

# ***Don't Be Dumb!***

**The Wisdom of Proverbs for Today**

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## *Introduction*

For several years now I have wanted to write a book on Proverbs. Why? Certainly not because I'm an expert on Proverbs, or on any other portion of the Old Testament for that matter.<sup>1</sup> It's mostly because, after years of sporadic efforts to teach and preach this book (all of which were most unsatisfying to me, and probably to those who heard them as well), I finally came upon an approach that makes sense to me. It also seemed to make sense to the good people at the Glen Allen Church of Christ, to whom I preached a series a series of sermons on Proverbs during the Summer of 2013. As you already know, Proverbs is a book of wisdom teaching, largely aimed at the young, and it seems to me that the authors overall have one basic message: "Don't be dumb!" Don't be dumb about life, about the choices you make, about the way you interact with other people, about the way life actually works *vs.* how you might like for it to work. So, that's the title and theme of this study: "Don't Be Dumb."<sup>2</sup>

So, why "publish" the book in this email format? Good question. Having published several books already, I know from experience that it's difficult to get a book before the eyes of your target audience. In this instance, my target audience is you - preachers and teachers of God's word, particularly those on the "Preacher Stuff" email

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<sup>1</sup>For an excellent study of Proverbs by someone who *is* an expert, I highly recommend Dave Bland's *Proverbs and the Formation of Character* (Cascade Books, 2015). This book is a gold mine of insight and instruction.

<sup>2</sup>In our highly sensitive, politically correct age, this may seem a somewhat harsh approach, but I believe it accurately reflects the tone of Proverbs, which takes no pains to spare our feelings and freely uses such terms as "fool," "sluggard," "adulteress," "scoffer," etc.

list. I considered going the traditional publishing route, but then realized that more people are likely to read this material if it's disseminated in this format than if it were published as a physical book. And, those who read it are exactly those I hope will benefit from it most: those who will in turn teach and preach Proverbs to others. (Also, doing it this way is a lot less hassle than the traditional route and takes a lot less time. Those who have been through this process will know immediately what I'm talking about.)

Concerning the scope of this work, it isn't a commentary on Proverbs, nor does it claim to be in any sense a thorough study of it. It is, rather, a study of some of the book's major themes. These chapters started out as sermons, but they are being expanded to include more material of a kind that wouldn't fit into a sermon, but which might be useful for a class on Proverbs. And, I hope the entire work will be helpful for some simply as a guide for personal use.

As for what I hope you will do with this material, that's up to you. Please feel free to print it, copy it, and forward it to others if you think it's worthwhile, without asking my permission. My only requests are (1) that you not alter it in any way, and (2) that if you share it with others, you do so free of charge.

So, this work is dedicated to all of you, to preachers and teachers of the gospel of Christ wherever in God's world you might be, with the hope that it will be some small blessing to you in your ministry - and to Dan Williams, who serves us all by managing the "Preacher Stuff" list and doing so much to encourage good preaching.

*"Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another."*

- Proverbs 27:17<sup>3</sup>

Tommy South, August 2018

### ***Acknowledgment***

My special thanks to my friend William Haithcock of Blacksburg, Virginia. His sharp-eyed and careful proofreading has made this a much better (and, I'm sure, easier to read!) document than it otherwise would have been.

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<sup>3</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from the English Standard Version.

## Chapter 1

### What Are Proverbs, & Why Do We Need Them?

In 1965 Hal David wrote a song that became immensely popular due to its appealing message. It declared that "What the world needs now is love, sweet love; that's the only thing that there's just too little of." That's a sweet sentiment, and no one would ever claim that there's a sufficient amount of love in the world -- but it's certainly not the only thing that's in short supply.

Observing the way so many people live today, I think I could make a strong argument that "what the world needs now" is actually *Wisdom*. And not just any wisdom, but Wisdom with a capital "W." Divine Wisdom. God's Wisdom. Why?

There's a lot of suffering in the world that people can't avoid or rescue themselves from. Just think of all the civilians in war-torn parts of the world, the vast numbers of people displaced from their homes because of fighting, terrorism, famine, and political conflicts that they have little, if anything, to do with. (Just yesterday I heard that the number of refugees worldwide now stands at 40 million, the largest number of displaced persons since World War II.) Add to that the millions who suffer from diseases, injuries, and disabilities that are no fault of their own. There's just a lot of suffering going on in the world that the sufferers can't help.

On the other hand, much of the suffering that people experience is entirely preventable because it's self-inflicted, the product of bad decisions, poor life choices, and generally unwise living. Many people are ill because they abuse or simply don't take

care of their bodies. Some are trapped in addictions that they got into because they ignored all the warnings to avoid substances that have the potential to wreck their lives. As I write this, the number-one cause of death for adults under the age of 50 in the U.S. is opioid overdoses. I'm not suggesting that these people are choosing death, but at some point in their lives, for some reason they did make a choice to use highly dangerous substances. Yes, some of them did so out of desperation because of chronic debilitating pain, but probably the vast majority were simply looking for something to give them a bigger buzz. Either way, millions are paying a high price for their decisions. Others are in trouble because they chose companions who influenced them in a negative direction, and so they've ended up in prison -- or worse. Some have made poor financial decisions and now live under a mountain of debt. Many in American society have a "victim mentality" about their lives, when in reality they're simply reaping the harvest of lives used unwisely.

*Wisdom Literature: Good Advice for Avoiding Bad Endings*

I suppose it's always been that way to some extent. That may explain why the Bible contains a category of writings called "Wisdom Literature." That's a handy designation for the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. Some would also include Psalms and Song of Solomon (Song of Songs) in this category, but Psalms contains very little direct instruction, and the Song of Solomon is a collection of love poems. Each teaches a kind of wisdom of its own, but the authors aren't really out to give advice.

Among the three books that are always included under the heading of "Wisdom Literature," it is Proverbs that stands out as a kind of manual of instruction for wise living. Job grapples with the problem of evil and God's role in it, while Ecclesiastes reflects on the unfairness and unpredictability of life, offering only occasional words of instruction based on the author's observations.

But Proverbs has the goal of telling people in very direct and graphic terms how to live wisely and to avoid behavior that is almost certain to lead to harm. In fact, we might summarize the goal (if not the message) of Proverbs as saying to us, "*Don't be dumb!*" Don't choose a path that doesn't lead where you want to end up. There are numerous options in life that may be lucrative and enjoyable for the moment, but they don't take us where we want to go; instead, they are almost certain to end badly. They are like enjoying first-class amenities on an airline flight, knowing (or maybe not knowing) that the final destination isn't where you want to go. No matter how nice the ride, the end result isn't what you want.

So Proverbs says -- over and over -- if you want to have a happy ending, don't be dumb about the choices you make now.

### *Proverbs in Everyday Life*

All of us grew up hearing proverbs, even though we probably didn't call them that. Still, when my mother repeatedly told me, "If you can't say something nice about someone, don't say anything at all," she was uttering words of wisdom, the truth of

which I came to learn much later in life. Some proverbs are cultural (“Waste not, want not.” “A stitch in time saves nine.” “A penny saved is a penny earned.” “The early bird gets the worm.”) while others are peculiar to families. The mother of one of my childhood friends had a proverb that I’ve never heard anywhere else, but heard frequently from her. Whenever she overheard either of us say we “wished” we had something, she would immediately respond, “Wish in one hand and spit in the other, and see which one gets full first.” Not a pretty image, but an effective one. (Here I am, still remembering it decades later!)

So what is a “proverb” anyway? Here are a few definitions:

“A short sentence of wisdom.”

““Short sentences drawn from long experience” (Miguel Cervantes, *Don Quixote*).

“A proverb has three qualities: shortness, sense, and salt.” (Source Unknown)

“Speech acts that cajole, taunt, and reprove, depending on how they are used.”<sup>1</sup>

Dave Bland offers this definition/description of a proverb: “a compact, portable distillation of wisdom.”<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of the precise definition of the term, most of us recognize a proverb when we hear one, don’t we.

The Old Testament *book* of Proverbs is a collection of these short, pithy sayings,

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<sup>1</sup>Some of these are taken from Paul E. Koptak, *The NIV Application Commentary: Proverbs* (Zondervan, 2003), 21.

<sup>2</sup>Dave Bland, x.

designed to impart wisdom to the uninitiated, but there are other biblical proverbs as well. For example, when Ben-hadad, the king of Syria, boasted of how easily he would conquer Israel, King Ahab said, "Let not him who straps on his armor boast as one who takes it off" (1 Ki 20:11). Modern version: "Don't count your chickens before they're hatched." When Jesus spoke of the obviousness of his eventual return, he said, "Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather" (Lk 17:37).<sup>3</sup> Obviously he wasn't talking about the literal attraction of carrion, so he seems to be citing a proverb, perhaps one already known to his hearers. Another of Jesus' parables is found in Luke 4:23: "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself'."<sup>4</sup> These words were spoken to the people at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, as Jesus anticipates their skepticism about his identity as Israel's Messiah. Notice that he assumes the people already know this proverb, indicating that it didn't originate with him. The presence of proverbs across such a wide span of time and places is simply additional evidence that proverbs are endemic to all cultures and all eras of history. Why? Because proverbs are a useful way of imparting and remembering the collective wisdom of a community.

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<sup>3</sup>The Greek word *aetos* literally means "eagle," but some ancient writers classified vultures as a kind of eagle. The word translated "corpse" in ESV is literally "body" (*soma*). Some have understood the reference to "eagles" as indicating the presence of the invading Roman armies, but the ESV reading seems more likely. Just as a swarm of vultures indicates the presence of a dead body, so the events of the Last Day will signal Jesus' imminent arrival.

<sup>4</sup>The word is actually *parabole*, "parable," but this word can have a broad application, including what we think of as a proverb, which Jesus' quotation clearly is.

### *A Collection of Collections*

The book of Proverbs contains more than five hundred wise sayings, many of them one-liners, but some offering more extended teaching. For example, chapters 1-9 contain an extended discourse on the value of wisdom, including the pleadings of “Wisdom” herself, calling out to those who need instruction. These opening chapters offer something of an introduction to the very specific instructions contained in chapters 10-29, where most of the “sentence literature” (to use Bland’s term) occurs. Chapters 30-31 contain more extended discussions, if one may call them that, of various themes utilizing several proverbs strung together into something that resembles paragraphs. (This is made evident by the arrangement of the text in the ESV.)

This collection that we know as Proverbs isn’t the work of a single author, but rather is a collection of collections taken from various sources. The book’s opening verse (1:1) introduces the first collection as “The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel.” Likewise 10:1 indicates Solomon’s authorship by introducing this second part of the collection as simply “The proverbs of Solomon.”<sup>5</sup>

Still, not all of the proverbs in the book of Proverbs are from Solomon. First, there is the group known simply as “the wise” (22:17, 24:23). These represent the sages among the people of Israel whose specific task it was to retain and pass on the collective wisdom of the community. One specific sage who is named in 30:1 is “Agur

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<sup>5</sup>This corresponds with the statement in 1 Kings 4:32 that Solomon “spoke 3,000 proverbs and his songs were 1,005.” Probably others wrote down what Solomon “spoke” (see Prov 25:1). How a portion of them came to be part of the book of Proverbs we have no way of knowing.

son of Jakeh." We know nothing about him other than what is said in this verse, but he must have been known to early readers of Proverbs; otherwise, why bother to name him? The same may be said for "King Lemuel." We have no information as to where or when he was king, but he was evidently someone known for his wisdom. What makes the reference to Lemuel more interesting is the statement that his recorded words in Proverbs are from "an oracle that his mother taught him." We should observe that in Proverbs, wisdom is not the territory exclusively of wise *men*, but also of wise women. In fact, the personification of Wisdom in this collection is a woman (see, for example, 1:20, 8:1ff). So the collective wisdom of the community comes from all quarters, not from any group exclusively. Likewise, the reference to Lemuel and his mother shows that the proverbs, the collected wisdom of the community, were generally passed on by word of mouth from one generation to the next.

Since there were so many hands involved in the writing and compilation of Proverbs, it isn't surprising that the book seems to contain seven different collections of sayings, based on the formulas which identify the beginning of each. We have already noted the "proverbs of Solomon" in 1:1 and 10:1. These seem to be separate collections, since they are marked off by this identification of their author. Likewise, 22:17 seems to indicate a fresh start when it introduces "the words of the wise," as does 24:23 ("These are also sayings of the wise."). Similarly, 25:1 says, "These are also proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied." Then there are the two references, as already mentioned, to the words of Agur (30:1) and those of

King Lemuel (31:1).

*What Proverbs Are -- and Aren't -- About*

The wisdom contained in Proverbs isn't primarily theological in nature, which is one reason the book is so often neglected. You don't go to Proverbs to find discussions of the great themes of sin and redemption, God's grace, the coming of the Messiah, the nature of God, etc. The book just isn't about that. What Proverbs *is* about is everyday living, the things you should do and not do when it comes to your family, the hazards of risky behavior (e.g., adultery, drunkenness), what a man should look for in a wife, how to relate to people in authority, minding your own business, working hard, controlling your tongue, and a host of other practical matters. Proverbs is about life in the here-and-now, and how to live it in the best (wisest) way possible.

It's also important to note that these proverbs are not *promises*. They don't tell us how life will *always* work out, but how it *usually* works if we follow the path of wisdom. Yes, there are exceptions to these "wisdom rules," but the exceptions don't negate the truthfulness or usefulness of the rules.<sup>6</sup>

For example, Proverbs 10:4 says, "A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich." The general truth here is that diligence and hard work generally pay off, while laziness and lack of effort usually lead to being without the things we need and want in life. However, there are obviously exceptions to this rule,

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<sup>6</sup>It has sometimes been observed that while Proverbs states the general rules for life, Ecclesiastes points to the frequent exceptions to those rules.

and the wise men and women of Proverbs knew that. As Ecclesiastes 9:11 says, "the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all." Still, the general rule is an important one to learn and live by. Ecclesiastes doesn't negate the proverb; it simply shows the other side of the coin. Normally, diligent effort is rewarded, but not always. But it's wise to put the odds in your favor as much as possible, and it isn't wise to hope you'll be the exception to the rule. Again, don't be dumb!

One proverb in particular has often been viewed as a promise, which has led to many unnecessary guilt feelings, as well as unfair judgment by others. I'm thinking of Proverbs 22:6, which says, "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it." This saying has often been understood as a guarantee that the right kind of upbringing will result in children who follow what they have been taught. It has been especially applied to the spiritual upbringing of children -- i.e., that if they are brought up in a believing household, they will be believers for life and will live accordingly, and if they don't, that's an indication of something lacking in the way they were raised. Taking the proverb this way has been the source of enormous pain and consternation to parents who did their best to "bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord," yet later watched their children take a different path. And others whose children have not taken a different path have often felt justified in criticizing and judging them. If the proverb were a promise, it would be hard to explain

why a family of four children might have one who goes astray and three who do not. But it isn't a promise; it's a statement of what is generally true, that children brought up to love and respect God, work hard, and be mindful of others will normally be that way in adulthood. But it certainly isn't a guarantee, any more than Proverbs 10:4 is a guarantee that all hard workers will get rich. Proverbs are *not* promises, and it's a mistake to read them that way.<sup>7</sup>

### *Why Do We Need Them?*

It goes without saying that the book of Proverbs is often neglected when it comes to teaching and preaching in the church. One reason for this is the difficulty of detecting a "preachable" arrangement of the text. It contains very little in the way of narrative, which is always more interesting (and easier to preach) than straightforward instruction, and it's virtually impossible to outline.<sup>8</sup> Working verse-by-verse through the book with a congregation or a class could very quickly become tedious. So, in the absence of a way of getting at the book and its contents, most just ignore it.<sup>9</sup>

But perhaps another reason for Proverbs' neglect is the lack of a sense that we

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<sup>7</sup>For an insightful discussion of this particular proverb, see Bland, who points out that, while there are exceptions, we shouldn't become so focused on that fact that we rob the proverb of its power. It *is* important how children are nurtured, and the nature of that upbringing normally has a direct impact on the life later lived by the child (164-171).

<sup>8</sup>But, as noted above, there is a discernible structure, but only a very broad one.

<sup>9</sup>Most preachers and teachers (myself included) opt for a thematic approach to the book. Still, there are so many topics covered in Proverbs that it's a challenge to decide which ones to discuss.

today need the collective wisdom of the community -- any community. After all, we have access to virtually unlimited information via our electronic devices, so we have access to much more than the sages of ancient Israel ever knew. Besides, proverbs themselves seem somewhat old-fashioned and out-of-touch as a medium of instruction. They're a lot like rules, and who today wants to hear rules, when most people have bought into the idea that right and wrong, good and bad, truth and falsehood are determined not by any outside entity (certainly not by the community), but are defined by each individual? In a climate such as this, there isn't much room for proverbs or any other statements of universal or supposedly "timeless" truths.

Perhaps that's exactly why we need them! Our individualistic approach to morality and truth is *killing* us as a society. You see, proverbs aren't just about what's best for *you*, but also for the community in which you live. They offer moral guidance that helps us all be better people, and when we're better individually, we're better and stronger collectively. There isn't much evidence to suggest that the radical individualism of Twenty-First Century American culture is doing anybody much good. In spite of our knowledge and technology, people are consumed by unhappiness, addictions of all sorts, fractured relationships, dysfunctional living, a myriad of fears and phobias, financial burdens, strife and violence, and numerous other self-inflicted wounds. It would seem that we really do need the wisdom contained in Proverbs.

Let's not be dumb about *that!*

## *Chapter 2*

### **Proverbs' Cast of Characters**

I always told my students, when preparing them for an exam over a narrative portion of Scripture such as the Gospels or Acts, "Know who all the people in the story are. If you know who the people are, you'll know the story." Something similar is true of Proverbs, although it's obviously not a narrative. Still, there are within it occasional scenarios that involve certain types of people who come in and out of the text with some frequency or who are addressed as those needing instruction. Some of them are there to serve as good examples and positive influences. Others are people whose example we should learn from -- but definitely not emulate!

So, let's think about the "cast of characters" presented in Proverbs and see what we should learn from each.

#### *The Narrator*

Although the narrator(s) in Proverbs isn't always identified, it's clear that there is one, the person who is telling the young man (the presumed audience) what he should and shouldn't do and urging him to take the correct course of action.

The narrator first becomes visible in Proverbs 1:8: "Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching." Even though the narrator calls the hearer/reader "my son," that doesn't necessarily mean it's his actual father speaking. Notice that the verse exhorts the young man not to forsake the teaching of either his

father or his mother. The narrator represents the sages of Israel, the purveyors of the collective wisdom of the community. He (sometimes, she) is the voice of wisdom and of conscience, urging the young man to pay attention and not do himself unnecessary harm by being foolish.

