

INTRODUCTION TO PROVERBS “THE RULES OF WISDOM”

When I was in eighth grade I took a class in algebra. Although I didn't know it at the time, I was introduced to the challenges of thinking abstractly. Algebra is usually the first domain in school that encourages a student's abstract thinking. In fact, modern algebra is sometimes called abstract algebra. After I became a Christian, I started reading the Bible. When I came to the Book of Proverbs I was over my head in abstract thinking. A proverb taps a person's ability to move from concrete to abstract thinking. For the most part The Book of Proverbs is symbolic. The individual proverbs are written in metaphors and similes. A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is directly applied to something else. A simile is a figure of speech that compares two otherwise dissimilar things, often introduced by the words like or as. You are “like” a breath of fresh air is a comparison by simile. A metaphor uses a word in place of another to suggest a likeness. You “are” a breath of fresh air. In the case of algebra, letters are used for numbers. In Proverbs, something is a representative or is symbolic of something else.

Understanding individual proverbs is challenging. The Book of Proverbs is in the wisdom section of the Bible, which is also referred to as the poetry section. Poetry, for the most part, is composed of abstract ideas. There are no concrete rules for poetry. Poetry is the absence of rules. However, the Book of Proverbs is a book of rules (principles). In Proverbs we have the rules of wisdom written in an abstract form without rules. Thus, we have rules for understanding and applying the wisdom of God written in a genre that has no rules. The Book of Proverbs is written to develop our thinking so we can grasp, retain, and apply the wisdom of God for our lives. Poetic structure helps do this. Poetry appeals to the emotions as well as thoughts. It appeals to curiosity which is helpful in seeking God's wisdom. Poetry also helps us remember truths, so we won't forget them.

Studying the Book of Proverbs is challenging. You can't significantly improve abstract thinking skills in a short period. It requires significant time, effort, and patience. That tends to discourage people from learning the rules of wisdom which God has placed in His Word. These rules are in the Bible to guide us in the spiritual and moral decisions of life. There is no book in the Bible that is more valuable in developing character and stabilizing the personality than Proverbs. I have been studying the Book of Proverbs since 1975 when I decided to begin reading it regularly. For several years I read through the whole book once a month. Now I read it three times a year, as I read the rest of the Bible through. Not only has the study of Proverbs helped me develop the ability to think abstractly, it has been significant in building my character. It also continues to help me in my growth and the understanding of what it means to be like Jesus. “But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God...” (1 Cor. 2:30).

The challenge is to understand what each proverb is saying. Then the challenge is to find out what each proverb means. Every proverb is a parable. One of the essential meanings of the word proverb is parable (James Strong). W. E. Vine states, “A parable denotes ‘a placing beside...’ It signifies ‘a placing of one thing beside another’ with a view to comparison... It is generally used of a somewhat lengthy utterance or narrative drawn from nature or human circumstances, the object of which is to set forth a spiritual lesson.” Vine goes on to say, “Two dangers are to be avoided in seeking to interpret the ‘parables’ in Scripture, that of ignoring the important features, and that of trying to make all the details mean something.” The proverbs are short parables. In my opinion commentators tend to ignore the first danger. They ignore the important features. This book focuses on the important features.

The book will look at every proverb as a mini-parable that contains one intended meaning by the author (Solomon). To get at the meaning of the abstract comparisons I have relied heavily on Strong's

Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible. Understanding the words in the original language brings each parable to life and helps in applying the proverbs to life. The root words and definitions of the Hebrew are most helpful in arriving at the meaning of what the author said. Once we know what Solomon said, it is easier to understand what he meant. It is only when we know what he meant, that we can know what we should do about each proverb.

