes we should not answer a fool. The wise person will know the difference.¹⁹

¹⁹ Norman Geisler and Ronald M. Brooks. *When Skeptics Ask*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 1990), 179.

v. A Fool's Destiny

Fools will experience disgrace, shame, and dishonour. Proverbs 3:35 makes this clear, "The wise will inherit honor, but fools get disgrace." Fools will be punished. Several verses in Proverbs expand on this. Proverbs 10:8-10 states, "The wise of heart will receive commandments, but a babbling fool will come to ruin. Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but he who makes his ways crooked will be found out. Whoever winks the eye causes trouble, but a babbling fool will come to ruin." Proverbs 19:29 says, "Condemnation is ready for scoffers, and beating for the backs of fools."

Finally, to complete this short study on foolishness and fools, consider Proverbs 8:5, "O simple ones, learn prudence; O fools, learn sense." Fools are exhorted to turn from their foolish ways, to stop being foolish, and to seek wisdom.

b. The Tongue

All of us at some point in time have experienced the shame, guilt and grief of an uncontrolled tongue. The tongue is such a small part of the body and yet it is capable of destroying our very soul. Scripture recognizes this is a problem and Proverbs addresses it repeatedly through the book. For example, Proverbs 18:21 says, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue...." Proverbs 18:7, "A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul."

i. Taming the Tongue Begins in the Heart

Throughout Proverbs Solomon points out that the tongue and the heart are inseparable when it comes to controlling the tongue. "He who loves purity of heart, and whose speech is gracious...." (Proverbs 22:11) is a reference to the "hand-in-glove" relationship between the heart and the tongue. Proverbs 10:20 says, "The tongue of the righteous is choice silver; the heart of the wicked is of little worth" making it clear that what is in the heart is revealed through our words. This relationship is seen again in Proverbs 16:23, "The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious and adds persuasiveness to his lips."

What wisdom does Solomon provide when it comes to taming the tongue? First, fear the Lord. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight." (Proverbs 9:10). Second, hate evil. "The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil...perverted speech I hate." (Proverbs 8:13) and "for my mouth will utter truth; wickedness is an abomination to my lips." (Proverbs 8:7). Proverbs makes it clear that the arrogant mouth and unclean speech are evil and the wise person avoids them. "Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you." (Proverbs 4:24)

Third, Solomon exhorts us to be humble, because "When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom." (Proverbs 11:2) A humble person is one who seeks growth mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. They love knowledge. They follow the words of Proverbs 3:7, "Be not wise in your own eyes..." Not only does a humble person speak knowledge (20:15), but they seek it (15:14), praise it (15:2), promote it (16:23), and listen and accept it (10:8).

ii. Taming the Tongue in Our Actions

Once we learn that controlling the tongue is rooted in the heart, we can begin to put it into action in our lives. The book of Proverbs reveals six positive actions we can take and compares them to six negative actions.

The first choice we make to begin our quest to tame the tongue is silence versus “noise.” One author wrote, “I have often regretted my speech, seldom my silence.”²⁰ Proverbs says, “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.” (10:19). “Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.” (17:28) It is not enough to simply control *what* we say, but also *how much* we say. “Whoever restrains his words has knowledge...” (17:27), but “he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.” (13:3) “so avoid a man who talks too much.” (20:19, NIV)

Second, build a character of discernment rather than one that lacks awareness. “On the lips of him who has understanding, wisdom is found, but a rod is for the back of him who lacks sense.” (10:13) A person who lacks sound judgment tends to be careless and thoughtless with their words. “Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent.” (11:12) A discerning person, on the other hand, takes the time to think about life and where they are going (14:8). They carefully consider their answers before they speak (15:28). A person who practices discernment not only knows *what* to say (“The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable...” [10:32]), but also *when* to say it (“A word fitly spoken...[25:11]).

The third life choice is that of patience versus impatience. “A patient man has great understanding...” (14:29, NIV) “and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.” (17:27). However, “[a] man of quick temper acts foolishly...” (14:17). Proverbs 29:22 tells us, “A man of wrath stirs up strife, and one given to anger causes much transgression.” An impatient person is a person who is not willing to listen and Proverbs 18:13 makes it clear that “If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.” At the same time he or she demands to be understood, but is not willing to understand others – “A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.” (18:2).

The fourth choice is that of being a peace maker versus a peace breaker. “It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling.” (20:3). Solomon teaches that it is wise to avoid conflict whenever possible. He says we are to give a “soft [gentle] answer” (15:1), “turn away wrath” (29:8), and “overlook an offense” (19:11). A wise person will do nothing to create conflict (16:19, 15:18, 16:28, 29:22). When conflict does arise, the patient person is able to calm it (15:18) and put an end to it (18:18). Once the conflict has been resolved we are careful not to speak in any way that would reignite it – “Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends.” (17:9).

The fifth wise life choice is truthful speech versus false speech. It is interesting that of the seven things the Lord “hates” (6:16-19), dishonest speech is mentioned twice – “a lying tongue” (6:17b) and a “false witness who breathes out lies” (6:19a). As believers we seek to always speak what is right (8:6), what is true (8:7) and what is righteous (8:8). We want to be a truthful witness (12:17), and always give an honest answer (24:26).