Some scholars have suggested that the book of Proverbs was originally a kind of handbook for the training of young Israelite princes. This suggestion is made more plausible by the inclusion of the wise sayings of two kings (Solomon and the unknown Lemuel; and King Hezekiah's men copied some of Solomon's proverbs). If 1:1 and 8 suggest that Solomon himself is the narrator in the first part of the book, then the reference to "my son" would be quite literal, if the proposed setting of the training of royalty is correct. But whether the training of potential successors to the throne is the original setting for and function of the book or not, the lessons it contains are universally applicable. Royalty or not, everyone needs to not be dumb about life!

### *Lady Wisdom*

One of the more striking features of Proverbs is the personification of wisdom as a woman who calls out to potentially wayward youths and pleads with them to partake of her offerings. That wisdom should be personified at all is interesting in itself,<sup>1</sup> but it is made even more so by the fact that it is presented as a "she" and not a "he." This

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<sup>1</sup>Koptak (83) notes that the idea of Wisdom speaking in a public setting is found nowhere else other than in the apocryphal book of Sirach, and that "nowhere else but here in Proverbs do we find an attribute or an abstract entity personified as a speaking character."

occurs first at 1:20-22 (“Wisdom cries aloud in the street; in the markets she raises her voice. . . .”) However, it is in chapters 8 and 9 that she figures most prominently.

In 8:1 Wisdom is equated with “understanding.” In Proverbs “wisdom” is a rather broad term, sometimes equivalent to understanding, and at other times virtually synonymous with knowledge. While we normally like to distinguish between “knowledge” and “wisdom”<sup>2</sup> and to define wisdom as the application of knowledge, this isn’t always the case in Proverbs. As Bland puts it,

The idea of wisdom defies any single definition. But speaking in broad terms, wisdom embraces the task of learning how to live successfully. It involves the ability to cope with life’s realities, not in the sense of dominating them, but in the sense of navigating the difficulties and assuming responsibility. Wisdom offers direction in connecting individuals to others and ultimately to God. Wisdom knows its limits. God ordered life in a certain way, building moral laws into its scheme. Wisdom seeks to live within those constraints.<sup>3</sup>

In Proverbs, Lady Wisdom’s goal is to give the ignorant and uninformed

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<sup>2</sup>As someone has cleverly illustrated this distinction, “Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is knowing not to make a smoothie out of it.”

<sup>3</sup>Bland, 3, footnote 9. R. J. Williams puts it this way: “In the OT the term Wisdom was used to describe the attitude that proper conduct is based on knowledge -- that the ability to live successfully can be imparted” (“Wisdom in the Ancient Near East,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, Supplementary Volume* [Abingdon, 1976], 949. It is interesting that Williams defines Wisdom as an attitude rather than as a quality or characteristic, a description that seems well supported by Proverbs.

sufficient instruction in order to guide them in ways that will keep them from harm and that will lead to positive outcomes in life. At the same time, in doing so she attempts to steer them away from the pitfalls that will inevitably lead to disaster.<sup>4</sup>

It may be worthwhile to ask why, in a male-dominated culture such as ancient Israel's, that Wisdom would be personified in feminine rather than masculine terms. This question becomes especially acute when we notice that in Prov 8:22-36 the feminine Wisdom declares herself to be both the Lord's offspring<sup>5</sup> as well as his adjunct or assistant in the creation itself. Perhaps the best explanation for the feminine portrayal is that Wisdom is presented as a virtuous woman to provide a stark contrast to the "wayward women" so often warned against in Proverbs. In competition with them, she builds a house, prepares a meal, and sends her (female) messengers to summon "the simple" (see below) to come and feast with her (9:1-6) rather than pursue folly. In this respect she is the positive feminine counterpart to the forbidden women who vie for the young man's attention.<sup>6</sup> Notice especially the juxtaposition of the description of the seductive adulteress (the "forbidden woman") in chapter 7, who has made careful preparations to ensnare the "young man lacking sense," with that of

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<sup>4</sup>David Atkinson describes her as "a sort of town crier, calling aloud at the street corner, making an appeal in the public squares" (*The Message of Proverbs: Wisdom for Life* [IVP, 1996] 31).

<sup>5</sup>ESV attempts to get around this difficulty (partially, at least) by translating 8:22 as "The Lord *possessed* (emphasis mine) me at the beginning of his work," rather than "The Lord created me" (Septuagint and RSV). But even the change in translation does not mitigate the statement that Wisdom participated in creation.

<sup>6</sup>"Wisdom," *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, edited by Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (IVP Academic, 1998), 955.

Lady Wisdom, summoning him to her banquet instead in chapter 8.<sup>7</sup>

Since Wisdom is not only a “character” in Proverbs, but also its primary theme, we would do well to note that Wisdom is always grounded in God. Wisdom is not an abstract entity, but the Wisdom of the Lord himself. Indeed, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (1:7). All true Wisdom not only comes from God, but points to him as well. This is the task of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs: to call the simple to follow God’s wise ways.

### *The Simple*

In one sense, “the simple” are the primary target audience of the book of Proverbs, first appearing at 1:4, where the purpose of the “proverbs of Solomon” (1:1) is said to be “to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth.” Perhaps the best synonyms for “the simple” are “the gullible” or even “the silly.” These are the folks who are easily led astray because they don’t consider the consequences of their choices and actions.

For example, in 7:6ff, it is a young man who is “among the simple” who most readily falls for the temptations and false assurances of the adulteress. A little thought would tell him to avoid her, but that’s his problem -- he doesn’t think!

We shouldn’t understand “the simple” to mean “simple-minded” in the sense of mentally slow or deficient in some way. There is hope for the simple if only he can be

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<sup>7</sup>Koptak, 225-26

persuaded to listen to Wisdom. But that's his problem: he prefers not to do so.

According to Proverbs, the fate of the simple lies in his own hands. He can choose the way of Wisdom and succeed in life, or he can ignore her pleas and suffer the consequences.

### *The Fool*

The character of the fool is so common in Proverbs that there are three different Hebrew words for "fool" employed in the book, and they are used a cumulative total of almost fifty times. The fool is the consummate antithesis to Wisdom. He's the guy (or girl) who just won't listen, the one the Narrator continually urges his "son" not to imitate. "Fools despise wisdom and instruction," the Narrator says, contrasting him with "The fear of the Lord," which is "the beginning of knowledge." In one sense the fool is a subcategory of "the simple," the segment of that group who simply say "no" to all that Wisdom has to offer.

It is important to note that the root of the fool's problem isn't intellectual, but spiritual. He is a fool because he rejects the fear of the Lord and despises instruction, not because he is incapable of doing better. He prefers to live by his own illusions rather than by reality, as vividly described in 14:7-12, where the young man being instructed by the Narrator is urged to "leave the presence of a fool" precisely because he follows the "way that seems right to a man" but whose end is "the way to death." In other words, the fool sees the chasm opening before him, but insists on running toward

it anyway. As a result, he is a danger not only to himself but to others as well who may get caught up in his foolishness. He believes and does dumb stuff and doesn't want to hear any voice that tries to correct him.

### *The Scoffer*

A special category of fool is "the scoffer." He merits separate treatment in Proverbs because he is even more adamant than the fool in rejecting wisdom. Proverbs 1:22 links the fool and the scoffer when it asks, "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?" Notice: fools don't just *ignore* knowledge; they *hate* it. As a result, they are entirely unteachable. "Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury. Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you. . ." (9:7-8). Whereas the simple can sometimes be corrected, scoffers can't. If they learn anything at all, it has to be the hard way.

Much of the fool's problem is his arrogance. He won't listen to anyone else, because he thinks he's smarter than everyone. "'Scoffer' is the name of the arrogant, haughty man who acts with arrogant pride" (21:24). As a result, there isn't much hope for the scoffer. His presence in Proverbs is primarily as a foil, to show the simple young man what not to become. How? By listening to Wisdom!

## *The Sluggard*

The purpose of Proverbs is deadly serious, but there's also a bit of comic relief contained in it. It comes in the person of "the sluggard." (Even the word is kind of funny, isn't it!) The sluggard has two primary characteristics: (1) he's lazy, and (2) he's full of ridiculous excuses for his inactivity. His laziness is made vividly evident in 26:14-15:

As a door turns on its hinges,

so does a sluggard on his bed.

The sluggard buries his hand in the dish;

it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth.

The sluggard is so lazy that he's fastened to his bed; his only movement is from one side to another, as if he were mounted on it by a hinge. Likewise, he may put his hand into a dish of food, but is simply too lazy to bring it back to his mouth. And, like the fool, trying to teach him anything is a waste of time. "The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly" (26:16). He has an answer for everything even though he is acting the part of a fool. He can always rationalize his laziness. In one of Proverbs' more memorable lines, the sluggard defends his inactivity by declaring, "There is a lion in the road! There is a lion in the streets!" (26:13). As a result, he reaps what he sows. "The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied" (13:4). But the sluggard isn't a harmless clown; rather, he is a genuine pain to those around him. "Like vinegar to the teeth and

smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him" (10:26). Whatever the errand or assignment, he never gets it done.

Like the fool and the scoffer, the sluggard serves as a foil by serving as the negative example of the kind of character the Narrator hopes to develop in the young man to whom he speaks. "Whatever you do," he says, "don't be like him!"

### *The Adulteress*

Like the fool, the scoffer, and the sluggard, the adulteress is someone to be meticulously avoided. In some respects, the danger she poses is even greater than the negative influence of the others. She can bring the simple young man to complete ruin, and possibly even to death. Her danger isn't simply that she is a bad example, but a hazard to the young man's spiritual and physical health.

The adulteress appears as a "character" in Proverbs primarily in chapters 5-7. She is described as "the forbidden woman" (5:3, 7:5) and "the evil woman" (6:24). She is contrasted with a prostitute, although she dresses like one in order to seduce the foolish young man who strays too near her house. But she is more deadly than a prostitute, because she lures the young man into a highly dangerous situation by giving all sorts of false assurances, such as that her husband is away and won't be home while he is with her. If the simple young man does not avoid her, he is doomed to suffer dire consequences.

The presence of the adulteress and her portrayal as a conniving seductress is

often cited as evidence of the Bible's low view of women. Of course, one response to this is the presence of noble women (such as Ruth, Mary, etc.) elsewhere in Scripture. But it should also be noted that the "evil woman" appears in Proverbs, not as a statement that "this is just how women are," but in recognition that some women are evil and pose a grave danger to the young man being trained (hopefully) in Wisdom. If the target audience of Proverbs were young women, we could expect the reverse: numerous warnings against "evil men." There are plenty of those in the Bible also. And Proverbs' portrayal of Wisdom as a woman certainly argues against the notion that everyone in ancient Israel believed that only men possessed wisdom, or that only men possessed godly character.

*And the Moral Is. . .*

So what are we supposed to learn from these characters? If Proverbs is to function as Scripture for us, and not simply as a relic of religion past, there must be a "bottom line" for us as well for the young princes of Israel, or whomever the original audience was expected to be. Happily, there is a message for us, and here are some aspects of it to think about.

*1. In the case of the fool, the simple, and the sluggard, the most obvious message is, "Don't be dumb like them!"* Take a long, hard look at their foolishness and the results of it and go and don't do likewise. One of my favorite sayings (a proverb?) gleaned from long ago is, "No one is ever completely useless: they can always serve as

a horrible example." Well, that's the role of these negative characters in Proverbs. We should look at them closely, maybe even laugh at them, and make a mental note: "Don't be like that." There is possibly a bit of each of them in all of us, so we shouldn't assume that we are immune. And if we see traits of them in ourselves, we know we need to change.

*2. Instead of being like these characters, we should listen to the Narrator, because he speaks Wisdom.* One of the biggest challenges where the imparting of Wisdom is concerned, not only in Proverbs, but in life itself, is getting people to *listen*. Remember that Jesus' famous Parable of the Sower starts with the word "Listen!" We might say, "Listen up!" It's hard to get people to hear what they *need* to hear rather than what they *want* to hear. It isn't necessary to make all of life's mistakes. In fact, it's dumb to do so, because all we have to do is listen and learn. Proverbs provides a great start for that process.

*Question:* If you had to put yourself in one of the categories listed above, which would it be? Are you listening to and living by Wisdom? Or are you blundering your way through life, making all kinds of unnecessary mistakes and paying the price for it? If you aren't sure, keep reading.

### Chapter 3

## Don't Be Dumb About God

Proverbs is noteworthy for its intensely practical character. It's a book that gives inspired advice on everyday life and how to live it well, largely by avoiding bad choices that continually confront us. It isn't where we would normally think of looking to find "theology" (literally, "knowledge of God") or very much information at all about God. For that we would normally think of books such as Genesis or Isaiah or Romans -- but not Proverbs.

Yet, what's more practical than knowing about God? And what is more *impractical* than to live as if God doesn't exist? So in that sense of pointing us in the direction of what pleases and displeases God, Proverbs does offer a great deal of "theology."<sup>1</sup> And, it also offers guidance on how not to be dumb where God is concerned. Let's look at some ways the book accomplishes this. What does Proverbs tell us about God?

### *That God Exists*

There are basically two kinds of atheism prevalent in the world today. One is

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<sup>1</sup>Derek Kidner says there are about one hundred proverbs that mention God, and all but a dozen use the covenant name "Yahweh." *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (InterVarsity Press, 1969, 32-33). That being the case, Proverbs is without question a book about developing our relationship with God.

what is usually called “philosophical atheism,” the denial of God’s existence based on the claim that there is evidence that proves he doesn’t exist. A generation ago this kind of atheism was seldom encountered in American culture, but it is now widespread, thanks to the efforts of such virulent atheists as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and others. Not only is philosophical atheism more prevalent than in the past, but it has, within the space of only a few decades, also become extremely aggressive. What was once largely a privately-held belief is now extraordinarily “in-your-face” and characterized by vicious attacks on theistic beliefs. Ironically, the “philosophical” part of this kind of atheism has largely disappeared; just making the claims against God is considered evidence enough. Sadly, a great many people buy into this, even though they’ve never considered the evidence that points to God.

But there is another kind of atheism that is even more widespread. This is sometimes termed “practical atheism” and is practiced by millions. With this form of atheism there is no overt denial of God’s existence. Rather, its adherents simply *live* as though God does not exist. In fact, many who claim to be believers actually fall into the category of practical atheists, because their lives are entirely untouched by any faith convictions at all. Their life choices are not influenced by a concern for what God desires, nor do they spend any of their time pursuing the worship or knowledge of God. For all *practical* purposes, they might as well be philosophical atheists.

It isn’t surprising, then, that Proverbs begins, not with an argument for God’s existence, but with a declaration of the wisdom of acknowledging him: “The fear of the

Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Proverbs 1:7). Translation: it's dumb not to know God! Similarly, Proverbs 2:4-6 urges the value of seeking wisdom with these words about God:

If you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures,  
then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.  
For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

It's clear that Solomon, as well as the other sages who speak in Proverbs are in full agreement with the assessment of Psalms 14:1-2:

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."  
They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds,  
there is none who does good.  
The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man,  
to see if there are any who understand,  
who seek after God.

Notice the two emphases in Psalms 1 that intersect with the thought of Proverbs. First, those who deny God are corrupt and do "abominable deeds." Why? Because they lack the wisdom to do otherwise, and their denial of God leaves them with no grounds for moral and ethical behavior. Second, everyone with any genuine understanding

(wisdom) seeks after God. In both books, to do otherwise is just plain dumb.

Throughout Proverbs these two concerns intersect: wisdom is not to be found apart from God, and those who truly seek wisdom will find it in the acknowledgment of God -- and will never find it if they refuse to acknowledge him.

### *That God Created the World by Wisdom*

As we saw above, Psalms 14:1 points out the foolishness of denying that there is a Creator. This says a lot about why there is so much reckless behavior, immorality, violence, and self-inflicted suffering in our world today: denying God means a lack of wisdom, and nothing good can come from that.

To highlight the foolishness of denying God as Creator, think about some of the claims we often hear. For example, there is the claim that the universe is here simply by chance and that there is no "first cause," or creator. Such an idea is totally illogical and even unscientific, since any introductory-level science student knows that nothing comes from nothing. Yet this is where the blind denial of God leads. Some try to modify this by claiming some sort of "primordial chaos" out of which the orderly universe arose (without accounting for the existence of the chaos!). Nothing else in creation supports such a notion; in nature there is never a progression from disorder to order, from disintegration to integration, rather it's always just the opposite. (That's why you're always having to repair your house, even if you don't do anything to damage it.) Others acknowledge that the universe *appears* to have been designed by someone but really

wasn't. We wouldn't apply that kind of logic to anything else, so why to creation? For example, when the ruins of the ancient Mayan city of Chichen Itza were first discovered, the immediate question was, "Who built these buildings?" If anyone had suggested, "No one; they just look like someone built them," he or she would have been laughed out of the scientific community. And those buildings aren't nearly as complex as what we see in nature. How foolish to suggest that there is "design, but not a Designer"!

Some who deny God's existence and his creation of the world prefer to speak of "Nature" as designing what we see before us. I've even heard people say that "Evolution *designed*" certain aspects of the creation. Who or what is "Nature"? And how does "Evolution" (a concept, a theory) "design" anything? People who speak this way are simply betraying their own foolishness.

But Proverbs doesn't just claim that there is "a Creator," but that creation is endowed with God's wisdom.

The Lord by wisdom founded the earth;  
by understanding he established the heavens;  
by his knowledge the deeps broke open,  
and the clouds drop down the dew.

Proverbs 3:19-20

So the claim is not simply that God "wisely" created the world, but that it also *functions*

*by virtue of his wisdom.* All that God has made is infused with his wisdom.<sup>2</sup> Likewise Wisdom herself claims in Proverbs 8:22-31 to have been present at and to have assisted in the creation.

There's no doubt that the wisdom God built into creation is often obscured by the results of human sin. For example, humans are his creatures, but we don't always act like it. That doesn't detract from what he created us to be; it only illustrates how badly we often miss the mark of why we were created. Still, there is ample evidence of God's wisdom in creation.<sup>3</sup>

Just after stating that the Lord created the world by wisdom, Proverbs 3:21-26 says,

My son, do not lose sight of these -- keep sound wisdom and discretion,  
and they will be life for your soul and adornment for your neck.  
Then you will walk in your way securely, and your foot will not stumble.  
If you lie down, you will not be afraid;  
when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.

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<sup>2</sup>This is similar to what we read in Hebrews 1:3, that Christ is the “exact imprint” of the nature of God, and that he “upholds the universe by the word of his power.”

<sup>3</sup>To give only one example, emperor penguins live in one of the most extreme climates on earth. So how do they keep their eggs from freezing at minus fifty degrees? The female lays the egg and rolls it onto the feet of her mate. He has a large flap of skin and feathers that quickly covers the egg and keeps it warm during incubation. Only the male has this flap. Question: How did the penguins survive if they had to wait for evolution to “design” and bring about this anatomical development? Creation makes a lot more sense!