Proverbs is a book of truth. When we talk about rules of wisdom, we are talking about principles of truth. Truth is a unity. Truth is as eternal as God. God has revealed eternal truth in the Bible and in His Son. One is the written Word of God; the other is the living Word of God. When Proverbs speaks of truth it uses terms like wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. They refer to different aspects of discovering truth. The Book of Proverbs is a cradle for truth – all truth. The truths of the Old and New Testaments connect in Proverbs, even though the New Testament had not been written. Proverbs is the nexus of Old and New Testament truth. It is the link between law and Grace, between Old Testament and New Testament justice, between God the Father and God the Son, between temporal and eternal punishment. Proverbs brings truth together in a practical book that was inspired for the purpose of linking us to God through truth. Chad Bird points out, “The wisdom literature, such as Proverbs, applies and expands the divine wisdom woven into the fabric of the laws of the Torah and exemplified in leaders such as Moses and Joshua.” He continues, “The Scriptures (are) a multilayered web of interconnections...Were the Bible hyperlinked, you’d be hard-pressed to hunt down a single verse without multiple words hyperlinked to other words, in other verses, in other books, in both testaments...The Scriptures are like a hyperlinked book.” The Book of Proverbs is the link to all revealed truth. In the Book of Proverbs Jesus is wisdom personified. Bird says, “The Hebrew word for wisdom, *chokmah*, is much more than intelligence. *Chokmah* is holistic because it involves a mind in tune with God’s word, hands engaged in good deeds, a mouth that speaks truth, a heart that leans on divine guidance. *Chokmah* is God’s gift whereby we image the wise Creator in thought, will, and action. In this sense, having wisdom is the means whereby we flourish in the life the Lord has bestowed on us.” Bird continues, “This higher heavenly wisdom, is far more than a divine quality or attribute. Not only is our Father wise; he has wisdom...I mean the Father begot wisdom, brought forth wisdom to be by his side, to work alongside him in creation, to teach humanity, and eventually to tabernacle with humanity. Like the word of Yahweh, the wisdom of Yahweh is a person. “The most fertile ground for this Christ-is-Wisdom” understanding is in Proverbs.” That is the wisdom of Proverbs in a nutshell.

Proverbs appeals to the whole human being. It is written to reach the mind, the emotions, the will, the intuition, and the conscience. Individual proverbs in the book are designed to instruct us to determine truth by paying attention to our senses and our intuition. The proverbs teach us to distinguish truth and detect error through the natural capacities built into our human nature. We are warned to watch and observe, to listen and hear, to pay attention to our instincts, and to believe the obvious. Those who do are prudent. Those who don’t are naïve. Add the Holy Spirit to our nature, and we have the ability to be “wise as serpents.” Oswald Chambers wrote, “We can change the world without when we change the recording instrument within...We only know the world by a nervous system, and we infer that everyone else knows it in the same way we do. The man who accepts things on the evidence of his senses is as wise as I am when I accept the revelation of the Bible. To accept the evidence of your senses is wise, but to say it is infallible is nonsense.” Chambers continues, “There is an intuitive certainty in everyone that there are some things that he ought not to do...The Bible says that a person is born with this knowledge, and that he will be judged according to his obedience to, or rejection of, the ordinance of God which is

written in his spirit.” He is quick to point out, however, “The individual exercise of conscience is never the Christian standard. The Christian standard is the personal relationship of the conscience in direct accord with God on the basis of the revelation given by Jesus Christ.” The Book of Proverbs is written to direct us to Christ.

The Book of Proverbs deals with a person’s attitude toward truth in a way that no other written revelation of God does. It instructs us and equips us to believe it, receive it, and defend it. It warns us against ignoring it, arguing against it, and turning away from it. Every proverb is a mini-parable dealing with a specific principle of truth. The principles are stated, explained, illustrated, and examined. By studying the proverbs and understanding their principles we can make the needed changes in our life to bring us to maturity and to establish a Christ-like character. If you master the Book of Proverbs you will master the Christian life, because you will become like Christ. Every proverb contains a seed of truth that is necessary for a victorious and balanced life in Christ. God bless you as you venture into this exciting examination of the rules of wisdom that will transform you into the likeness of your Savior.