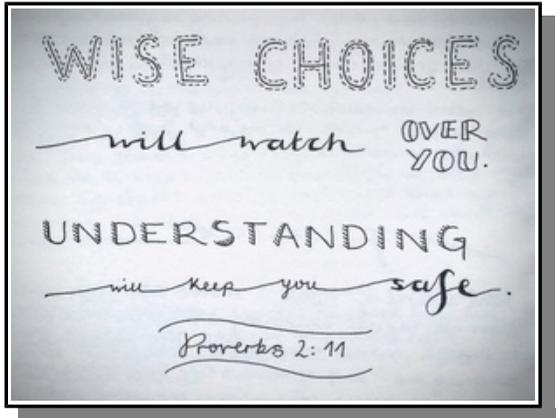


Understanding Proverbs

For most of the Sundays through this summer we will be spending time in the biblical book of Proverbs, digging into some biblical wisdom and hopefully learning some very practical stuff. As my introduction from last week failed to record, I thought I'd do a write up of some of what I said to give background to those that missed it, or as a refresher for those that were there.



We're all familiar with proverbs – English has a whole bunch of them: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do”, “Two wrongs don't make a right”, “People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones” and the like. All good stuff.

We all know how to deal with proverbs in our own language too. And we can cope with different ones like “Many hands make light work” without worrying why it seems to contradict “Too many cooks spoil the broth”. But when we encounter them in Scripture, we seem to lose our common sense and try to make them into something they're not – complete statements of truth.

Proverbs are not promises, or scientific explanations of the world of human behaviour. They're short, pithy sayings that communicate general advice through comparisons, exaggeration or graphic imagery. They look to teach truths about relationships and the way we ought to behave through vivid or memorable phrases rather than long explanations or wordy teaching.

Middle Eastern people loved proverbs and the Jews were no exception. So it's natural that God should speak to them in that form of literature too. The Hebrew word for proverb (“meshulah”) comes from a word that means “to be like” – so in Proverbs essentially we have a book of comparisons between common, concrete images and life's most profound truths. It covers a variety of forms – straight proverbs like we would have in English, parables, riddles and other comparisons. They all aim to bring teaching about the best way to live life, but in an indirect way that is easy to grasp.

We see then that biblical Proverbs are simple, moral statements (or illustrations) that highlight and teach fundamental realities about life. They're not especially

religious – the majority teach about moral behaviour and ethical values rather than religious thoughts as such. But they do show us that our religious belief must affect the way we live – it is our faith, our “fear of God” as we shall see later, that conditions how we live out our lives.

They are not intended to be legal water-tight guarantees, but statements of general truth that give us sound principles to live life by. The truth expressed in Proverbs is not like the law of gravity (“The person who jumps off a tall building will end life with a splat”). Many is the Christian parent who has despaired of themselves when reading Proverbs 22:6 – “Direct your children onto the right path, and when they are older, they will not leave it” – and presumed they must have done something very wrong if all their kids are not faithful Christians in later life.

As such, like our own proverbs, they are not to be taken too literally. Take “a stitch in time saves nine”, for example. How much time? Will it never save six? Or fifteen? Proverbs have to be read for what they are – not as if they were something else. To read them literally is a bit like taking a nursery rhyme and thinking it’s history. So which hill was it that Jack and Jill went up?!

Biblical proverbs are part of what is known as “wisdom literature” which was a very common form of teaching in the Near East at that time. There are a few other books in the Bible written in a similar way – Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, some psalms and the book of Job. Solomon and various others collated different expressions of wisdom in order to provide a collection of wise sayings to help people – especially young men – to make right decisions.

But just what do we mean by “wisdom”? The story is told of a young man who admired a very successful bank manager. One day, he decided to ask for the secret of the magnate’s success.

“Two words”, replied the manager. “Right decisions.”

“And how do I learn to take right decisions?” asked the young man.

“One word. Experience”, was the reply.

“And how do I get the necessary experience?” was the next question.

“Two words. Wrong decisions.”

Biblical wisdom is about learning through experience, both our own and that of others, and in the process acquiring the ability to take the best choices in life, to take right decisions about how we live. As Proverbs 2:11 says:

“Wise choices will watch over you. Understanding will keep you safe.”

The learning that we gain through the book of Proverbs gives us that understanding, helps us learn how to take those wise choices. The first chapter sums up the purpose of the book, to:

- *teach people wisdom and discipline*
- *help them understand the insights of the wise*
- *teach people to live disciplined and successful lives*
- *help them do what is right, just, and fair*
- *give insight to the simple*
- *knowledge and discernment to the young*

However, this isn't something that we just ask God for and that then floats down out of heaven into our minds. Rather, biblical wisdom is learned. It is a bit like an artisan learning their trade – it involves acquiring skill or ability, but in the area of moral behaviour and relationships. Wisdom in this sense, rather than something that God gives us instantly is more about understanding God's heart and character and becoming more like him in the way we see the world and interact with others.

Like almost any other skill in life, the book of Proverbs suggests that this ability comes from practice and intentional effort and is intended to guide us in that process. Look at what Proverbs chapter 2:1-4 says about this:

“My child, listen to what I say, and treasure my commands. Tune your ears to wisdom, and concentrate on understanding. Cry out for insight, and ask for understanding. Search for them as you would for silver; seek them like hidden treasures.”

Did you notice all those verbs? Listen, treasure, tune your ears, concentrate, cry out, ask, search, seek. That's how we're supposed to engage with the teaching in the book of Proverbs, a very active, dynamic searching, as if we were digging up our back garden to find a stash of gold coins we'd just learned was hidden there. Or as our teachers might have said to us, “Apply yourself” ...

All this comes with a very clear result though (Proverbs 2:5):

“Then you will understand what it means to fear the Lord, and you will gain knowledge of God.”

Then. Not before. Knowing God, and understanding what it means to fear the Lord, will be the fruit of that investment of time and energy.

Just a couple of other comments before we finish. Do make sure you read proverbs as a whole – very often they come in two halves, and the meaning is in both halves together – don’t try to separate them as if one half told the full story. You’ll often see that proverbs speak about wisdom and folly. A fool in Proverbs is not someone who is thick as two short planks – it has nothing to do with intellectual ability but is all about moral failure – someone who isn’t wise enough to take the right decisions.

In addition, the sayings in Proverbs are often addressed to young people, who are in the process of becoming wise. So some of them must be seen as help to take right decisions, not advice for those who have taken wrong ones! “Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife”, for example, is not giving domestic arrangements for henpecked husbands but telling young men to think carefully before committing to marry a girl whose womanly attractions have left them senseless!

Finally, a word about what “fearing God” means. It isn’t terror, being afraid of. That would push us away from God. It’s more about respect and reverence, taking God seriously, choosing to give him the regard he deserves and so to take him into account in the way we live out our lives.

And that is the “foundation of true knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7). So as we listen carefully to the teaching that the book of Proverbs brings, think on what it means for us and how to apply it in our lives, we grow closer to God and are better able to live as he intends. Sound good? Indeed! As we go through different themes week by week, let God give you insight into how to live out your life. As Proverbs 4:20-22 says:

“Pay attention to what I say. Listen carefully to my words. Don’t lose sight of them. Let them penetrate deep into your heart, for they bring life to those who find them, and healing to their whole body.”

Get wisdom!