Do not be afraid of sudden terror or of the ruin of the wicked, when it comes;  
for the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being  
caught.

The point? Since we live in a world created by wisdom, it only makes sense to  
acknowledge that wisdom and live by it. If you do, "the Lord will be your confidence."

### *That God and His Will Can Be Known*

Some who are willing to admit at least the possibility of a Creator still question  
whether or not we can know him and his will. Contrary to this, Proverbs 2:1-8 says,

My son, if you will receive my words and treasure up my commandments with  
you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to  
understanding,  
yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding,  
if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures,  
then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.  
For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and  
understanding;  
he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk in  
integrity, guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of  
his saints.

Notice the boldness of these promises: if we seek God and his wisdom, we will have understanding, and God's blessing and protection along with it.

Now, the only way for us to know God's wisdom is if he *reveals* it. The revelation of God's will follows as a corollary to the reality of his existence and his creation of the universe. Why would he create the world and the people in it unless he *wants* us to know him? This is Paul's point in his famous sermon in Athens, recorded in Acts 17:22-28: God created us so that we will both seek and find him. That being the case, both God and his wisdom are knowable.

But, we know *only that which he chooses to reveal*, and we have to learn to live with that reality. Some people object to the reality of God because there are things about him they don't understand. But if we understood everything about God, wouldn't we be on his level, and wouldn't he cease to be God? It stands to reason that there will always be things about God that we don't and can't know. In Proverbs 30:1-4, Agur the son of Jakeh says,

The man declares, I am weary, O God, I am weary, O God, and worn out.

Surely I am too stupid to be a man. I have not the understanding of a man.

I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One.

Who has ascended to heaven and come down?

Who has gathered the wind in his fists?

Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment?

Who has established all the ends of the earth?

What is his name, and what is his son's name?

Surely you know!<sup>4</sup>

What is Agur's point? Simply that there are things about God we are incapable of figuring out and that will forever remain unknown to us. His words put us in our place.

We need to remember this when we're prone to ask such questions as, "Why does God allow suffering in the world?", or "Why did God create the world if he knew people were going to sin and be lost?", or "Why did it take so long for Jesus to come and save the world? Couldn't it have been done sooner?" None of us knows the answers to all of these God-questions. We need to remember the wise words of Deuteronomy 29:29: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." What a great reminder that it isn't our job to know everything -- but it is our responsibility to obey everything we know that God has revealed.

You've probably had the experience of following a GPS system to get some place you had never been before. Does the system show you the layout of the entire city you're in or the entire state or country? No, it gives you only the immediate area where you are and what you need to do next. By following that step by step, you'll eventually reach your destination (assuming the GPS is correct!). In the same way, we don't have to

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<sup>4</sup>These words are reminiscent of God's response to Job's complaint in Job 38-39. It may be that such questions were standard in Wisdom Literature as an expression of God's superiority to man and of man's inability to know everything about God.

know all of God's will or everything about him in order to know him. We just have to follow what we're given.<sup>5</sup>

### *That God Is Lord Over All Our Plans*

"Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand" (Proverbs 19:21). "The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps" (Proverbs 16:9)<sup>6</sup>

Both of these texts establish the truth that God is greater than our plans, and that if he wills to do so, he can override them. Some people have gotten the idea that there's something wrong with planning, based on such texts as these and James 4:13-16. But the problem, both in Proverbs and in James, isn't with making plans; it's making our plans as they were ultimate, when in fact they aren't.

Planning, in fact, is normally a very good thing. We have ample evidence from Paul's letters and from Acts that he generally had specific plans in mind for his upcoming travels and evangelistic efforts.<sup>7</sup> But we should always make our plans contingent on God's plans. It's dumb to plan without taking God into account, as the man popularly known as "The Rich Fool" of Luke 12:13-21 learned the hard way. There

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<sup>5</sup>Someone has well said that "Arrogance is only unacknowledged ignorance." The sooner we acknowledge that we don't/can't know everything about God, the better off we will be.

<sup>6</sup>Bland (144) points out that 15:33-16:9 form a unit which contrasts human freedom with divine sovereignty.

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, Romans 15:22-25.

are numerous examples of people in the Bible who had fine, noble plans that got re-routed by the Lord. For example, after his failed first attempt to deliver Israel by killing an Egyptian slave-driver, Moses fled to Midian and settled down to the life of a shepherd, complete with a nice family and everything he could have wanted. Apparently he intended and expected this situation to continue for the rest of his life -- but God had other ideas. Likewise, David was certain (and had Nathan the prophet's confirmation) that he should build a temple for the Lord, but learned that God didn't need a temple from him, and that he already had plans for David's son, Solomon, to build it. There was nothing wrong with the plans of either man; but neither of them were God's plans.

What we should realize is that it's okay if our plans get side-tracked by the Lord, because we can trust him absolutely. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths" (Proverbs 3:5-6).

So if you find God overriding your plans, take heart. Wherever he takes you ultimately will be for your good.

### *That We Are to Fear God -- Positively*

The subject of fearing the Lord is one we often find confusing. Some statements in Scripture seem to say we should, while others indicate we shouldn't. (See, for example, 1 John 4:17-19). Proverbs definitely says we should:

In the fear of the Lord one has strong confidence,  
and his children will have a refuge.  
The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life,  
that one may turn away from the snares of death.

Proverbs 14:26-27

So what kind of “fear” is the wise man talking about? It obviously isn’t the *terror* of God that paralyzes us and makes us not want to be in his presence. We know God doesn’t intend for us to fear him in that way because he invites us through his word to seek him and draw near to him.<sup>8</sup> And no one is going to do that only to establish a relationship of cowering fear.<sup>9</sup> As Proverbs (and Scripture elsewhere) makes clear, God wants us to love and trust him, and we aren’t going to do that if we are terrified of him.

The kind of fear Proverbs talks about is a “healthy respect” for God, knowing that God is God and we are not, and realizing that we dare not take him lightly or refuse to do his will. The “fear” 1 John 4:18 speaks of so negatively is the fear which is terror; when we know God and his love for us, that kind of fear is “cast out” and we accept his gracious invitation to draw near in faith and confidence. We fear him in a

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<sup>8</sup>See Hebrews 4:14-16 for example.

<sup>9</sup>Some never escape this kind of fear, and as a result shy away from any involvement with God. As one woman once told me, “I’m afraid to get close to God; he can hurt you!”

healthier, more positive way.<sup>10</sup>

One aspect of this more positive fear of God is to love what he loves and hate what he hates, and Proverbs points us in that direction.

There are six things that the Lord hates, seven<sup>11</sup> that are an abomination to him:

haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,  
a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil,  
a false witness who breathes out lies,  
and one who sows discord among brothers.<sup>12</sup>

Proverbs 6:16-19

We need to know this because we want to know God's mind and heart so that we can imitate him by living accordingly. It is this kind of fear that is "the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7).

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<sup>10</sup>Kidner (33) says the "fear" of the Lord certainly implies more than merely "healthy respect," which could be maintained at some distance, since "fear of the Lord" is equated with the "knowledge" of the Lord in 2:5 and 9:10, "and this knowledge is remarkably intimate."

<sup>11</sup>"The numerical saying,  $x, x+1$  is not unique to the book of Proverbs (cf. 30:15-31) or even to the Bible. Although numerical sayings are found in various ancient cultures, their precise function is not known. . . . The numerical pattern not only has the feel of a riddle, it places emphasis on the final statement as a kind of climax" (Koptak, 189-90).

<sup>12</sup>One writer suggests that 6:12-19 comprise a description of "the scoundrel," a troublemaker who enjoys stirring up strife, and that Solomon (if he is the author) may have had in mind his half-brother Absalom (2 Samuel 15:1-12). "Journeys Through the Bible: Proverbs" (Sweet Publishing, 1998) 26. The author's name is not given, but this is an insightful brief treatment of the book.

Thankfully, our knowledge of God isn't limited to Proverbs. Think of all we'd be missing if it were! But still it's a good start, and a very practical one. Knowing that God exists, that he is our Creator, that we can know him and his will, that he is the final Arbiter over all our plans, and that we are to live in reverent fear of him -- all of that puts us miles down the road toward a wise and good life. And we'd certainly be dumb to ignore all these basic truths about him.

But the rest of the story is found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's where we learn that God not only made the world, but that he loved it so much that he sent his Son to be our Savior (John 3:16-17). And this isn't a different message from Proverbs; rather it's the culmination of the same message. That's why in 1 Corinthians 1:22-25 Paul says,

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

The same wisdom by which the world was created came to earth to proclaim and demonstrate God's redemptive love for us. So the only wise way to live is to follow him. And the wisest time to begin is now.

## Chapter 4

### Don't Be Dumb About Self-Control

The book of Nehemiah opens with the title character receiving some tragic news from his homeland of Judah.<sup>1</sup> He was in exile in what had been the Babylonian Empire, but which was now ruled by the Persians under King Artaxerxes, but he still had a profound love for his home country and its capital city, Jerusalem. The message he received was this: "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire" (Nehemiah 1:3). This news was so disturbing to Nehemiah that he wept and mourned and prayed and fasted for days, until he was finally able to lay his sorrow before the king and gain permission to return to Jerusalem to lead the way in rebuilding its walls.

We might wonder, why so much consternation about a *wall*? And why was this considered a matter of shame? The answer lies in the role that walls played in the defense of ancient cities -- all ancient cities. Cities were surrounded by great, high walls, sometimes fifteen to twenty feet thick (these were not merely fences!), and sometimes there was a double wall, just in case the outer wall was breached. In the days before modern warfare, a city's wall was its first and best defense against

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<sup>1</sup>According to Nehemiah 1:1, this occurred about the year 445 B.C.

invasion. When attacks seemed imminent, people in the surrounding villages would hurry inside the city walls, and the gates would be securely shut. Once that occurred, the city was very difficult to overthrow.<sup>2</sup>

So the wall of a city was a symbol of security, which is why the book of Revelation describes heaven as a beautiful city surrounded by a great wall.<sup>3</sup> So what Nehemiah was bemoaning was the fact that Jerusalem -- minus its wall -- lay as a hapless victim to any and every enemy who might want to invade it.<sup>4</sup>

### *Of Walls and Men*

Knowing this about ancient cities and their walls makes Proverbs 25:28 all the more significant: "A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls." According to the Proverb, our best defense against being overrun by evil (other than the Lord himself) is the "wall" of self-control. Take that away, and we lie as helpless as Jerusalem against the onslaught of temptations that come our way every day.<sup>5</sup> Self-control gives us the ability to restrain our appetites and avoid temptations

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<sup>2</sup>This helps explain the faithless report of the ten spies after their foray into the promised land. After describing its attractions, they added, "However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large" (Deuteronomy 13:28).

<sup>3</sup>Revelation 21:15-27. Ironically, the gates of the heavenly city are never closed, since there no longer remain any enemies to fear.

<sup>4</sup>See also Isaiah 5:5. God's threat against Judah (his "vineyard") is, "I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down."

<sup>5</sup>"Impatience views restraint only as restriction; so the enemy arrives to find the walls down" (Kidner, 161).

that can bring us down spiritually and in other ways. When we lack self-control, we're subject to all sorts of disasters and to the shame and humiliation that goes with them. Think about those people on the television news reports who are caught in some shameful criminal act, who then have to take the "perp walk" from a police car into the jail or into a courthouse. What do they do? Invariably they hide their faces in shame, as if *that* will keep us from knowing who they are. Very often these are people who simply failed to exercise self-control in some critical area of their lives. They are wall-less cities, and it's a sad sight.

Because self-control is so vital to our well-being, Proverbs has a lot to say about it. Proverbs 23 is an entire chapter which warns against such sins as gluttony, drunkenness, and sexual indulgence, and we will give individual attention to some of these in a later chapter. Other topics touching on self-control include working (6:6-11; 10:4), talking too much (10:19), belittling other people (11:12), speaking rashly or unwisely (15:1-2; 17:28; 18:2), quarreling (17:14), anger (19:11), self-promotion (25:6-7; 27:2), and gossiping (26:20). Read through these texts and notice the emphasis in each on the consequences of failing to practice self-discipline. The wise men are telling us not to be dumb about this. Don't be that city with a broken-down wall!

One example of the lack of self-control and its consequences occurs in Proverbs 17:14: "The beginning of strife is like letting out water, so quit before the quarrel breaks out." In an era when such petty things as "road rage" and other senseless

quarrels often lead to murder, the appropriateness of this advice is evident. But often we fail to control ourselves and before we know it, we're embroiled in a quarrel (or worse) that we never intended to happen. The problem? Lack of self-control to keep the quarrel from beginning in the first place.

*But the Problem Is. . .*

One of the real challenges to living with self-control is that we live in a society that doesn't encourage or value it very highly. In fact, the *lack* of self-control is considered the norm and is often applauded, and self-indulgence is the aspiration of most.

For example, we have access to easy credit, which leads many into what has been termed "shopaholism," which simply means being addicted to buying things you really don't need and can't afford. Millions today are in mountains of financial trouble for no other reason than they do not control their spending habits. In a similar manner, food is abundant, so much so that we take it for granted and overindulge. A young Ukrainian friend who had recently visited the U.S. once remarked to me, "There is food *everywhere* in America!" As a result, it is difficult for many to know when enough is enough, and that's the primary reason that obesity, with all of its threats to good health, is an epidemic in our country. Traveling overseas, I'm continually amazed at how many more Americans are overweight than in most other countries. Sexual appetites are also out of control for many. Movies, television, and the Internet present

sex in a “whatever/whenever” fashion, so much so that sexual immorality is the “new normal.” There’s even a “morning-after” pill for those who don’t control themselves yet aren’t prepared to bear the consequences of pregnancy. Clearly, we have a problem with self-control in America!

### *How Self-Control Helps*

Self-control, like the literal walls around ancient cities, provides numerous benefits. One is *security*. We are safe from many self-inflicted ills when we are guided by it.<sup>6</sup> Another benefit of self-control is built-in *boundaries* so we know where the limits are. Each time the wise men advise us to exercise self-control, whether in the areas of food, sex, drinking, working, or whatever, they’re telling us where the limits of safe behavior are. When you know the boundaries of safety, it’s much easier to enjoy your life. People without boundaries are always surprised at the troubles they get themselves into. And a third benefit of self-control is a sense of *community* with others who are committed to living within the same boundaries. Shared values bind us together, but it’s difficult to feel kinship with people who violate what you consider to be necessary norms of behavior.

On the other hand, the lack of self-control carries with it distinct disadvantages. The most obvious of these are the *consequences* of negative behavior. Proverbs is filled

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<sup>6</sup>As noted earlier, Proverbs makes several applications of the need for self-control in various areas of life. It doesn’t discuss it simply in the abstract.

with warnings of these consequences. One of the most memorable of these is the warning against overindulging in alcohol found in Proverbs 23:29-32:

Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining?

Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes?

Those who tarry long over wine; those who go to try mixed wine.

. . . In the end it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder.

It's difficult to imagine someone voluntarily getting bitten by a snake, but that's how Proverbs describes the use of wine without self-control. No matter what the subject, lack of self-control leads to self-inflicted wounds, and that's what the wise teachers of Proverbs are trying to prevent. It's dumb not to listen.

Another negative consequence of living without self-control is the *chaos* that comes into your life when there are no boundaries. We all need clearly-defined limits as to what is and isn't acceptable. When there are none, life becomes one series of chaotic episodes after another, which is a terrible way to live, both for the uncontrolled person and for everyone around him. Likewise, strife is inevitable when people live without boundaries. If you have no boundaries and I have none, we're bound to hurt each other at some point. Out of control people are a hazard to everyone around them.

Pretending that the negative consequences don't exist, or that they won't apply in my case, is worse than unhelpful. In fact, it's another variety of lack of control, since we are refusing to live according to reality. In Ezekiel 13:10-14 the prophet chastises

the false prophets who claim there is “peace, when there is no peace.” He then compares these prophets to an unstable wall that they have whitewashed. All the paint in the world won’t keep the wall standing once the storms come. Likewise, a person can defy the odds and live without self-control, claiming all the while that they won’t suffer the consequences that other people suffer, but the wall eventually falls. Without self-control disaster is inevitable.

### *The Solution*

The answer to this problem is really quite simple: cultivate and practice self-control in all areas of life. That’s what the wise men in Proverbs keep urging. Rather than making excuses for one’s excesses, they advise us to take a cold, hard look at reality (the consequences of not having self-control), and then act according to wisdom.

It isn’t only Proverbs that teaches this. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7:8-9 teaches sexual abstinence before marriage. The expectation is simple: either marry or exercise self-control and abstain from sex. That sounds really strange today, especially to many in the “Millennial Generation” who have been raised on “Sex and the City,” and the whole notion of sex with anyone, anytime, anywhere. But then those programs never show the real consequences of out-of-control sexual appetites, do they? In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 Paul asserts that self-control is something you attain, a habit you develop, like an athlete in training.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize?

So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

The key is found in Paul's statement that an athlete "exercises self-control *in all things*." If athletes exercise such self-control in order to win a prize that is bound not to last, we should certainly be ready to do so in order to receive the "imperishable wreath" of eternal life. Because without self-control, our lives will not have the holiness required in order to "see God" (Hebrews 12:14). The principle is simple: every "wall" has to be maintained, or else it will collapse.<sup>7</sup>

### *It's Never Too Late*

Back to Proverbs 25:28: What if your "city" has already been broken into due to lack of a "wall" (self-discipline)? What if your life is headed down one of the self-destructive paths the wise men warn against so eloquently? Does Proverbs lead us to believe that it's too late?

The answer is, no. By likening self-control to a wall, the writers of Proverbs also suggest that, like walls, lives can be repaired just as surely as they can be broken down. But how?

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<sup>7</sup>The quality of self-control is so important that if a man doesn't have it, he can't serve the church as an elder, according to Titus 1:7-8.

First, through forgiveness, which is available for the asking. Romans 3:23 declares that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." And in one sense, lack of self-discipline is what sin is. But the promise is that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from *all* sin (1 John 1:7), even our worst acts of foolish indiscretion.

Second, through Christ, we have God's Holy Spirit to help us develop the self-discipline we need, regardless of what sins/lack of self-control we might struggle with. In Galatians 5:22-23 Paul lists the characteristics that make up the "fruit of the Spirit" in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness -- and, *self-control*. Even though we may innately struggle with maintaining self-control, the Holy Spirit within us will bear that fruit in our lives if we allow him to do so. You see, what we call "self-control" in reality is *Christ-control*. It is seeking his will and not our own, and being empowered by his Spirit rather than trying to live by our own strength.

