

Discovery Hour
E 100, Week 9
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Today we will focus on the book of *Proverbs* from which we read two days this last week. *Proverbs* is a particular type of writing in the Bible, referred to as Wisdom Literature. This includes the book of *Ecclesiastes* and parts of *Job* and the book of *James* in the New Testament. Proverbs are concise statements which capture key insights about life in a memorable manner. Key features include this memorableness, the way they work with word pictures (one commentator calls the book of *Proverbs* the photo album of the Bible), their poetic form (particularly the use of metaphor and parallelism), and their focus on experience. There is an interesting twist on this last point, however, in that even as proverbs focus on concrete human experience, they also teach profound truths. This combination of simplicity and complexity is a hallmark. For example, “he who loves money will not be satisfied with money” is a profound statement based on a very understandable first premise (*Ecclesiastes* 5:10).

The book of *Proverbs* as a whole seems targeted and geared toward land owners and the ruling class and seems designed to support the training of leaders. They were collected over many decades and perhaps several centuries and likely compiled just prior to the exile in the early 6th century. The focus, obviously, is on wisdom which today and in the scriptures is conceived differently than knowledge. Generally, whereas knowledge relates to information; wisdom relates to skill in living. In fact, the Hebrew word for wisdom is used of the craftsman who were chosen to work on the tabernacle (Exodus 28:3; 36:1). More broadly then proverbs teach us how to live skillfully as the finite creation of an infinite God.

We find three basic types of proverbs: synonymous (where the second line restates the first to reinforce it); antithetical (where the second line expresses the opposite of the first); and synthetic (where the second and additional lines extend the idea in the first). In seeking to understand specific proverbs, the reader should look for these elements and then see where the emphasis is being placed. We should also keep in mind that no individual proverb captures the entire truth about a given topic. Rather, by design each focuses our attention on a particular aspect or angle on that topic.

Proverbs have limits. Their very literary form means that they overstate or oversimplify. They carry no fine print, no footnotes, no lists of exceptions. That is why we need so many of them. We need both ‘Haste makes waste’ and ‘He who hesitates is lost.’ Each is precisely true in certain situations; neither is true in every circumstance. Knowing when and where to use them is part of wisdom. ... [And] our fear of the Lord ought to place major restrictions on our self-confidence. We cannot use proverbs like subway tokens, guaranteed to open the turnstile every time. They are guidelines, not mechanical formulas. (David Hubbard, *The Communicators Commentary: Proverbs*, 25).

Another central idea in the book is central placement of the fear of the Lord: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; but fools despise wisdom and discipline” (1:7). This fear refers to the reverence, respect, and awe we are to have for God. It makes sense that this is the beginning of wisdom because when we rightly understand God in the fullness of his character, that is not only loving, merciful, and kind but also holy, infinite, all powerful, and just, the only appropriate response is to fall to our knees out of reverence, or fear. And, we cannot rightly understand the rest of our lives and this world without first understanding God and ourselves in relationship to him.

One good way to study proverbs is to take up a theme or topic and then find as many proverbs as you can on that topic. For example, we can find proverbs that speak to the theme of friendship and learn a good deal about it (13:20; 17:9; 18:24; 27:5,10). In reading these together as a set, we can gain multiple insights into friendship.

Discussion Questions:

It seems *Proverbs* is relatively little taught, why do you think this is so?

How does the emphasis on the fear of the Lord help us understand the whole book?

What is the difference between the wisdom found in Proverbs and the wisdom from your grandmother or grandfather?