²⁰ Jo Petty, source unknown.

The sixth and final life choice is that of having a trustworthy tongue versus one that betrays. Proverbs 11:13 says, "A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret." (NIV)

iii. Blessings When We Learn to Tame the Tongue

When we begin to grow in the use and taming of our tongue, Solomon reveals we will experience God's blessings. First, we will receive the wisdom of the Lord, because "On the lips of him who has understanding, wisdom is found..."(10:13). The more we seek to speak in wisdom and control the tongue, the more wisdom the Lord will give: "(turn] your ear to wisdom and apply your heart to understanding...then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God...wisdom will enter your heart" (2:2,5,10, NIV).

Second, we will experience the protection of the Lord, "Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life..." (13:3) Throughout the book of Proverbs we read about the suffering of those who do not tame their tongues. They are trapped (12:13), will come to ruin (13:3), encounter trouble, conflict and struggle (18:6, 14:3), and finally death (Prov. 19:9). But "Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble." (21:23) and the "...the lips of the wise will preserve them." (14:3)

The third blessing is that of the peace of the Lord. When I speak of peace in this context I am referring to the inward comfort and contentment of words well spoken, i.e., a tongue that is or is being tamed. Three verses in Proverbs express that it is by "the fruit of [our] mouth" that we enjoy "good things" (12:14, 13:2, 18:20).

Finally, the fourth blessing we will receive is the joy of the Lord. "To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is!" (15:23). "The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life..." (10:11). The words of a tamed tongue: nourish (10:21), heal (12:18, 15:4), cheer (12:25) and comfort (16:24). This will bring the joy of the Lord.

Learning to tame the tongue is something everyone will have to deal with at one time or another as it holds within it the power of life or death (18:21). The wise words of Solomon reveal that we must begin with the proper inner attitude, progress to beginning to demonstrate a tamed tongue in our lives, which will result in eternal blessing.

Because Solomon shares this wisdom in God's Word, we are responsible to apply it. "Apply your heart to instruction and your ear to words of knowledge." (23:12). This is a call for Christians to dedicate our tongues to the keeping power of the Holy Spirit. At the same time we seek to avoid words that hurt, discourage, and destroy. When we apply Solomon's teaching on learning to control the tongue, we can become men and women of purpose. Our words, our actions, and our lives can be led by the wisdom of God.

7. Lessons from the Proverbs

There are several key lessons we learn in the book of Proverbs.

a. Proverbs Reminds Us of the Universal Need for Wisdom.

There are really only two kinds of people seen in Proverbs – the wise and the fool. The wise person is following God's ways and will. The fool is not. There is no middle ground. You are on one side or you are in the other. The message of the Bible is that there are two kinds of people

in the world – those who are God's people and those who are not God's people. Believers may do foolish things at times, but in the book of Proverbs they are not portrayed as fools.

b. Proverbs Teaches us the Widespread Application of Wisdom.

We cannot read very far through the Proverbs before realizing that it deals with a great many subjects and a great many circumstances. There is a principle here – the Scriptures have something to say about every area of life. There is no distinction between the sacred and the secular. All true wisdom is God's wisdom.

This was a common message of the Old Testament prophets. The idea of a division between the sacred and the secular, between religious ceremony and practical righteousness is nothing new. They often warned Israel that religious ritual is meaningless when divorced from righteous living.

The New Testament gives us the same message. James tells us that true religion is not in your denominational affiliation or your doctrinal creed but in visiting orphans and widows in their distress and keeping oneself unstained by the world (James 1:27). Sometimes we get the idea that the Bible only tells us what we ought to do on Sunday but that the rest of the week is our own. The fact that wisdom speaks to every area of our life means that we must seek to apply the wisdom of the Scriptures to all areas of life.

c. Proverbs Teaches us that what is Good is also what is Right.

The world denies the existence of right and wrong and is only concerned with what feels good. The book of Proverbs corrects this kind of sloppy thinking.

d. Proverbs is not a Book of Promises, it is a Book of Principles.

Proverbs is not a book of laws, it is a book of lessons. You can take many of these principles and find exceptions to the rule. For example, you can probably think of cases where two godly Christian parents raised up a child in the way he should go and then when he was old he departed from the faith. Does that mean that the Proverbs are not true? No, but it does mean that Proverbs is a book of principles and not of promises.

e. While the Bible (including Proverbs) is all True, it Does Not Contain All Truth.

While it is true that other religious writings contain some truth, they are not all true. King Lemuel in Proverbs 31:1-5 was an Arab King. Yet he said some things that are true. There is a principle here – all truth is God's truth. This means that as Christian should be able to learn from others and that we should never be arrogant about our faith.

f. The Book of Proverbs Do Not Give Us a Rose-Coloured View of the World.

Proverbs present the world as a place where bad things really do happen. Tragedy strikes and trouble comes and Proverbs doesn't deny or minimize those things, but it does give us wisdom on how to deal with it.

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