That doesn't mean that developing self-control will be *easy*, but that it is *possible*, if you're willing to follow the Spirit's lead as expressed in Scripture. The person who has trusted Christ and been immersed into his death and has risen with him to a new life will find that he or she has all the help -- all the self-control -- that they need.

Nobody has to be like a city with a broken-down wall. So why do it?

## *Chapter 5*

### **Don't Be Dumb About Adultery**

When the prophets of Israel wanted to characterize the nation's faithlessness to their covenant with God, they frequently used the imagery of spiritual adultery. God was Israel's "husband," and they were his "bride," yet they had "played the harlot" with other gods.

The Lord said to me in the days of King Josiah: "Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and there played the whore? And I thought, 'After she has done all this she will return to me,' but she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it. She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce. Yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore. Because she took her whoredom lightly, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree. Yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the Lord."<sup>1</sup>

It's rough language, but it makes the point that God tolerates no rivals.

It also shows the seriousness and ugliness of the sin of adultery. After all, not

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<sup>1</sup>Jeremiah 3:6-10. Of course, the tragic marital history of Hosea and Gomer is the classic statement of the spiritual adultery theme.

committing adultery was one of the fundamental laws which God gave to Israel,<sup>2</sup> and God took this sin so seriously that the law of Moses called for death by stoning for both parties involved.<sup>3</sup>

Why is adultery so serious as to call for the death penalty? Because God knew that this sin would undermine the family structure in Israel, and as a result undermine Israelite society as a whole in a way that nothing else could. And, God knows that adultery is a sin that captivates people like no other. I have seen men and women risk and lose everything that was most precious to them -- family, reputation, job, even their relationship with God -- because of an infatuation with someone who wasn't their spouse. There is simply no way to calculate the destructive power of adultery.

Proverbs underlines the seriousness of adultery by speaking repeatedly and directly about it and its consequences, and by pleading with the "young man"<sup>4</sup> to follow the path of Wisdom, a path that leads away from adultery. No one should be dumb about this sin -- it's just too dangerous!

*Solomon Says. . .*

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<sup>2</sup>See the Seventh Commandment (Exodus 20:14).

<sup>3</sup>Deuteronomy 22:22.

<sup>4</sup>As noted earlier, Proverbs is consistently addressed to a young man, so the warnings concern becoming sexually involved with any woman other than his wife. But the truths stated apply equally to both women and men. Proverbs' approach isn't about caricaturing women as evil or men as gullible, as some suggest; the book simply speaks to a particular cultural situation, and the dangers that confront both men and women tempted to commit adultery.

Proverbs contains four primary texts that warn against adultery, and all are from the earlier part of the book which contains the “proverbs of Solomon” (1:1, 10:1, 25:1). This is somewhat ironic, since it turns out it was a form of adultery that led to Solomon’s eventual downfall. His many wives (700 -- plus 300 concubines!) turned his heart away from God and toward idolatry. According to 1 Kings 3:1 Solomon originally married the daughter of Pharaoh, but in 11:1 we are told that “Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh.” He didn’t abandon his first wife; he simply wasn’t faithful to her. You can read the whole sordid story in 1 Kings 11. Perhaps it was because he later saw the error of his ways that he wrote what he did in Proverbs, or perhaps he wrote the proverbs first but failed to live up to his own ideals. Such things have happened to men before.

In spite of Solomon’s own failures in this area, his teachings are still valid, so let’s look at them carefully.

1. *Proverbs 2:16-19*. This text tells the young man that if he will pursue and follow Wisdom,

So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her  
smooth words,  
who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God;  
for her house sinks down to death, and her paths to the departed;  
none who go to her come back, nor do they regain the paths of life.

The word translated by the ESV as “forbidden” in verse 16 literally means “strange.” The woman is “strange” in that she is someone other than the young man’s wife. Verse 17 points out her dual sins: she forsakes “the companion of her youth” (i.e., her husband), and she “forgets the covenant of her God.”<sup>5</sup> So she sins against both her husband and against God himself.

It turns out that adultery is a very complex sin. Although those guilty of adultery, as well as those planning to be, often argue, “I’m only hurting myself,” the claim simply isn’t true. First, the adulterer sins against the other person involved in the relationship by using him or her simply for sexual gratification. Second, the adulterer sins against his/her own spouse and against the spouse of the other person, if that person is also married. Third, there is the obvious sin against God. Finally, adulterers sin not only against all these others, but even against themselves. In 1 Corinthians 6:18 Paul, in harmony with Proverbs, admonishes us to “Flee from sexual immorality. Every other<sup>6</sup> sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.” Not only is adultery (and all sexual sin) uniquely a violation of another person, it is uniquely a violation of one’s own personhood as well; we just weren’t

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<sup>5</sup>Koptak (101) points out that this is the only occurrence of the word “covenant” in Proverbs. He also maintains, in contrast to some other commentators, that the “covenant” referred to in verse 17 is the woman’s marriage covenant, not Israel’s covenant with God. But he adds that the abandonment of the marriage covenant also severs the covenant with God.

<sup>6</sup>As pointed out in the ESV footnote, the word “other” is not represented in the Greek, but Paul seems to assume it since he is contrasting sexual sin with all others. So the insertion of “other” seems justified.

created for this sort of thing.

Proverbs 2:18-19 clearly outlines the consequence of succumbing to the embrace of the “strange” woman: death. The implied admonition is to stay off her street, since that street to her house leads to where the departed go and don’t come back. Once a person starts down the road of adultery, redemption (spiritually speaking) is still possible, but the shattering of the adulterer’s life and of others touched by this sin is permanent. Even though an adulterer may eventually find forgiveness through the blood of Christ, the pain of what has been destroyed will linger for a lifetime. The wise man says, “Don’t be dumb: just don’t go there.”

2. *Proverbs 5:1-23*. So serious and dangerous is the sin of adultery that the entire fifth chapter is devoted to it. It begins, “My son, be attentive to my wisdom; incline your ear to my understanding. . . .” In other words, “Listen up!” What follows is of the utmost importance and seriousness, so the reader needs to be certain to hear it and hear it well. Once again the text speaks of the “forbidden” (“strange”) woman. Very often it is the very quality of “forbiddenness” that seems to draw some people into adultery.

Verses 1-6 acknowledge the appeal of adultery, but at the same time the deceptiveness of it. The forbidden woman’s lips drip honey and her words are smoother than oil, “but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword.” Eventually, “Her feet go down to death; her steps follow the path to Sheol.” Following her isn’t a good idea!

Verses 7-14 offer the surest deterrent to adultery: stay away! "Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house." It's much easier to stay away from temptation than to walk away once you've gotten involved. In fact, walking away may require some drastic measures, but if you're being tempted by this sin, then it's best not to walk -- run! Follow the example of Joseph when Potiphar's wife attempted to entice him into a sexual relationship. When all else failed, he simply "left his garment in her hand" (she had grabbed him by it) and "fled out of the house."<sup>7</sup> Here's how that translates into today's world: If you are being seriously tempted to commit adultery, get as far away from the source of temptation as you can, and do so as quickly as possible. It may mean changing your circle of friends, getting a different job, moving to a new neighborhood -- all of which may seem drastic. But anything is better than the disaster that will come if you get caught up in a web of adultery. Notice that this isn't a sin of *ignorance*, according to verses 7-15, but a sin of *ignoring* the wise teaching given earlier in life. The sad adulterer ends up wondering, "Why didn't I listen?" and finds himself "at the brink of utter ruin in the assembled congregation." Of concern here is not simply what happens to the man's family, his job, and his reputation, but what his sin costs him in regard to his standing with God's people as a whole.

Verses 15-20 offer another deterrent to adultery: enjoy the spouse you have. In 1 Corinthians 7:2-5 Paul writes,

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<sup>7</sup>Genesis 39:13. The entire chapter is instructive in dealing with sexual temptation. It's also very realistic about the potential consequences of being faithful to God in such situations.

. . . because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you through lack of self-control.

Notice that Paul's primary goal in these verses is to help Christians avoid sexual immorality, and a healthy sexual relationship in marriage is an important deterrent to that sin. Proverbs 5 goes even further. The writer doesn't say simply, "Have a healthy sexual relationship," but encourages the young man to "Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well." So far that sounds like a poetic way of saying the same thing Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7. But then, continuing the water imagery, he says, "Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe." In other words, enjoy the spouse you have, to whom you have already committed your life. It's amazing how little effort some people put into having a strong marriage, but how much effort they expend in finding someone else! In his 1983 book *The Myth of the Greener Grass*,<sup>8</sup> J. Alan Petersen explores the mind

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<sup>8</sup>Tyndale House, 1983.

games people play where their marriages are concerned. They tell themselves that somehow life will be better if they have someone else, if they engage in an illicit sexual relationship, or if they switch spouses altogether. But as he says, it's a myth. Usually the problems a person has in one marriage will be carried over to another. The same challenges of love, acceptance, and mutual responsibility are still there, as is the need to be selfless and other-focused. Besides, that "other person" ("forbidden woman/man") who seems so ideally suited to you undoubtedly carries a lot of baggage of their own, and having them may not be as much delight as you might think. Otherwise, why are they seeking someone else's spouse? What hope is there for two adulterers to have a successful marriage when they both know the other can't be trusted?

Like Paul, Proverbs points to the sexual side of marriage as an effective deterrent to adultery. "Let her breasts<sup>9</sup> fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love. Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman and embrace the bosom of an adulteress?" (5:19-20). The expression "be intoxicated with her love" is literally "be led astray by her love." That may seem like an odd thing to say in regard to one's wife, but the point is, "Get lost in her love," or as we might say today, "Be

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<sup>9</sup>The Revised Standard Version reads, "be infatuated always with her love," but the language is more specific than this, pointing clearly to the sexual side of marriage. The New Revised Standard Version corrects this: "May her breasts satisfy you at all times." Not only is this a more literal rendering, but it keeps the balance of the contrast between the "breasts" of one's wife vs. the "bosom" of an adulteress. It is also a healthy reminder that although the Bible is strongly against sexual immorality, it isn't anti-sex, a point also made obvious by the Song of Songs, in addition to Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7 cited above.

crazy about her." If so, you won't likely be looking for someone else.

The usual rejoinder to such teaching is, "But what if I just don't love my wife any more?" Notice that Proverbs doesn't provide loving your wife as an option, but as an obligation. It *can* be (and is) commanded. Similarly, in Ephesians 5:25 Paul says, "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church." Remember what attracted you to her in the first place. Ask yourself to what extent your own behavior and attitudes have contributed to the breakdown in your marital relationship. Get help from a qualified counselor if you need it. Just do whatever is necessary to rekindle your love-relationship with your wife. Looking for someone else is a non-option.

Verses 21-23 present yet a third alternative to adultery: remember that God observes everything you do. "For a man's ways are before the eyes of the Lord, and he ponders all his paths. . . He dies for lack of discipline, and because of his great folly he is led astray." This is reminiscent of Hebrews 13:4: "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." It's just plain dumb to think you can commit this sin and get away with it.

3. *Proverbs 6:20-35*. As if he's afraid the foolish youth hasn't really been listening, the wise teacher returns to the subject of adultery in the very next chapter. He begins with four verses of admonitions to the young man to pay attention and never forget the teachings of his father and mother, especially where adultery is concerned. In particular he points to the danger of a sinful relationship with a married woman

(verses 24-35). As bad as it is to steal food, that's sometimes understandable and may be forgiven. But stealing someone else's wife is likely to get you killed. Think of the many instances of homicide that occur as a consequence of domestic violence. Often this has to do with a jealous husband or boyfriend and an unfaithful wife (or the reverse). The wise man's point: You don't want to be the headline in tomorrow's news. So stay away!

Even if adultery doesn't cost your life, it can still cost you dearly. Think of the example of King David after he committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite (2 Samuel 11). For a time it looked as if David had gotten away with his adultery and the subsequent murder of Uriah, who was one of his most loyal and faithful soldiers. But eventually Nathan the prophet exposed his sin and brought David to his knees in repentance. Still, David didn't escape the consequences of his actions. From 2 Samuel 1 until the time of his sin in chapter 11, David experienced an almost meteoric rise in power and popularity. After chapter 11, everything went downhill for him, as well as for his family. The infant son born to the adulterous union died. One of David's sons raped one of his daughters. Another son killed that one and had to flee for his life. David became so distracted and depressed by his family's disintegration that he did a poor job governing Israel. Eventually his murderous son returned to try to depose him, only to be killed in a battle for David's kingdom. It's a sad, ugly story. Its message, along with that of these texts in Proverbs, is clear when it comes to the consequences of adultery: Don't be dumb!

4. *Proverbs 7:1-27*. Here is another entire chapter devoted to warning the young man against adultery. (Do you get the impression the wise man was afraid he might not be listening?) Such an abundance of material on one subject is a clear indication both of its danger as well as its importance.

What the teacher describes is something like a one-act play. He describes a scene he has actually witnessed, “a young man lacking sense,” hanging out near the house of the “forbidden woman” (further defined as “the adulteress with her smooth words”). She lures him not only with her provocative dress, but also with assurances of her husband’s absence and of her readiness to make love to him. The result: he follows her “as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as a stag is caught fast till an arrow pierces its liver; as a bird rushes into a snare; he does not know that it will cost him his life” (verses 22-23).

The teacher’s admonition is the same as before: don’t go there. Pay attention. Realize where this will end -- in your death!

#### *A New Wrinkle to an Old Sin*

Today, thanks to the Internet, we face another form of temptation that David and Solomon knew nothing about, what some have called “virtual adultery.”<sup>10</sup> Virtual adultery refers to the use of Internet pornography that is so readily available to anyone

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<sup>10</sup>See the excellent article by Dan Williams, “Virtual Adultery,” available from the author at [dwilliams@harding.edu](mailto:dwilliams@harding.edu).

with a computer or smart phone. Without ever leaving the privacy of their homes, offices, automobiles, or wherever they might be, people are able to tempt themselves in ways Solomon never dreamed of.

In 2013 Holly Finn<sup>11</sup> reported in a *Wall Street Journal* article that 12% of all websites are pornographic and that 40 million Americans (including 70% of people ages 18-34) view such sites at least once a month. Other researchers report that 25% of all search engine requests are looking for pornography, and that there are more visits to porn sites than to Netflix, Amazon, and Twitter combined. Seventy percent of men and 30% of women admit to viewing porn, with about one-third of those visits taking place at work. As a result, therapists are seeing a sharp rise in patients who are addicted to pornography and all that goes with such a habit. For the first time, the recent DSM-5<sup>12</sup> lists "Hypersexual Disorder" as a diagnosis and describes compulsive pornography use as one of its characteristics.

The solution? According to researchers: just stop watching it. That sounds amazingly like Proverbs, doesn't it? "Just don't do it. Just don't go there."

But how does viewing pornography amount to adultery? It's simple. Jesus said in Matthew 5:28 that "whoever looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her *in his heart*." There's no question that viewing

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<sup>11</sup>"Online Pornography's Effects, and a New Way to Fight Them," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 3, 2013.

<sup>12</sup>*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. DSM-5 is the standard reference used by psychiatrists and psychologists in classifying and diagnosing mental disorders.

pornography is looking at a woman with the intent to lust. Otherwise, why do it? Jesus follows this teaching with the command that if your eye or your hand is the cause of offense, pluck it out. Almost no one takes this literally (the underlying cause isn't your physical body), but here's the point: *whatever it takes to get free from this sin, do it before it's too late.*

And just think what this sort of irresponsible behavior can and will do to a marriage? If you are continually desiring someone other than your wife or husband -- even if it's someone you don't actually know -- it's bound to affect your relationship negatively. No husband or wife can hope to compete visually with the images found in pornography, and even if they could, it's just plain sinful to be wanting someone else when you already have a spouse to whom you have pledged your loyalty. Virtual adultery is nothing less than emotional infidelity, and that's just as serious -- and sinful -- as physical adultery.

Make no mistake: virtual adultery is *real adultery*, not a lesser form of it. And it's often a gateway to physical adultery as well.

So what should you do if you're guilty of either physical or virtual adultery? It's not rocket science, as the wise man says in Proverbs:

1. *Stop it completely, and stop it now.* No excuses. No delays. No "working on it." Just give it up. In the case of virtual adultery, make yourself accountable to others for all your online activities. Put the home computer in a high-traffic, clearly visible

place. Ask someone you trust to review your phone use on a regular basis. Whatever you have to do, just do it!

2. *Ask God to forgive you and to strengthen you against this particular form of temptation.* The good news is, He will.

3. *Get whatever outside help you may need,* whether from a minister, Christian friend, or professional counselor. Use every resource available to you to beat this addiction.

4. *Take Solomon's advice: work at strengthening your marriage.* You'll be amazed at how putting more time and effort into your husband or wife will wean you away from interest in any form of adulterous relationship, whether physical or virtual.

Perhaps the best advice of all: don't get involved with adultery in any form -- virtual or physical -- to begin with. You'll never be sorry you didn't, and you will most definitely be sorry if you do.

## Chapter 6

### Don't Be Dumb About Money

Have you ever heard of the "Roby Millionaires"? How about the "Roby 43"? Roby, Texas is a farming community of just a few hundred people located not far from where I grew up, so I was intrigued to hear in 1997 that forty-three residents of that little community had become instant millionaires by pooling their money and winning the Texas Lottery. Their story went worldwide almost overnight, with the town being covered in the national media and various members of "The 43" appearing on the talk show circuit. Roby is kind of a hard-luck town where most folks barely get by, but with that windfall it gained the distinction of being the town with the highest number of millionaires per capita in the entire United States.

But that's not the whole story. In a follow-up television program several years later, I learned that most of the instantaneous millionaires had gone broke, that there were deep divisions within the community and especially among "The 43" themselves -- and even strife within their families -- over their new-found wealth. Some of the "lucky 43" had died tragically. Even all those millions of dollars didn't make the town a happier, more prosperous place, and today it still struggles to survive, a sadder -- and hopefully a wiser -- place than before. Money wasn't the answer. It seldom is.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from James T. South, *Uncommon Sense: The Wisdom of James for Dispossessed Believers* (DeWard, 2014) 126.

### *Proverbs' Wisdom about Money*

Since Proverbs is a book of practical wisdom, it's not surprising that it says a great deal about money. If it didn't, it wouldn't be very practical, because money is a fact of life we have to learn to deal with, and that takes wisdom. Money can be either a great blessing or a great curse. It all depends on whether or not we learn to be wise in our pursuit and use of it. There are an untold number of books, seminars, DVDs, and other media focused on teaching people how to get rich and spend wisely. But you have to wonder if they are really that helpful to those who use them, or are they mostly helpful to those who produce and profit from them? If all of these money experts have "the answer" to acquiring and using wealth, why aren't more people better off after using them? The big question is, how much *godly* wisdom do they really contain?

