

**Proverbs:
Introduction—Wise Guys**

Sunday, January 17, 2010
Text: Matthew 23:34

Introduction

We are going begin today a study that I have long looked forward to—a study of the book of Proverbs.

Difficulty of Exposition

This is somewhat of an intimidating task because Proverbs is a rather good-sized book, and its contents virtually defy all attempts at organization.

I've mentioned before that we must learn to read the Bible as if the chapter and verse divisions were not there because they are often misleading—especially the verses, because the verses have a tendency to cause us to think that each verse is an independent thought with a life of its own. In most books of the Bible, this is not true (that a verse contains an independent thought); but in Proverbs it often is. In Proverbs we often find a complete, self-contained thought in a single verse. Proverbs is really one of the very few books of the Bible that actually lends itself to be divided into verses without creating a false conceptual framework for understanding it.

So the difficulty in explaining the book has to do to a large extent with its organization. Should we go verse-by-verse through the book, changing the theme as we move from one verse to the next, and re-visiting each theme several times over as we come to verses that deal

with it; or should we go theme-by-theme, drawing together at one time all the verses from the different parts of Proverbs that speak on a given subject, and then move on to the next theme?

Well actually we're going to do both. The early chapters lend themselves quite well to a more traditional kind of exposition, as particular themes are addressed in larger sections running through several verses. Beginning with chapter 10, however, we find that the themes often change from one verse to another, so when we get to chapter 10 we will try to gather all the different verses from the different parts of the book that speak on a given theme and consider those verses at the same time.

Outline

Since we are talking about the organization of the book, let me give you a brief outline. Textual clues within the book itself show that Proverbs can be readily divided into seven collections as follows:

- I. Proverbs of Solomon I (1:1-9:18) (read 1:1)
- II. Proverbs of Solomon II (10:1-22:16) (read 10:1)
- III. Thirty sayings of the wise (22:17-24:22) (read 22:17-21)
- IV. Further sayings of the wise (24:23-34) (read 24:23)
- V. Proverbs of Solomon III (25:1-29:27) (read 25:1)
- VI. The words of Agur son of Jakeh (30:1-33) (read 30:1)
- VII. The words of King Lemuel (31:1-31) (read 31:1)

Author(s)

We find three *named* authors: Solomon, Agur, and Lemuel. The "sayings of the wise" were probably composed by someone other than Solomon himself, but collected by him and appended to his own. I say

“someone”, but it was probably *several* some-ones. As Solomon interacted with other wise men or read other wisdom literature and came across something worthwhile, he must have included it in his work under the heading: “Sayings of the Wise”.

We have no idea who the final editor was. It may have been “the men of Hezekiah” mentioned in 25:1. Some scholars put the final form of the book later, in the Persian period (540-332 B.C.), or even the Hellenistic age (332-31 B.C.).

Genre

The first thing (perhaps) that one notices when reading Proverbs is that it is a poetic book. You can tell this simply from the layout of the text on the page. It doesn’t *look* like Genesis or Exodus or Acts—books that consist of historical narrative and are written in prose, with full sentences and regular paragraphs.

As with all poetry, there is in Proverbs a rather liberal use of imagery or figurative expressions. We find simile, metaphor, allegory, anthropomorphism, irony, hyperbole, personification, and quite a number of other figures of speech.

One of the chief characteristics of Hebrew (though not of English) poetry is a feature called *parallelism*. This is a structural feature in which there is a correspondence between the parts of successive lines.

Example:

A wise son makes a glad father,
but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother (10:1)

The correspondence is very easy to see in this verse.

A wise son makes a glad father,
but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother (10:1)

This is an instance of what is called *antithetical* parallelism, which is to say that the second line states the antithesis of the first—it states the opposite. In this case we have a wise son in the first line and a foolish one in the second; likewise, in the first line we have a glad father, and in the second a sorrowful mother.

Antithetical parallelisms often have the word “but” at the beginning of the second line.

We find a number of antithetical parallelisms that take the form A is “better” than B.

Better is a dinner of herbs where love is
than a fattened ox and hatred with it (15:17)

There are also *synonymous* parallelisms. This is when the thought of the second line restates the thought of the first in different words.

A false witness will not go unpunished,
and he who breathes out lies will not escape (19:5)

Synonymous parallelisms often have the word “and” at the beginning of the second line.

Another parallelism is called a *synthetic* parallelism. This is when the second line of the verse expands upon the meaning of the first line.

A scoffer **does not like to be reproved;**
he **will not go to the wise** (15:12)

In this verse, “will not go to the wise” expands upon “does not like to be reproved”.

Here’s another synthetic parallel:

Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the LORD;
be assured, he will not go unpunished (16:5)

“He will not go unpunished” expands upon the meaning of “[he] is an abomination to the LORD.”

What is a Proverb?

Perhaps we ought explain what a proverb *is*. “In English a proverb is a short, pithy saying that has *popular* currency.”¹

Examples:

A stitch in time saves nine
An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure
A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush
The early bird catches the worm
Look before you leap
He who hesitates is lost

Biblical proverbs, however, have “currency among those *who fear the LORD*... Were they popular with the masses, Wisdom would not have to

¹ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs* in NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), vol. 1, p. 56.

stand at the gate of the city pleading a hearing for her sayings (1:20-21; 8:1-3)."²

The Hebrew proverb has been explained as "a parable expressed in a brief pithy sentence." Its pithiness makes it memorable.

Who is the Book For?

As we will see more fully in another message, the book of Proverbs, while beneficial to everyone who reads it, is especially directed to young people (**1:1-6**).

What is the Book About?

Proverbs divides everyone into two categories: the wise and righteous, on the one hand, versus fools and the wicked on the other. We read a great deal about the wise and the righteous. Solomon (and the other authors) commend wisdom and righteousness, and show that they go together. Wisdom and righteousness are not the same thing, but they are correlative. The righteous man is a wise man; his wisdom is proved by his righteousness. Likewise, a man who pursues wisdom will find that he becomes more righteous.

Where does Wisdom come from?

Wisdom is shown (not only in Proverbs but in other places, too) to come from the Lord (see **Job 28:1-28**). The themes of this passage, as we will see, are also found in Proverbs. But the chief thing is that

² Ibid

wisdom consists in the fear of the Lord, we'll talk more about all that this entails at another time. For now, let us simply note that wisdom comes from the Lord.

But here is the sad thing: there is not much of a premium put on the pursuit of wisdom these days. Look out into the world. Where do you find *anyone* in pursuit of wisdom?

- Pursuit of pleasure? Yes, by all means.
- Pursuit of wealth? Absolutely.
- Pursuit of status? You betchya.
- Pursuit of success (usually measured in terms of wealth and status)? Yep.
- Pursuit of career advancement? That too.
- Pursuit of knowledge? Insofar as it serves as an aid to acquiring wealth and status and career advancement, check.

But the pursuit of wisdom? Not so much.

Proverbs 4:5-9

Our goal in this series is not simply to be able to define words and dissect sentences and learn technical information, nor even simply to memorize Proverbs, but to internalize them, and by internalizing them, to gain wisdom—to be able, when we encounter a situation in life, to say “this is like that...” This is like the Proverb that says... And then act accordingly.