To give us that basic (and much-needed) wisdom, Proverbs offers *Seven Rules about Money* and how not to be dumb about it. These rules are not found in one text of Proverbs, nor are they listed in one-two-three fashion (as I'm going to do). Rather, they are scattered throughout the book. Still, these seven guidelines emerge consistently in the words of the wise to those needing wisdom about money.

*Rule #1 - Before you do anything else with your money, honor God with whatever you have.*

Proverbs 3:9-10 says, "Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of

your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine." Deuteronomy 26:1-11 tells Israel that, once they are in their Promised Land and have harvested their very first crop, they are to take the first portion harvested and take it to the priest and offer it to the Lord. Why? In recognition of his goodness to them and with the realization that without God, no such harvest could have occurred. By doing so they showed both honor toward God, as well as trust in him, that just as he had provided the firstfruits, so there would be *second* fruits to come. So firstfruit giving became the norm in Israel.

Proverbs 3 says that if this practice is followed diligently, there will always be plenty of produce and wine. It's that latter part of the verse that has caught the attention of so many purveyors of the "Health and Wealth Gospel," the idea that by following certain financial practices, one can guarantee God's blessings. But the point here isn't to "invest" in God, but to *honor* God. It isn't a manipulative technique for extracting blessings from God. Rather, it is an act of trust in God, with the assurance that by putting him first, we will have all we need. In this respect, it's very similar to Jesus' teaching about "seeking first the kingdom of God." When we do, Jesus says, "all these things" (the things necessary for life that he had referred to earlier) will be ours as well (Matthew 6:33). We don't need to worry. God can be trusted - completely.

Question: Is verse 10 an absolute promise of material wealth or prosperity? That's the way the "Health and Wealth" folks understand it, but is that a valid conclusion? The answer is "no," and here's why:

a. *Proverbs, along with the rest of Scripture, has a lot to say about righteous people who are poor.*<sup>2</sup> Jesus' pointing out to his disciples a poor widow who gave all she had is a case in point (Mark 12:41-44). Nothing is said in the text to suggest that the widow became wealthy because she gave so generously. So righteousness and wealth do not necessarily go hand in hand.<sup>3</sup>

b. *Sometimes wealth isn't what's best for us.* Wealth has been the ruin of many people, and you or I might be among them if we were given more wealth than we have the ability to manage. Have you ever thought, when wishing you had more, that maybe you don't because God doesn't want you to hurt yourself with it, and knows you would? Think about it.

c. *There are other forms of blessings that are more important than money and material things.* That's why Jesus taught us to "lay up treasure in heaven" rather than here on earth. Which of us, one second after eternity has begun, will wish we had had more money or owned more stuff while on this earth? Yet there are many who will wish they had put God's kingdom first, but didn't.

Here's the bottom line: If you don't honor God with your wealth, that's idolatry,

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<sup>2</sup>See Ecclesiastes 8:14 for a clear rebuttal of this idea. In Luke 6:20 Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Likewise, James 1:9 admonishes the "lowly (in context, "poor") brother" to "boast in his exaltation." Life is simply a far more complicated matter than the "Health and Wealth" advocates allow.

<sup>3</sup>In ancient Judaism, "the poor" was a frequent way of designating those who were righteous before God in the Old Testament, in the intertestamental literature, as well as in the New Testament (see James 2:5 for an example). See Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Eerdmans, 1982) 111-112.

and you'll lose everything in eternity. How dumb is that!

*Rule #2 - Be generous toward the poor.*

There's a moral principle involved with money: you can't be blessed by keeping it for yourself. It's a counterintuitive concept, but Scripture is clear that sometimes you have to lose material wealth in order to gain spiritual blessings. Here's how Proverbs 11:24-26 puts it:

One gives freely, yet grows all the richer;  
another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want.  
Whoever brings blessing will be enriched,  
and one who waters will himself be watered.  
The people curse him who holds back grain,  
but a blessing is on the head of him who sells.

Although Proverbs 11:24-26 doesn't specify giving to the poor, 14:21 does: "Whoever despises his neighbor is a sinner, but blessed is he who is generous to the poor." Likewise verse 31 says, "Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him." Both "despising" and "oppressing" the poor were considered extremely sinful in ancient Israel. God had made provisions in his covenant law with Abraham's descendants that they should have a special concern for the poor, just as God himself has.<sup>4</sup> For this reason they were not to harvest their fields

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<sup>4</sup>See Psalms 12:5, 68:5-10; Exodus 2:23-24. Because Israel was once poor and enslaved but were

to the very edges or pick up the grapes which fell to the ground in their vineyards. They were to deliberately leave something for the poor.<sup>5</sup> To refuse to do so was to “despise” the poor, and it’s always dangerous to despise that which God loves.

In order to fully appreciate such teachings as Proverbs 14:21, we must be aware of the high degree of oppression and abuse suffered by the poor in ancient times. To be poor basically meant to be powerless, and the powerful were always ready to take advantage of the weak. Many people had to sell themselves or family members into slavery because of their debts, and most poor people eventually lost their lands and homes to more powerful land owners who were able to take them over with impunity.<sup>6</sup> There was practically no middle class, only a very few rich people at the top of the economic ladder, with almost everyone else gathered at the bottom. No wonder God was so specific about how his people were to treat the poor!

Notice that, according to Proverbs 14:31, giving to the poor has a dual effect: (1) It brings blessings to the giver. (2) It honors God, the Maker of the poor.<sup>7</sup>

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delivered by God, so they must have a special regard for the poor and enslaved. In this way their conduct was to reflect the nature of God himself.

<sup>5</sup>Leviticus 19:9-10. See Ruth 2:1-16 for an example of such “gleaning” which went above and beyond what the law required.

<sup>6</sup>See 1 Kings 21:1-19 for an extreme example. Sadly, such land-grabs were not unusual. In our own day, we see something similar taking place in what we politely call the “gentrification” of poorer sections of our cities. Wealthy developers are allowed to force poor people from their homes so that more expensive housing can be built for wealthier clients, housing which the poor themselves could never afford.

<sup>7</sup>And, obviously, it benefits the poor. But it is instructive that the humanitarian motive is not addressed directly in this proverb.

Proverbs 19:17 takes this a step further: "Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed." In other words, to give to the poor is to give to God himself. It is hard to read this verse without thinking of Jesus' commendation in Matthew 25 of those who gave food, clothing, water, and hospitality to those in need, saying, "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."

And notice: the poor may not be able to repay us, but the Lord always can -- and will. Maybe not in a monetary way, but we will be repaid.

*Rule #3 - Avoid debt whenever possible.*

"The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender" (Proverbs 22:7). The word "slave" might sound rather extreme, but if you think about it, it's really not. A slave is someone who isn't free to do as he or she wants, who is in some sense "owned" by someone else, and that's exactly what happens when we become indebted financially. Just ask a recent college graduate who has \$80,000-\$100,000 in school loans to pay off and who is making \$40,000 each year. That debt (and the interest that goes with it) is always there, always impeding financial independence and progress.

As noted earlier, enslavement was a frequent consequence of debt in the ancient world. People were simply overpowered by their indebtedness and by their debtors. And often they became their slaves, and not in a figurative sense. Although Proverbs doesn't

state the solution to this problem of enslavement, it's rather obvious without being said: avoid it in the first place if at all possible. This is a great challenge today, where we live in a debt culture. Virtually everyone borrows to buy a house, a car, and sometimes things of far lesser cost and value. Credit card debt is crippling many households. Many Christians do not give what they should to the Lord because of the weight of debt. There's really only one solution: the self-control to pay down our debts and avoid accruing more. This is more easily said than done, but it can be done in most instances. But remember Proverbs 25:28. Nowhere is our lack of self-control likely to cost us more than when it comes to the right use of money. If you can avoid debt, do it.

Proverbs 11:15 applies this principle to a special case: going in debt for a stranger. "Whoever puts up security for a stranger will surely suffer harm, but he who hates striking hands in pledge is secure." "Striking hands" is probably something like shaking hands in agreement to a deal. Who would ever do such a thing for a stranger? The wise man probably has in mind some sort of business deal in which one person is kind of a "silent partner" furnishing the money for someone else's endeavor. If we don't know that person well, we could be letting ourselves in for lots of trouble. Again, the writer doesn't give an imperative, but the message is obvious: don't do it, regardless how much you may think you stand to gain from it.<sup>8</sup>

Proverbs 6:1-5 gives the after-effect of having put up security for someone else.

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<sup>8</sup>Koptak (320) asks, "Is this a contradiction to the call to charity found throughout the sayings. . . or is it an example of doing the right thing at the right time? The surrounding verses suggest that both are true; it is better to give generously than to make a pledge."

My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor, have given your pledge for a  
stranger,  
if you are snared in the words of your mouth, caught in the words of your mouth,  
then do this, my son, and save yourself, for you have come into the hand of your  
neighbor:  
go, hasten and plead urgently with your neighbor.  
Give your eyes no sleep and your eyelids no slumber,  
save yourself like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter,  
like a bird from the hand of the fowler.

Notice how the wise man uses hunting imagery to describe the desperate plight of one who has put up security for another. He is like an animal or bird caught in a snare, and like such an animal, must do whatever is necessary to extricate himself from this predicament as soon as possible. Being in debt to or for someone else is a dangerous thing.

We might wonder, are there no exceptions? Isn't it a charitable thing to help out a friend or family member? The proverb is obviously an exaggeration, because most of us would do this for someone we know well or for a loved one. But the exaggeration makes the point: there are serious hazards to being in someone else's debt. Avoid it whenever possible, and if you are already there, do whatever you can as fast as you can to get yourself free.

*Rule #4 - Don't pretend to have more or less than you have.*

Proverbs 12:9 says, "Better to be lowly and have a servant than to play the great man and lack bread." In other words, don't try to make others think you have more than you actually have; there's no virtue in being thought wealthy when you can't eat.

This rule ties in closely with Rule #3. How many people go into debt buying things they really can't afford because they think they need to impress others with what they have? Image and ego are largely to blame for much indebtedness. Be who you are and enjoy what you have. Besides, those you're trying to impress may not be as well off as you think! Bernard L. (Bernie) Madoff was a well-known financier, investment adviser and stock broker. At one time his personal worth (financial assets) was estimated to be \$126 million, plus an additional \$700 million value of his investment firm. But in 2008 he was arrested and later convicted for running a "Ponzi scheme" through which he had bilked investors (some of whom included charitable organizations) out of almost \$65 billion. He was subsequently sentenced to 150 years in prison, which means he will likely die there. As a result, Madoff became the butt of many jokes, but how many people do you think envied him prior to his exposure and conviction? How many thought he had far more than he actually had? How many tried to impress him in various ways? How many lost millions of dollars because they assumed that a man of such wealth could be trusted to produce more wealth for them? And how many now wish they had simply been content with what they had, rather than trying to get more by investing with such an outrageous criminal?

Proverbs 13:7 says, "One pretends to be rich, yet has nothing; another pretends to be poor, yet has great wealth." This verse is similar to 12:9 but adds a twist: Some people pretend to be poor in spite of their wealth. Why? Probably so others won't expect anything from them. This is a form of hypocrisy and ingratitude. How many Christians have plenty for whatever they want to do, but when it comes to giving to the Lord and for the spreading of the gospel, "poor-mouth" as though they have nothing!

Rather than pretending to be either rich or poor, Proverbs counsels us to be thankful for what we have and to use it for God's glory.

*Rule #5 - Don't sacrifice what is truly valuable for the sake of money.*

This may sound like a contradiction to some people, but the truth is, there are many things in life of far more value than money. Proverbs 22:12 mentions one:

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,  
and favor is better than silver or gold.

The rich and the poor meet together; the Lord is the maker of them all.

A good reputation is a priceless asset, and all the money in the world can't buy one. But the pursuit of money can cost you the one you have.

In Shakespeare's *Othello* Iago tells Othello, "Good name in man or woman, dear my lord, is the immediate jewel of their souls. Who steals my purse steals trash. . . . But he that filches from me my good name robs me of that which not enriches him, and

makes me poor indeed.”<sup>9</sup> No one who earns the reputation of a “money-grubber” or “materialist” or a cheater is likely to be respected or otherwise thought well of by others. And, once a good name has been tarnished, it can rarely be recovered. The pursuit of money simply isn’t worth what it may cost.

Proverbs 23:4-5 provides another example of sacrificing what is truly valuable for the sake of money:

Do not toil to acquire wealth; be discerning enough to desist.

When your eyes light on it, it is gone, for suddenly it sprouts wings,  
flying like an eagle toward heaven.

To be clear, these verses are not advising us to refrain from working for a living (see Chapter 8). Rather, they are telling us the importance of knowing when enough is enough. Wealth is often a fleeting thing, and it isn’t worth the sacrifice of your health, your family, or even your life. There has to be a stopping-place, and the wise person will recognize when he or she reaches that point. What is wealth for if we don’t have the time to enjoy it, or if we have no one with whom to share it, or if we die from striving to get it? This is powerfully expressed in Dan Fogelberg’s song “The Power of Gold”:

The story is told of the power of gold

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<sup>9</sup>Act 3, Scene 3.

And its lure on the unsuspecting.  
It glitters and shines, it badgers and blinds  
And constantly needs protecting.  
Balance the cost of the soul you lost  
With the dreams you lightly sold.  
Are you under the power of gold?

Those who pursue wealth think a lot about the “bottom line.” Well, the bottom line is, according to Proverbs, the pursuit of wealth simply is not a wise use of your life.

*Rule #6 - Don't be fooled by get-rich-quick schemes.*

The promise of easy money quickly gained has always been a temptation, but the Internet makes it even more powerful and widespread. There are schemes and scams too numerous to mention that promise that a small “investment” on our part will reap huge rewards -- and fast. But here's what Proverbs says about that: “Wealth gained hastily will dwindle, but whoever gathers little by little will increase it” (13:11). The point? Easy come, easy go. Just think of all the professional athletes you have heard about who signed enormous contracts out of all proportion to what they actually do for the money, and who within ten years or less are working in a car wash or barely getting by making appearances at low-level events.

Now, this proverb doesn't suggest that no one ever gets rich quickly, or that it's wrong to do so. Just that it's not a goal, because wealth quickly obtained most likely

won't last. (Remember the "Roby 43"?) The wiser and more realistic course is to "gather little by little" through hard work, patience, and saving.

*Rule #7 - Learn to be content with enough.*

Proverbs 30:7-9 contains a remarkable prayer that we would all do well to memorize and live by:

Two things I ask of you; deny them not to me before I die:

Remove far from me falsehood and lying;

give me neither poverty nor riches;

feed me with the food that is needful for me;

lest I be full and deny you and say, "Who is the Lord?"

or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.

This prayer sums up the spirit of Proverbs where money is concerned: "Make me neither poor nor rich." Why? So I will keep perspective and maintain spiritual priorities.<sup>10</sup> That's wise. Very wise. Yet, how many of us would be willing to pray this prayer in all sincerity concerning our own lives?<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Commenting on this prayer, Bland writes, "Individuals engaged in the process of moral development must learn to hold to wealth tenuously. One's economic situation serves only as a means to a greater end: the development of integrity that images the nature of God. The use of wealth, like language, reflects character. The disciple nurtures an attitude toward wealth that strengthens her or his dependence on God" (137).

<sup>11</sup>Kidner, echoing C.H. Toy (*International Critical Commentary: Proverbs*, 1899), notes, "he

In a similar vein, Proverbs 16:8 says, "Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice." The scenario envisioned here is someone who has gained wealth, but at the expense of others who have been treated unjustly, especially those poorer and weaker than himself. Likewise, 15:16 advises, "Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it." How often have you seen someone with a good job, a happy family, living in a good location, and enjoying a healthy church life, trade all of that for a job that pays more money, only to find out that the true cost of that "little bit more" is the loss of things of far greater importance? Sometimes it's better simply to be content with what you have and where you are.

Paul may have had these proverbs in mind when he wrote 1 Timothy 6:6-10:

But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

Notice Paul's admonition that we should be content, and his definition of "rich" -- having sufficient food and clothing. According to most of our standards, that's setting

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might have prayed to use poverty or riches rightly, but knows his frailty too well" (179).

the bar awfully low. But notice the potential negative outcome: "some have wandered away from the faith."

You might be thinking, "Some -- but not all," and that is correct. But do you want to run the risk of being among the "some"?

## Chapter 7

### Don't Be Dumb About Drinking

#### *A Visit to a Strange World*

Suppose for a moment that you have come to the United States from some remote place where drinking alcohol doesn't exist, and in fact, you have never even heard of such a thing. During your visit you begin to see commercials for alcoholic beverages in magazines, on television, on the sides of buses, and in numerous other places. What would you conclude about drinking if these were your only sources of information?

You would probably notice that all of the people who do it are really pretty! In fact, much better looking than ordinary people. You might conclude that those who drink are much more suave and sophisticated than the average person. (After all, "the world's most interesting man" not only drinks, but is perpetually thirsty -- and recommends it!) You would no doubt notice also that drinking alcohol is always associated with good times -- ball games, tailgate parties, gatherings on beaches at sunset - and always in the company of lots of pretty people. To say the least, you would get the impression that drinking in many ways adds to the enjoyment and quality of life.

What you would *not* see are the victims of automobile accidents caused by drunken drivers, or the domestic quarrels that frequently erupt as a result of drinking, or the spousal abuse that often occurs when people drink too much, or the crimes that

people frequently commit when “under the influence.” You would never see the “drunk tank” at the local jail, or the red eyes and swollen faces of intoxicated people, or the jobs they have lost due to their overindulgence, or their broken marriages or their despairing and helpless children caught in the middle of the chaos they create.

In other words, you would never get a realistic view of the results of drinking beverage alcohol. So the writers of Proverbs, including King Solomon, King Lemuel, and the wise people who often narrate the book, all go out of their way to advise the young listener (and readers today) to beware of the dangers of drinking, and not to be dumb about it.

That the teachings in Proverbs are aimed primarily at young people is especially appropriate in this regard, since a study published in the *American Journal of Public Health*<sup>1</sup> revealed that beer and liquor advertisements are frequently aimed at teenagers, even though they aren't supposed to be. This conclusion is based on the number of ads on television programs and magazines which have teens as their primary audience: the more teen viewers, the more beer and liquor ads. So Proverbs has a special message for younger people: “Don't be dumb about drinking!”<sup>2</sup>

This isn't to suggest that drinking is primarily a problem with teenagers. Far from it. But the harsh reality is that the drinking habits of older people are often the product

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<sup>1</sup>Paul J. Chung, *et al*, “Association Between Adolescent Viewership and Alcohol Advertising,” *American Journal of Public Health*, 3, March, 2010, 555-562.

<sup>2</sup>Wine ads, on the other hand, are aimed primarily at women, since they are the biggest consumers of wine. No wonder that alcoholism among women is steadily increasing!

of what started in their teens. And, this is not simply a beverage alcohol problem, since there are all kinds of other drugs that impair judgment, damage health, and contribute to the destruction of human relationships. We shouldn't be dumb about these either.

### *The Words of the Wise*

There are three significant texts in Proverbs that warn against the dangers of alcohol abuse. Let's look at each briefly and see what they advise concerning the use of alcohol.

*Proverbs 20:1.* "Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise."<sup>3</sup> "Strong drink" is a general term for alcoholic beverages other than wine, that is, all forms of grain alcohol.<sup>4</sup> "Mocker" and "brawler" describe two ways alcohol sometimes causes people to behave. The word translated "mocker" is the same as the word for "scoffer" in 19:29. And remember that the "scoffer" in Proverbs is not only unwise, but is actually anti-wisdom. Too much to drink turns one into exactly what we should not want to be and what God definitely does not want us to be.<sup>5</sup>

Anyone who has observed drinkers knows that alcohol alters behavior and in

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<sup>3</sup>Or, as the footnote in the ESV indicates, "will not become wise." Both statements are obviously true. Koptak says "led astray" here suggests staggering both in steps and in judgment (483).

<sup>4</sup>This probably accounts for the NIV translating it as "beer" in place of "strong drink."

<sup>5</sup>Derek Kidner sees strong drink and wine in this text as a kind of poetic personification of a force which dominates the personality of the drinker. (*The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* [Inter-Varsity Press, 1964] 136).

some people even changes their personalities. (E.g., the Jekyll-and-Hyde type who is “a great guy unless he’s drunk,” or the normally truculent person who “mellows out” when drinking.) Some people lose their inhibitions when drinking, doing and saying things they would never do if not under the influence of alcohol. And, you don’t have to be “falling-down drunk” for that to happen. This isn’t to suggest that all who abuse alcohol are bad people, but there is no disputing the fact that alcohol causes some people to do very bad things. It simply is not wise to run that risk.

*Proverbs 23:29-35.* This text is part of a larger discussion (beginning at 23:1) concerning the dangers of gluttony, illicit sex (adultery and prostitution specifically), and drinking. The overall point concerning all of these is the need for self-discipline. Even our natural appetites (food and sex, for example) have to be controlled; when they aren’t, we suffer for it (see vs. 20-21, 26-27). The section specifically on drinking begins at verse 29:

Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining?

Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes?

Those who tarry long over wine; those who go to try mixed wine.

Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup

and goes down smoothly.

In the end it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder.

Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart utter perverse things.

You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea,

like one who lies on the top of a mast.

"They struck me," you will say, "but I was not hurt;

they beat me, but I did not feel it.

When shall I awake? I must find another drink."

Notice that this section begins with a question, then answers it. Those who suffer the maladies described in verse 29 are those who spend too much time with wine and who are fond of "mixed wine," something evidently done to make the drink more potent. This creates a variety of problems, including "woe" and "sorrow." (Drunks tend to get in trouble a lot.) "Strife" and "complaining" are also results of alcohol abuse, since alcohol abusers frequently have problems with interpersonal relations at home, work, school, in the neighborhood, etc. -- and not infrequently with other problem drinkers. The "wounds" and "redness of eyes" are indicative of the toll that drinking can take on one's physical health. There are plenty of health problems that can beset a person in life without inviting those that come with or are aggravated by alcohol.

In verse 31 the wise man acknowledges that wine has its appeal (those ads and commercials we mentioned earlier), but we shouldn't be fooled by that. In the end you may experience something like a snakebite. One argument drinkers frequently make is, there is only a small chance you'll become addicted to alcohol, and not everyone who drinks (even those who drink too much) gets into trouble. Obviously, that is true. However, it reminds me of the time my wife and I attended the Rattlesnake Roundup in Sweetwater, Texas. At one point a television reporter went into an enclosure that

contained at least one hundred venomous snakes to interview one of the snake handlers. He kept assuring her that they were in no danger, as long as they did not move suddenly or step on any of the serpents. At one point a snake slowly made its way directly toward the reporter, crawled over her shoe, and stuck its head up her pants-leg. Needless to say, she was terrified. All the while the experienced handler kept calmly reassuring her that if she just stood still, no harm would result. And, he was right. The snake eventually withdrew its head and crawled away. But here's the point: even if the snake handler was 100% right, I still wouldn't go into that pit, would you? What if that reporter had lost her nerve or fainted? Going in there was a foolish thing to do -- not because you are certain to get bitten, but because you very well might be. Why risk it?

But there's more. Verses 33-34 describe the mental impairment experienced by the drinker, his hallucinations and distorted judgment. He isn't even able to stand up, but when he lies down, it's as if he's lying in a raft in the midst of the ocean, being tossed all over the place, or as if he's attempting to lie down on the mast of a ship. (I'm not sure what that would be like, but it can't be a very pleasant sensation, can it?) In verse 35 the drunkard brags about being assaulted but claims he wasn't hurt. The real problem is, he isn't sensible enough to know what has happened to him. But when he wakes up, his only thought is where to find that next drink, and the cycle starts all over again.

A word of caution is in order here. The wise man isn't describing drinking

minimal amounts of alcohol; he's talking about drunkenness. But your senses can become impaired long before you reach an obviously drunken state, and because of the alcohol, you most likely won't recognize your condition. So how does a person know he or she is not addicted to alcohol? There's only one sure way: stop drinking.

*Proverbs 31:4-7.* This text on drinking is a very interesting one, because it is part of "The words of King Lemuel" (whose identity, remember, is otherwise unknown), but it is actually "an oracle that his mother taught him" (31:1). Once again, the wisdom of women as well as men has a prominent place in this book.<sup>6</sup>

It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine,  
or for rulers to take strong drink,  
lest they drink and forget what has been decreed  
and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.

Give strong drink to the one who is perishing,  
and wine to those in bitter distress;  
let them drink and forget their poverty  
and remember their misery no more.

In addition to reminding him of some of his kingly duties (such as defending the rights of the poor and needy, vs. 8-9), Lemuel's mom had warned him of some pitfalls

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<sup>6</sup>For the identity of King Lemuel and some comments on the wisdom of women in Proverbs, see Chapter 1.

that can befall a king, but that are equally applicable to all of us non-royal types as well. One of these, not surprisingly, is sexual promiscuity (vs. 2-3), which is linked with drinking in this chapter, as well as in chapter 23. Notice that Lemuel's mother didn't just advise him against getting drunk, but against drinking at all (although the problem of forgetting things he should remember may imply drunkenness). Her reasoning? The king has better things to do with his time than sit around drinking. He has important business to conduct, especially on behalf of the poor and needy, and using alcohol as a recreational drink will only hinder him from doing what is truly important. It's an interesting phenomenon about alcohol, how it becomes a form of recreation within itself. People frequently get together to share a bottle of wine or kill a six-pack of beer, but how often does someone say, "Come over and let's split a six-pack of Diet Coke"? There's something more recreational about drinking alcohol. The king shouldn't get involved in such things, because he needs to keep his wits about him if he is to rule wisely and fairly, and he won't do that if he's in the habit of drinking (v. 5).

Verses 6-7 view alcohol as what it actually is: a drug. Something that might be given to people who are already miserable in order to ease their pain. But again, the king has more important things to do and certainly should not be consumed by alcohol (vs. 8-9).

Question: If it's not a good idea for the king to be a drinker, is it a good idea for a child of the King and a follower of the King of Kings? Don't *we* have more important things to do? Don't we need all our wits about us as we strive to live for God in a

godless world? First Peter 5:8 says, "Be sober-minded, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." Drinking just makes it more likely that that "someone" might be you! Remember that in listing the "works of the flesh," which Paul says are "evident" (not hard to spot), "drunkenness" is listed right along with things such as sexual immorality (just as in Proverbs 23 and 31), idolatry, sorcery, and strife. This alone should make any Christian think twice about using beverage alcohol.

### *Objection!*

Any time someone points out what these texts in Proverbs say about drinking, someone is sure to protest that the Bible never condemns drinking *per se*, only drunkenness. And, this is absolutely right. But it isn't the whole story. There are actually *three categories of biblical texts on the subject of drinking*, and we need to pay attention to all of them.

*First, there are texts that present wine in a very positive light, in fact, as a sign of God's goodness and blessings.* For example, when Isaac blessed his son Jacob, he said, "May God give you the dew of heaven and the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine" (Genesis 27:28). Similarly, the Psalmist praises God because "You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread to strengthen man's heart" (Psalms 104:14-15). Then there is

Ecclesiastes 9:7 which advises the reader to “Go, eat your bread in joy and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.” Along with these are the well-known facts that our Lord himself turned water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee (John 2), and that Paul recommended “a little wine” for Timothy’s chronic digestive ailments (1 Timothy 5:23).<sup>7</sup> Appropriate to this discussion are the comments found in the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*:

In the ancient Near East, with its scarcity of water, wine was a necessity rather than a luxury. It therefore easily became an image of sustenance and life. . . . Due to its ongoing relationship to the life of the community, wine becomes, in association with grain and oil, a technical term for the covenant blessings promised by God to Israel for obedience and withheld by God for disobedience. These terms will often be found linked in texts relating their presence or absence to God’s provision or punishment and to Israel’s obedience or covenant breaking.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>I am aware of the opinion of some that in these texts “wine” must mean non-alcoholic grape juice. For a variety of reasons that I won’t go into here, I find this view unpersuasive and not in harmony with the implications of some of the relevant texts. However, when the term “new wine” is used, grape juice is most likely the intent.

<sup>8</sup>“Wine,” in Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (IVP Academic, 1998) 953. This is an excellent resource, especially for some of the imagery found in Proverbs, as well as elsewhere in the Bible. It is also rich in homiletical suggestions, although that is not its primary intent. “Throughout its history Israel was a wine-producing and wine-consuming country. Except for the sect of the Recabites [*sic*] (see Jer. 35), the production and use of wine was a commonly accepted practice” (*Journeys Through the Bible: Proverbs* [Sweet Publishing, 1998] 79; author unknown).

*The second set of texts condemn the use of "strong drink" as well as too much wine.* In addition to the Proverbs texts discussed above, these include Isaiah 5:11-12:

Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may run after strong drink, who tarry late into the evening as wine inflames them!

They have lyre and harp, tambourine and flute, and wine at their feasts, but they do not regard the deeds of the Lord, or see the work of his hands.

In a similar vein, Luke 21:34 warns, "But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap." Romans 13:13 says, "Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." And in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 Paul warns that "drunkards" are among those who will not "inherit the kingdom of God." It should be noted that these texts are not a blanket condemnation of drinking, but they certainly say nothing to commend it.

*The third set of texts instruct us to make wise and godly choices about drinking, and not to judge others about theirs.* At the same time, we are cautioned not to allow our liberty to lead others into sin. Especially relevant for this discussion is Romans 14. Paul has a dual emphasis in this chapter. First, that Christians should not pass judgment on one another when they differ over personal choices about disputed matters. "Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? We

will all stand before the judgment seat of God. . . So then each of us will give an account of himself to God" (14:10-12). At the same time, Paul admonishes his readers "never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another" (14:13). He then goes on to declare that "nothing is unclean in itself, but is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean" (14:14).<sup>9</sup> Because of the unthinkable hazard of causing someone else to sin, Paul declares, "it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble" (14:20-21). Notice that last statement: sometimes it is good *not* to do something, such as drinking alcohol, even though we are persuaded there is nothing wrong with it. Paul says similar things in 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1, where he says we are to do whatever we do for the glory of God, even as we pay attention to the potential effects on other believers of the decisions we make.

Taking all of these texts into consideration, it seems hazardous to conclude that "drinking is okay as long as you don't get drunk." First, you don't have to be drunk to be a hazard to yourself and to others. Second, since drinking impairs judgment, the danger of becoming drunk while drinking is always present.<sup>10</sup> Third, in some instances

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<sup>9</sup>It should be noted that this obviously excludes things which the Bible clearly designates as sinful. Paul is not allowing liberty about those things, but about matters about which there may legitimately be divergent views, such as those he specifies in this chapter.

<sup>10</sup>There is some distinction to be made between an "alcoholic" and a "problem drinker." Drinking can cause plenty of problems, even for those who seldom if ever get drunk. Some of the signs of problem drinking are: drinking early in the day; trying to keep others from knowing how much you drink; feeling the need to drink when faced with a stressful situation; planning activities around drinking and avoiding those that will exclude it; becoming angry when others comment on how much you drink; and blaming others, such as your spouse, boss, children, etc.

exercising our liberty in regard to alcohol may cause someone else to sin.

So the Bible is emphatic that drunkenness is without question always wrong. According to Proverbs, it's also dumb. It isn't what God wants for any of us.

Drinking but not becoming drunk isn't necessarily wrong, but it *can* be, and we have to carefully consider the dangers to and potential negative impact on others. At the same time, we must be careful not to pass judgment on the decisions others make in regard to their use of alcohol, because the Bible warns against this tendency just as it warns against drunkenness. Often our attitudes about alcohol use are shaped more by our culture than anything else. For some, any drinking of alcohol is, because of their past experiences with it and the attitudes toward it with which they grew up, always wrong, even though Scripture does not support this. For others, using alcohol is a common part of their upbringing, is never abused by them, and is a normal part of life, much as it was in biblical times. But even in these cultures, the danger of abuse must always be kept in mind, as the proverbs we have been studying in this chapter reveal.

Keep this in mind: No one's life is ever negatively impacted by a decision *not* to drink. Whatever you do or don't do, be sure your decision is one that glorifies God. That's the only wise thing to do.

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for how much you drink.

## Chapter 8

### Don't Be Dumb About Work

#### *A Problem with Idleness*

Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness<sup>1</sup> and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. (2 Thessalonians 3:6-12)

We don't really know why some of the Christians in Thessalonica didn't want to work, but apparently they thought they didn't need to any more. Many have suggested it was because they believed that the Lord was going to return right away, so why

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<sup>1</sup>“Walking in idleness” is more accurately “walking (or, “conducting himself”) in a disorderly manner.” The notion of idleness comes from the context and is a reasonable inference. See my discussion in James T. South, *Church Discipline: God's Gift for a Healthier, Holier Church* (DeWard, 2015) 101-111.

work? After all, if the end is only weeks away, who needs to pay rent or make a car (chariot?) payment? This is an attractive suggestion, since Paul speaks so much in this letter about Christ's return. Still, he does not make an overt connection between the Lord's coming and the Thessalonians not working, so we have to be careful with this conclusion. The answer to the question of why they were not working may be much simpler and less theological: maybe some of them were just lazy and irresponsible. They had found this group of Christians who were known for taking care of one another (Acts 2:44-45, 6:1-7), so they figured they would just let them take care of *them*. (If so, they wouldn't be the last to reason this way, would they!)

Whatever the reason they weren't working, it was wrong, and Paul gives a vigorous response to this behavior that he regards as entirely unbecoming of a Christian. First he instructs the church to deal decisively with this problem by keeping away from "any brother who is walking in idleness" (v. 6). And under no circumstances should they allow it to continue: those who refuse to work should not be allowed to eat (v. 10).<sup>2</sup> Next he cites his own work ethic (vs. 6-9) which he had demonstrated during his time with them, which was a deliberate act of setting them an example to imitate.

Where did Paul get such strong notions about working for a living? Possibly from many places, both cultural and scriptural, but one was surely the book of Proverbs, which repeatedly emphasizes the importance of working to support oneself. We

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<sup>2</sup>Is he thinking of not allowing them to participate in communal meals, or of refusing them access to the "church pantry," or maybe both?

touched on this theme briefly in our discussion of money (Chapter 6), but the wise teacher has much more to tell us about work and how not to be dumb about it.

### *The Value and Purpose of Work*

When God pronounced sentence on Adam because of his disobedience in the garden, part of his punishment was,

cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return. (Genesis 3:17-19).

From this statement some have erroneously concluded that work itself is a curse placed on mankind due to disobedience. However, this is certainly a misreading of the text. Well before Adam and Eve had sinned, Genesis 2:15 says, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it." So work was not the curse; the curse was that because of sin, work would now be laborious and difficult, since the earth would no longer yield its fruit as easily as before. The moral: Human sin distorts everything, even God's gift of work.

Working is something we need in our lives, if for no other reason than that we simply need something to do with our time here on earth. But beyond that, work provides a sense of accomplishment and of self-worth. The real curse is having nothing to do. (Just ask someone who can no longer work due to age or disability.) Besides, we

need to work in order to provide for ourselves and our families. Rather than viewing work as a curse, we should thank God that we have work to do and that we are able to do it.<sup>3</sup>

To emphasize the dignity and value of work, Proverbs 10:4-5 says, "A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. He who gathers in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame." The focus of this proverb is the contrast between the outcomes of working and of not working. It is "prudent," the wise man says, to gather in summer (when the crops are ready for harvest), but shameful to sleep that time away. A similar proverb says, "In all toil there is profit, but mere talk tends only to poverty" (14:23). Both proverbs warn against the assumption that "everything will work out all right," even though we do nothing to bring that about. That isn't the way the world works.

A word of caution is in order here: Don't read more into these verses than the inspired writer intended. Remember, as stated in Chapter 1, that proverbs are not promises. Rather, they are statements of how things usually work out, but they do not rule out exceptions. For example, when Proverbs 10:4 says, "A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich," that does not guarantee that hard work will produce wealth, or that slackers won't get by. In fact, Ecclesiastes 9:11 laments that, "the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the

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<sup>3</sup>This in no way ignores the fact that some people's work is burdensome and often degrading. But again, the problem is not that we have to work; it is the kind of work that we sometimes have to do in order to survive.

wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all." Sometimes those who don't deserve it do quite well, while those who do experience poverty.<sup>4</sup> Still, in most cases, hard work pays off -- not necessarily in becoming rich, but at least in making a living.

*But Not Too Much. . . .*

While some proverbs commend hard work, 23:4-5 encourages us to keep a balance in our lives between work and relaxation and to focus on things other than getting wealth. For example, 23:4-5 advises, "Do not toil to acquire wealth; be discerning enough to desist. When your eyes light on it, it is gone, for suddenly it sprouts wings, flying like an eagle toward heaven." This isn't a contradiction of 10:4, it's just saying, "Know when enough is enough," and, "Don't make wealth the goal of your life." Money<sup>5</sup> has its place in life, but it isn't life, and the wise person knows the difference. Plus, money can be a fleeting thing. The old saying, "Here today, gone tomorrow" is frequently true in a very literal way. Just ask someone who has gambled big on the stock market and lost. So it's best not to give it more importance than it

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<sup>4</sup>"Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous survive?" (Jeremiah 12:1). "For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (Psalms 73:3).

<sup>5</sup>We should keep in mind that for most people in the ancient world, money *per se* was not that much of an issue. Wealth was usually tallied in terms of land, livestock, stores of grain and other commodities, and even garments. Still, the principle is the same: wealth is a fleeting thing and should not be the first priority of anyone's life, as vividly demonstrated in the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-21). Being "rich toward God" is of far greater importance.

deserves. It has its place, but there has to be a balance. Remember Jesus' words: "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). Wise people don't mistake money for life.

So Proverbs, along with the rest of Scripture, offers strong incentives not to be dumb about work and its importance. And knowing when enough is enough (whether enough work or enough money, or both) is something we should never be dumb about.

### *The Hazards of Laziness*

Remember "the sluggard" from Chapter 2? He's the quasi-comical character who simply cannot be motivated to do what common sense dictates he should do. He is presented in a humorous way in Proverbs, but his shortcomings are anything but funny. The sluggard is the guy who puts his hand in the dish to get food, but is exhausted from the effort of bringing it up to his mouth (26:15). And he always has an excuse why he "can't" work. The road to work seems always to have a lion blocking it (26:13). So, he remains confined (voluntarily) to his bed and turns back and forth on it like a door on its hinges; but like a door, makes no progress (26:14). Still, he "is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly" (26:16). But the sluggard doesn't create problems only for himself. To those whom employ him, he is "like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes" (10:26) simply because he is so unreliable.

We would be mistaken, however, if we regarded the sluggard as someone with

no dreams or ambitions. Rather, he is simply someone without the motivation to realize them. “The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied. The fact that “the diligent” have what they desire and the sluggard does not is simply the result of effort *versus* the lack of it. There is a definite disconnect between what he wants and what he is willing to work for: “The sluggard does not plow in the autumn; he will seek at harvest and have nothing” (20:4).

The wise teacher, however, doesn’t simply criticize the laziness and unrealistic outlook of the sluggard, he offers a solution, one taken from nature.

Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise.

Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, she prepares her bread in summer  
and gathers her food in harvest.

How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep?

A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest,  
and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.

(6:6-11)

As the teacher points out, even though the ant isn’t the most intelligent of God’s creatures, in some ways she<sup>6</sup> is far wiser than many people. Notice the two qualities of ants that a sluggard (and the rest of us as well) needs to learn from: she is self-

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<sup>6</sup>Speaking of the hard-working ant as “she” is another reminder that the claim that the Old Testament presents women in a negative light simply is not accurate.

motivated (v. 7) and forward-looking (v. 8). The sluggard, by contrast, is neither, as he lies on his bed even as poverty stalks him (vs. 10-11).<sup>7</sup> As the wise man observes in another place,

I passed by the field of a sluggard, by the vineyard of a man lacking sense,  
and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns;  
the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down.  
Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction.  
A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest,  
and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.<sup>8</sup>  
(24:30-34)

Without ant-like diligence, the sluggard pays an extremely high price! No one should be like the sluggard. That's just dumb.

### *Wisdom from the New Testament*

We began this chapter with a text from the New Testament, so it seems appropriate to return there to see what it says about work. When we do so, we find

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<sup>7</sup>Kidner observes that the ant “shames the sluggard twice over,” in that she needs no overseer, while he must be prodded, and that she knows when it is time for hard work, while to the sluggard all time is alike (43).

<sup>8</sup>Since this same saying occurs in two places in Proverbs, it seems likely that this was already a well-known proverb in ancient Israelite culture.

some even higher motivations for work than the very practical ones expressed in Proverbs. One such statement is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12.

Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

In addition to the very practical/financial reasons for working, Paul adds that we should work in order to create a good impression on “outsiders” - i.e., non-Christians.<sup>9</sup> Paul’s concern is for the church to avoid the appearance of a group of pie-in-the-sky day-dreamers who are detached from the world in an unrealistic way. True, we are instructed in Scripture not to hold too tightly to the things of this life,<sup>10</sup> but at the same time, while we live in this world, we are to do so diligently and honorably. Our faith is to shape our conduct in this world and show others the possibilities for those who believe and follow God’s ways. The result is that we point them to a reality beyond this world.

When Paul held his farewell meeting with the elders of the church in Ephesus,

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<sup>9</sup>Given the critical statements found in Proverbs, there can be little disputing the fact that our work habits are observed by outsiders, and are central in the opinion they form of us.

<sup>10</sup>Romans 12:1-2, 1 Corinthians 7:29-31.

among other things he quoted a saying from Jesus, the only one in the New Testament that is not found in any of the four Gospels.

And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:32-35)

Notice Paul's concern that Christians should be ready to help the weak, and that they should be prepared to do so by working hard in order to provide, not only for themselves and their own families, but for others in need as well. In Ephesians 4:25-28 he addresses this same concern again:

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

In this text Paul shows that working is simply part of putting faith into practice. What he says provides an entirely different perspective on work and our motivation to work

than what most people have. We are to work both to take care of ourselves and to take care of others who can't take care of themselves. This is a wise perspective, because it shows that we realize that life is more than just what we have; it is also about what we can share with others, as well as what we give to God. This perspective comes, of course, from Jesus himself. His entire life was about living for and giving to others. He not only said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive"; he exemplified that truth.

The perspective of Proverbs when it comes to work is aptly summed up by another wise man in Ecclesiastes 2:24-26:

There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

The bottom line: It's wise to work, and to be grateful that we can do so. Anything else is just plain dumb.

## Chapter 9

### Don't Be Dumb about Your Friends

An old saying suggests that you can tell a person's character by the company they keep. And there's a lot of truth in that, because people will tend to choose as friends people who share their values, interests, and outlook on life.

On the other hand, it isn't an *absolute* truth, because Matthew 11:19 describes Jesus as "a friend of tax collectors and sinners." Those words were spoken by our Lord's enemies, and they weren't intended as a compliment. Still, Jesus did keep company with some people that most "decent folks" of his day regarded as pretty shady, people not known for their high moral and ethical standards - people who were nothing like himself. Of course, Jesus had his reasons for befriending people like that. He wanted them to know of God's love for everyone, even the most sinful and despised; and, he knew that sometimes it's the people on the bottom of the morality ladder who are most often open to redemption.

But that doesn't negate the general truthfulness of the old saying.<sup>1</sup> Usually you *can* judge a person's character -- and especially his or her wisdom -- by the folks they spend time with as friends. That saying isn't found in Proverbs, but I think the wise men of Israel would agree, because they have quite a bit to say about friendship. This

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<sup>1</sup>Although Jesus befriended tax collectors and sinners, his inner circle of *close* friends were those who had committed themselves to him and his kingdom.

shouldn't surprise us, because few things in life affect us and shape who we are quite as thoroughly as our friends. So it certainly pays not to be dumb about friendship.

Proverbs presents two general lines of thought on the subject of friends and friendship:

### *What Real Friendship Is*

Today's world is confused about a lot of things, and the meaning of true friendship is certainly one of them. For many, the word "friend" is a polite description of people they hardly know ("I'd like to introduce my friend. . ."). In this case "friend" has become something of a synonym for "acquaintance." In the age of Facebook, the word "friend" has become almost meaningless, or at least seriously distorted. Facebook users have turned "friend" into a verb which means something like "I've added you to my list of people I hardly know, if at all." Likewise, to "unfriend" someone simply means they're no longer on that list. This gives what clinical psychologist Roger Fransecky has described as "an illusion of closeness in a complex world of continuous partial attention."<sup>2</sup> So many people have adopted this concept of friendship that Facebook now limits members to no more than 5000 "friends."<sup>3</sup> Without doubt, the concept of

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<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Aimlee Lee Ball, "Are 5,001 Facebook Friends One Too Many?" *New York Times*, May 28, 2010.

<sup>3</sup>At the same time, Oxford professor Robin Dunbar has postulated that, based on the capacity of the human brain, the maximum number of individuals with whom a person can maintain a stable relationship is 150 (Ball). As a side note, if Dunbar's estimation is correct, this has interesting implications for the ideal size of a church.

“friendship” needs clarification for our modern world.

Perhaps the ancient world needed it also, since Proverbs 17:17 says, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.” According to this proverb, the essence of friendship is the constancy of love, “being there” for someone in both good times and bad. Notice the emphasis in 17:17 on “all times.” Friendship isn’t circumstantial; it is constant.

Naturally, there can be different levels of friendship for all of us, based on common interests (loyalty to a particular sports team) or common experiences (high school or college buddies) or simply on the fact that we happen to like someone. And not all of these friendships will have the same level of intimacy. But out of all of our friendships, very few will be “Proverbs 17:17” friendships. One thing wise people learn in life is that not very many people turn out to be “Proverbs 17:17” friends. But that’s okay. You don’t need a lot of “BFFs” in your life -- but everyone needs a few.

Proverbs reminds us (warns us, actually) that not everyone who self-identifies as our “friend” really is. “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (18:24). A “companion” is not necessarily a true “friend”; the difference is that the friend “sticks” (stays with us) regardless. And one true “friend” is worth more than a multitude of “companions.”

Proverbs 27:5-6 takes it a bit further by pointing out that true friends are faithful enough that they will speak the truth to us, even if it hurts: “Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.”

In other words, even enemies can appear to be friends, and friends sometimes hurt us with their truthfulness. Verse 9 adds, "Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel."<sup>4</sup> One way to determine who your friends really are is to ask yourself, "When I really need advice about something serious, to whom do I go for it? Who cares enough about me both to listen to my concerns and to tell me the truth?"

At the same time that Proverbs gives advice about the friends we choose, it also encourages us to *be* the friends that others need us to be: "Do not forsake your friend and your father's friend, and do not go to your brother's house in the day of your calamity. Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother who is far away" (27:10). Being a friend is "being there" for others, just as we need them to "be there" for us.<sup>5</sup>

### *The Importance of Making Wise Choices*

Because friendship is so vital to life, Proverbs cautions us to choose as close friends only those people who will have a positive impact on us. Some people, no matter how much we may like them or they may like us, simply are not good for us. Proverbs gives several examples:

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<sup>4</sup>Remember Paul's entreaty to the Galatians as he protests his loyalty to them, in contrast to false teachers who have befriended them only for what they can get out of them: "Have I thus become your enemy by telling you the truth?" (Galatians 4:16).

<sup>5</sup>Notice also the encouragement for friendship to be trans-generational. Those who have been true friends to our parents should be regarded as our friends as well. Loyalty to a previous generation should be repaid with further loyalty.

*Proverbs 1:10-19.* Very near the beginning of the first collection of wise sayings, the father pleads with his son to avoid people who try to influence him to go places he shouldn't go and do things he shouldn't do:

My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent.

If they say, "Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood;

let us ambush the innocent without reason;

like Sheol let us swallow them alive, and whole, like those who go down to the

pit; we shall find all precious goods, we shall fill our houses with plunder;

throw in your lot among us; we will all have one purse" -

my son, do not walk in the way with them;

hold back your foot from their paths, for their feet run to evil,

and they make haste to shed blood.

For in vain is a net spread in the sight of any bird,

but these men lie in wait for their own blood;

they set an ambush for their own lives.

Such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for gain;

it takes away the life of its possessors.

This section of Proverbs speaks of a pretty drastic situation involving robbing and killing. But it doesn't have to be that drastic for us to know that there are some people we should avoid. Anyone who would entice us to do anything that is not wise or that will weaken us or harm our influence as Christians is someone we should be careful

about associating with.

Verse 17 shows how foolish these people actually are, as well as those who throw in their lot with them. Even birds don't fly into nets they can see! So when it's obvious that your "friends" are headed in the wrong direction, don't go with them. I'm reminded of a teenager I met who was arrested for vandalizing a car. Even though he was normally a good kid who stayed out of trouble, he had gotten involved in this activity through the insistence of several "friends" who participated in it with him. But when the police arrived, the "friends" were nowhere to be seen, and the young man was left holding the bag all alone. Hopefully he gained some wisdom about the real meaning of friendship, both what it is and what it is not.

If someone urges you to go somewhere you shouldn't or do something that you know is wrong, don't feel that you owe them an explanation for refusing or that you have to defend your decision. Just say "No!" and stick to it. If they are your friends, they will accept your refusal without rejecting you. If they are not your friends, you need to know that once and for all, and the sooner the better.

*Proverbs 23:19-21.* Here the wise man expands the urging to choose the right kind of friends beyond those who rob and kill:

Hear, my son, and be wise, and direct your heart in the way.

Be not among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters of meat,  
for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty,  
and slumber will clothe them with rags.

This proverb warns not so much against those who participate in criminal activity as those who engage in activities that are worthless and unproductive. They are headed to poverty, and the teacher pleads with his young protégé not to go with them.

It isn't unusual to hear someone resist this advice by saying, "But I can hang out with these people and not get hurt, as long as I don't do what they're doing." Notice that verse 20 says, "Be not *among*" them. Why? Because being among them may lead you to do something you don't intend to do. Besides, why would anyone want to "be among" those who spend their time on worthless and destructive things?

Another category of those to avoid that isn't mentioned specifically in Proverbs is people who would intentionally try to destroy your faith. In 1 Corinthians 15:33-34 Paul warns, "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company ruins good morals'.<sup>6</sup> Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame." Notice first Paul's injunction not to be deceived, which sounds very much like something that might be found in Proverbs. The general rule is that "bad company ruins good morals." In their context Paul's words have to do specifically with associating with people who challenge the reality of the resurrection of the dead. Such a denial gives them a distorted worldview, and constantly associating

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<sup>6</sup>As indicated in the ESV footnote, the quotation is most likely from Menander's comedic play *Thais*, so it was likely a well-known saying. This serves as a good reminder that Paul had no hesitation in recognizing and quoting truth wherever he found it. It in no way suggests that Menander was a divinely-inspired author, as has sometimes been suggested.

with them will have a negative effect on other believers. So Paul urges the Corinthians to “wake up” and stop sinning by buying into such nonsense. It is because of their waffling on this all-important conviction that “some have no knowledge of God.” We aren’t likely to stand up for truths about which we are not thoroughly convinced.

Does this suggest that Christians ought not to associate as friends with non-Christians or with those who question our faith? Obviously not, since such a conclusion would have serious implications for evangelism. It does mean, however, that if someone’s goal is to tear down what you believe, you need to avoid them. That kind of person isn’t your “friend” anyway.

*To Sum It Up. . .*

Proverbs 13:20 says, “Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.” Here we are again, back to the idea that the people with whom we associate shape our character in significant ways, and perhaps even reveal it to others. The simple truth is, we tend to become like the people with whom we associate most. Being in the company of wise people has a way of rubbing off and making us wise, while being in the company of fools tends to make us foolish - and we’ll pay a high price for it. That’s why Proverbs 14:7 advises us to “Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not meet words of knowledge.” Nothing worthwhile is likely to come from being in the presence of foolish people, so we should seek out the company of wise people instead.

An Old Testament example of this principle in action is found in 1 Kings 12, the story of "Rehoboam's Folly." Rehoboam ascended the throne of Israel following the death of his father Solomon. Shortly after his coronation, a large delegation of Israelites, led by Jereboam, approached him with the plea to "lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke on us, and we will serve you" (12:4). Remember that Solomon had engaged in massive building programs that had taken a toll on his people and on their resources, so the people were hoping for something better from the new administration. Rehoboam sent them away while he spent three days gathering the advice of counselors. The "old men, who had stood before Solomon his father," advised him to listen to the people and ease up on their burdens in order to gain their loyalty. But his buddies of his own age advised just the opposite: he should let the people know that they hadn't seen anything yet, and that, "My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions" (verse 11), and Rehoboam followed their advice. As a result, Jereboam led a rebellion of the majority of the people, who broke away and established a rival kingdom in the north, a sad state of affairs which continued until the destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 721 B.C.

Why did all of this happen? Because Rehoboam refused to listen to wise people, and chose to follow the advice of the fools who were his habitual companions instead. There's no question about it: whether you're a king or a kid, your friends will exert a powerful influence on you and will shape your life for good or ill.

Do you remember that scene near the end of *Indiana Jones and the Last*

*Crusade* when Jones had finally managed to enter the chamber where the "Holy Grail" (the cup from which Jesus supposedly drank at the Last Supper) had been hidden for centuries? There he encountered an old knight who had been left in charge. Before the knight could reveal to Jones which of the many cups in the room was actually the one he was seeking, they were interrupted by the Nazi sympathizer who wanted the cup for its supposed magical powers. Scanning the array of cups, most of which were beautiful and ornate, he seized the most beautiful, most elaborately adorned one, and drank from a fountain which, along with the cup, was supposed to give eternal life. Well, rather than living forever, he began to age at warp speed until he finally melted into a pile of dust. Looking on with a deadpan expression, the ancient knight responded, "He chose. . . poorly." It's such an understatement that it's impossible not to laugh at it.

Here's the point: you will have many opportunities in life to choose between friends who will lift you up to become a better person and those who will turn your life in directions neither you nor God want it to go. Don't "choose poorly"!

## Chapter 10

### **Don't Be Dumb about What You Say**

*Oh, be careful, Little Mouth, what you say.*

*Oh, be careful, Little Mouth, what you say.*

*For the Father up above is looking down in love,*

*So be careful, Little Mouth, what you say.*

Many of us have sung those words more times than we can count -- along with the verses about our Little Eyes, Little Ears, and Little Hands -- in VBS and in Bible classes and in our homes as we have sought to teach our children the importance of godly speech. And while we may think of "O Be Careful" as a children's song, it actually contains a very serious message for adults as well. What we say is important; in fact, it can have eternal consequences. Jesus sternly warned those who were speaking against him,

Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be

condemned. (Matthew 12:33-37)

We don't find these exact words in Proverbs, but we do find much the same idea, except that in Proverbs the emphasis is more on the foolishness of much of what we say, and on the negative impact words can have on us and on those around us.

The little children's song is sweet and cautionary, but Proverbs is explicit and emphatic as it tells us, "Don't be dumb about what you say!" And to help us avoid the pitfalls of an unwise tongue, the wise men of Israel offer us three guidelines:

*Guideline 1: Recognize the Power of the Tongue*

Proverbs 18:20-21 says,

From the fruit of a man's mouth his stomach is satisfied;

he is satisfied by the yield of his lips.

Death and life are in the power of the tongue,

and those who love it will eat its fruits.

There is a certain parallelism in these two verses. The first states that what we say can bring physical and material satisfaction. The idea probably is that knowing what to say and when to say it can go a long way toward helping us obtain the things needed for life (getting a job, closing a sale, etc.). Verse 21 picks up the idea of eating and says "those who love it" (i.e., the tongue and its power) will "eat its fruits." In other words,

we should be careful about what we say, because we will eat the “fruit” of our words, whether for good or for ill. Notice that the statement, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue,” is not an exaggeration. Think how easily someone’s reputation can be destroyed by our words, whether they are true or not. We are living in an era when innuendo and accusations are thrown about with very little consideration for their ultimate effect, and even if the words are untrue, the effect is the same, and it’s often disastrous. Likewise, what people “say” on social media platforms such as Facebook often comes back to haunt them, as when a prospective employer comes across posts that reveal something decidedly negative about an interviewee.

As a further illustration of the power of the tongue, 18:14 says, “A man’s spirit will endure sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?” And words can so easily crush a spirit. The old childhood rhyme claims, “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” That’s one of the biggest lies ever told! Words are often more painful even than physical blows. Battered women often report that the worst thing about spousal abuse isn’t the physical beatings, but the demeaning and cruel words aimed at crushing the spirit. Cyber-bullying among children and teens has become a major problem in our society, and it is a serious one for precisely the same reason: cruel words can be so devastating (especially when spoken/written publicly, as through social media) that they can lead to social isolation, psychological pain, and even suicide.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>A biblical example of the power of words occurs in 1 Samuel 4:12-18. When Eli, the elderly priest, heard of the capture of the ark of the covenant, he fell over backward and died. The

Unwise use of the tongue (or keyboard) also has the power to erect barriers between people. Proverbs 18:19 says, "A brother offended is more unyielding than a strong city, and quarreling is like the bars of a castle." If we aren't careful we may say something that so offends another person that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to re-establish a relationship with them. Civility of speech is, unfortunately, not one of the characteristics of our age. The result is that people become alienated from one another, often without even knowing each other, because of unkind and unwise words, things that simply didn't need to be said, or that could have been said in a much kinder, less offensive, or less hurtful way.

At the same time that words have the power to destroy, alienate, and even kill, they also have tremendous power for good.

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold is a wise reprovener to a listening ear.

(25:11-12)

Here the wise man compares a "word fitly spoken" to a beautiful piece of jewelry or an ornament of gold, "apples of gold in a setting of silver." But what exactly does "fitly" mean? What distinguishes a word spoken "fitly" from one spoken "unfitly"? The New

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immediate cause of death was a broken neck, but the cause of his falling was the mere mention of the capture of the ark, which distressed him even more than the news of the death of his two sons. Without question, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue."

International Version uses the word “aptly” rather than “fitly,” but this doesn’t help us much. Some have suggested that the term refers to verbal eloquence, that a word said in just the right way is a beautiful thing and helps make the speaker’s message more effective. No doubt eloquence is a plus, but let’s face it -- most of us just aren’t eloquent, and surely we aren’t being called to a standard to which we can never measure up. So is there another possibility here? It may be that rather than eloquence, the wise man is referring to words that are spoken at just the right time, words that are appropriate, words that are suitable to the need in a given situation. For example, look at Proverbs 25:15: “With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone.” The “soft tongue” isn’t a flattering tongue, but rather one that is wise enough to answer gently rather than harshly. Even though “soft,” it has great power: bone-crushing power. Proverbs 25:25 gives another example: “Like cold water to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country.” Think of the power of words of encouragement when someone is feeling defeated or intimidated by life, or of words of comfort to those who are struggling with grief. Even words of wise reproof can provide refreshment and encouragement, “like a gold ring or an ornament of gold is a wise reprover to a listening ear” (25:12). It’s no wonder that the wise man declares that “Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad” (12:25).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>An example of the positive power of reproof occurs in Acts 2:37. When the audience on the Day of Pentecost heard that they had crucified the One who was “both Lord and Christ,” they were “cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” The words of reproof were painful and hard to hear, but they proved to be a blessing to those who heard and obeyed.

There's no question that the proper use of words can make a difficult situation either better or worse, and the wise men knew this.

A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

The tongue of the wise commends knowledge,

but the mouths of fools pour out folly. (15:1-2)

Because words can either douse a flame like water or cause it to explode like gasoline, it's important to keep control of our tongues, especially in situations of potential conflict. The old adage about counting to ten before saying what you're thinking isn't from Proverbs, but it would fit very well there. Especially in a potentially volatile situation, it's wise to ask yourself, "Will what I am about to say help calm this situation, or only make it worse?" Giving yourself a moment to think this over may keep you from saying something you will regret later.

In the category of "the power to harm," Proverbs warns against numerous sins of the tongue. For example, 12:22 says, "Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight." In a memorable text on "things the Lord hates," Solomon writes,

There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him:

haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,

a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil,

a false witness who breathes out lies,  
and one who sows discord among brothers. (6:16-19)

Of these seven, we should note that three of them involve what we say (lying, bearing false witness, and sowing discord).

Likewise, 18:8 warns against the deceptive power and attraction of gossip: "The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body." There's just something compelling, and often wickedly satisfying, about hearing some bit of gossip. I was once approached after worship by an elderly sister who was known for her sharp tongue. She asked me if telling something about someone else falls into the category of gossip if it is actually true. I replied that it would depend on the reason for telling it. (She didn't like that reply and let me know it!) We may need to tell someone something about another person in order to try to help a difficult situation. But if we aren't careful, we'll use that as an excuse for telling something simply because it's "too good" to keep to ourselves. How often have confidences been betrayed or gossip spread under the guise of telling someone something "so you can pray about it"? Is that really the case, or are we simply "eating a delicious morsel" of gossip? "Oh, be careful, Little Mouth, what you say!"

There are lots more such declarations in Proverbs. "A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin" (26:28). "Do not slander a servant to his master, lest he curse you and you be held guilty" (30:10). In this case, refraining from slander is not only the right thing to do, but may also be a matter of self-preservation:

it can backfire on you! Along the same lines, 11:12-13 warns,

Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense,

but a man of understanding remains silent.

Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets,

but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered.

Did you catch that? Those who engage in slander may think they are telling negative things on others, but in reality they are speaking volumes about themselves, that they lack sense and are not trustworthy. In other words, it's a pretty dumb thing to do. "The one who conceals hatred has lying lips, and whoever utters slander is a fool" (10:18).<sup>3</sup>

*Guideline #2: Be Careful What You Say - Always!*

One of the worst things about social media (can you tell I'm not a fan?) is that the supposed anonymity it provides encourages people to say (okay, write) whatever they're thinking, without really giving it any thought. Not speaking to others face-to-face emboldens folks who have no filters about such things to just blurt out whatever happens to be on the top of their brains, regardless of the potential effect on others, and even on themselves. In an age dominated by electronic communications, such as

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<sup>3</sup>Kidner (47) adds a section on "The Weakness of Words." (1) They are no substitute for deeds (14:23). (2) They cannot alter facts (26:23-28, 28:24, 24:12). (3) They cannot compel response (17:10, 29:19).

ours, it seems especially important to hear what Proverbs says about controlling our speech, not just some of the time, but *all* of the time.

Proverbs 14:3 is one such warning text: “By the mouth of a fool comes a rod for his back, but the lips of the wise will preserve them.” People who foolishly say whatever they are thinking are bound to suffer for it eventually, whereas those who watch their tongues (and keyboards) will fare much better in life. Similarly, 13:3 says, “Whoever guards his mouth (modern translation: has filters on what he/she says) preserves his life; he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.” We have a great example of this in 2 Samuel 1:1-16. After Saul and Jonathan had been killed in battle with the Amalekites, one of Saul’s soldiers found David and reported their deaths. David asked the man, “How do you know that Saul and his son Jonathan are dead?” At this point the young man proceeded to tell a lie in order to make himself look like a hero and David’s great ally. Although 1 Samuel 31 says Jonathan was killed in battle, and that Saul died by falling on his own sword, this messenger claimed that he had actually killed Saul himself. What he didn’t consider was that, in spite of Saul’s hatred toward him, David respected Saul’s position as “the Lord’s anointed,” and so he asked the man, “How is it you were not afraid to put out your hand to destroy the Lord’s anointed?”<sup>4</sup> And he ordered the man executed on the spot. As the Proverb says, “he who opens wide his

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<sup>4</sup>Remember that David himself had declined twice to lift his hand against Saul, even though Saul was trying to kill him and David’s own men were urging him to do it. See 1 Samuel 24:1-22 and 26:1-25. In the second instance Abishai, one of David’s men, offered to kill Saul, but David restrained him from doing so. In both cases David referred to Saul as “the Lord’s anointed,” just as in 2 Samuel 1.

lips comes to ruin.”

Proverbs 18:2 mentions another form of foolish speech: “A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.” These words remind us of James’ warnings against the misuse of the tongue (3:1-12), and his admonition that we should all be “quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” (1:19). A modern proverb points out that God made us with two ears and only one mouth; therefore we should listen twice as much as we speak. (Perhaps far *more* than twice as much!)

Two additional sections of Proverbs discuss the trouble fools make for themselves by having loose tongues.

A fool’s lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating.

A fool’s mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul. (18:6-17)

Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.

Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips.

(27:1-2)<sup>5</sup>

Finally, Proverbs warns us that the more we talk, the more likely we are to sin. “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent” (10:19). The message is clear: put those filters on and *keep* them on!

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<sup>5</sup>In the case of both texts, it is hard not to think of Haman in the book of Esther, whose hatred for Mordecai caused him to make boasts that eventually caused him humiliation and death.

*Guideline #3 - Utilize the Power of Silence*

Proverbs 10:19-21 says,

When words are many, transgression is not lacking,

but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.

The tongue of the righteous is choice silver;

the heart of the wicked is of little worth.

The lips of the righteous feed many,

but fools die for lack of sense.

Since the more we talk, the more likely we are to sin, it only makes sense to learn to be quiet much of the time when we are tempted to speak. Perhaps that is why 17:28 says, "Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent." There is a similar modern proverb: "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt." Humorist Sam Levenson once quipped, "It's so simple to be wise. Just think of something stupid to say and then don't say it." Okay, maybe it's not quite *that* simple, but Sam was on the right track. In a similar vein, Proverbs 27:14 says, "Whoever blesses his neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing." Sometimes we need to refrain even from saying *good* things.

According to Proverbs, silence isn't just golden, it's also powerful. For example, it

can stop a quarrel from proceeding any further. "For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases" (26:20). If the opportunity arises to quench a quarrel by remaining silent, don't let that chance go by! Sometimes our silence expresses more than words can say. For centuries God sent prophets to the people of Israel, and for the most part they didn't listen. But they got the message when, around 400 B.C., he went completely silent for a period of 400 years.<sup>6</sup>

There's no question that the gift of speech is a wonderful blessing. By this means we can praise God, tell others about Jesus, lift up the spirits of the downtrodden, and rebuke wrongdoing. We just have to learn to use this great gift wisely. Remember the words of Jesus' brother James:

So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

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<sup>6</sup>This at least partly explains the excitement that surrounded the preaching of John the Baptist. After 400 years of silence, God was speaking to his people again! See Matthew 3:4-6.

(James 3:5-10)

Knowing that our words have such incredible power both for good and for ill, we just can't allow ourselves to be dumb about the things we say. "Oh, be careful, little mouth. . . ."

## Chapter 11

### **Don't Be Dumb About Choosing a Mate**

If we've learned anything at all about Proverbs so far in our study, it's that this is a book that is imminently practical. It speaks to the most basic needs for a successful and blessed life in many different realms. That being the case, it isn't surprising that this remarkable book has something to say about the very practical business of choosing a mate, that one person who will be our partner for life in all of its endeavors. What could be of more practical importance than that?

One text from Proverbs particularly stands out in this respect, so in this chapter we will focus most of our attention on it.

#### *Proverbs 31:10-31. Wisdom's Description of a "Good Wife"*

This text is interesting for a number of reasons. One is that it is one of the few extended discussions of a single topic to be found in Proverbs. Perhaps that says something about the importance of the subject, that it isn't just dealt with in scattered one-liners, as so many other topics are. Another point of interest is the fact that 31:10-31 is what is called an "acrostic poem." That simply means that each of its 22 verses begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which has 22 letters. If an acrostic were to be written in English, it would have 26 letters, but the Hebrew alphabet has only 22 (no vowels). A similar acrostic poem occurs in Psalms 119, but there each

line of each of the 8-verse stanzas begins with a letter of the alphabet.<sup>1</sup> Acrostics were most likely composed in order to aid memorization, always an important concern in oral cultures such as that of the ancient Hebrews. Another interesting aspect of this poem is that 31:1 suggests it comes from King Lemuel's mother (about whom, remember, we know nothing), so it contains the words of a wise woman, rather than those of a wise man as in most of Proverbs.<sup>2</sup>

Notice that the poem begins with a question: "An excellent wife who can find?" So although the bulk of it contains a description of the ideal wife, the overall thrust is that this is what one should look for and hopefully find. But the fact that verse 10 is in question form indicates that not everyone is able to find this kind of woman, not, perhaps because there is a shortage of such women, but because they are looking for other things. Then follows a listing of the excellent wife's characteristics, concluding with the admonition that a woman like this is to be praised.<sup>3</sup>

So the thrust of the "Excellent Wife" poem is to try to find one just like this, or as

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<sup>1</sup>This is made evident in the ESV, New American Standard Bible, and some other translations by writing out the appropriate Hebrew letter at the head of each stanza. The NIV gives both the Hebrew letter and its English spelling.

<sup>2</sup>It should be noted that some scholars think verses 10-31 are a separate poem from the rest of the chapter, one which was added to Proverbs after the rest of the book was written. This point of view in no way affects the meaning or applicability of the poem, but it would mean that these words are not to be attributed to Lemuel's mother, since that identification comes in verse 1 and is not repeated for verses 10-31.

<sup>3</sup>Bland describes this chapter as not only a portrait of godly womanhood, but a "portrait of what mature character looks like." It isn't the portrait of a king such as Solomon, Hezekiah, or Lemuel, but "an unknown woman of wisdom" (171).

nearly like this as possible. It also suggests, by implication, that the young man (perhaps a young prince) should not be dumb about making this most vital choice. Why? Because a great many lives -- including Solomon's<sup>4</sup> -- have gone in directions they never wanted or intended to go simply because of a poor decision of whom to marry.

### *Some Preliminary Considerations*

1. *Think long. Think hard.* Proverbs 20:25 offers this advice that seems pertinent to the idea of choosing someone to marry: "It is a snare to say rashly, 'It is holy,' and to reflect only after making vows." The reference to declaring something as holy suggests the vows in question are those made to God, and how foolish it is to make vows first and think afterward.<sup>5</sup> But think about it: the essence of marriage is making a sacred vow to be faithful to another person, so the wise teacher's advice is very appropriate in this context as well. No one should "rashly" enter into marriage, and no one should act first and think later. *The time for considering the wisdom of your choice*

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<sup>4</sup>See 1 Kings 11:1. "Now Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh." Many (if not most) of these were idolaters, and they turned his heart from the Lord. If it can happen to a king who had experienced a personal vision of the Lord (1 Kings 9:1-2), it can happen to anyone.

<sup>5</sup>"When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?" (Ecclesiastes 5:4-6). This text shows that making and keeping vows was serious business in ancient Israel, just as it should be today. See also Deuteronomy 23:21-23.

*of a mate is before the vows are made.*

Several times I have been called or visited by someone asking me to perform a wedding ceremony on the spot. This is something I have always refused to do, and instead advise those asking that if they want me to be involved in their wedding, we will need to meet together a minimum of three times. During those sessions we study from Scripture what marriage was "in the beginning" and what God wants it to be now. We discuss the difference between *agape* love (love that seeks what is best for the other person) as opposed to romantic love. It always amazes me how many people refuse to invest even this small amount of time in preparing for their marriage. Most of the time couples put far more planning into their *wedding* than into preparing for the marriage itself. Part of that planning and preparation needs to be some thoughtful consideration of whether or not a particular person is the one you should marry. (More about this below.)

Nobody can predict the future of a marriage. Sometimes couples who show all the promise of a solid marriage and a blissful life together end up in marital disaster. This happens even in cases where careful consideration has been given to the choice of whom to marry. Still, your chances of a successful marriage are far greater if you think long and hard about what you are about to do.

*2. Appreciate a good thing when you see it.* Proverbs 18:22 says, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord." In a similar vein, 19:14 says, "House and wealth are inherited from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the

Lord.”<sup>6</sup> The point? When you have a good spouse, recognize that person as a gift from the Lord, and approach your marriage with that thought in mind. It’s too easy to see the other person’s faults and failures, but a wise husband or wife will always remember that he or she has been the recipient of a tremendous blessing from God.

In Genesis 2:18 God declared, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” True, many people live meaningful and fulfilling lives without being married. But for most of us, being alone isn’t a good thing.<sup>7</sup> So if you aren’t alone in life, especially if you have a good wife or husband, be grateful, and let your spouse know that you are.

You may have noticed that, although Proverbs 31 speaks to a man about seeking a wife, I’ve been applying these texts to seeking either a wife or a husband, so that needs to be explained. The fact that the text speaks only of a man seeking a wife reflects the fact that Proverbs is a kind of “wisdom manual” for young men, as evidenced by the frequent addresses to “my son.” In addition, we should remember that in ancient Israel women were seldom able to select their husbands; most marriages were arrangements made by agreement between two sets of parents. This also meant that not many men chose their own wives either, which makes it all the more important that a young man who finds himself with an “excellent wife” should realize what a treasure he has. Still, the basic principles of what to look for in an

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<sup>6</sup>Both verses, along with 31:11-31, show that the question asked in 31:10 is not a cynical one, but rather emphasizes the value of a good wife and the appreciation that ought to follow such a gift.

<sup>7</sup>See Paul’s comment in 1 Corinthians 7:6-7, where he recognizes the ability to live a celibate life as a “gift,” even as he acknowledges that it is not the norm.

excellent wife apply to seeking a good husband as well. So it is legitimate, I think, to speak of both simultaneously.

*3. A universal concern.* It's easy for some people to read Proverbs 31 and conclude, "That doesn't apply to me, because I'm not married and don't intend to be." That may be your current status and intention, but you never know about the future, so it's wise to think about this subject in advance, even if you're single and satisfied. Likewise, parents who are already married need to instill these principles in their children, so that when the time comes, they will know what to look for in a husband or wife. In the case of married people, these verses are an important reminder that we should (a) appreciate the good husband or wife we have, and (b) strive to become the kind of person Lemuel's mother describes. It's never too late to become what you ought to be.

### *How Not to Be Dumb*

The following suggestions for choosing a mate come partly from Proverbs 31 and partly from other Scriptures. All are important.

*1. Look for someone who fears the Lord.* "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised" (Proverbs 31:30). This verse makes two important points. First, in choosing a mate, don't focus on superficial things. Everyone thinks about how a prospective spouse looks, and extremes in appearance (sloppiness, etc.) can be a red flag. But for the most part, physical beauty and/or charm

are not what we should be seeking. Why? Because how a person looks usually tells you little or nothing about his or her character. Just think of all those beautiful people who populate the pages of *People* magazine and the television commercials. Most of them are quite attractive (or are made to appear that way by skillful photographers), but how many of them do you suppose are people of good character? Especially, how many of them are people of faith, who “fear the Lord”? That brings us to the second point: In seeking a mate, look for someone who shares your faith. Proverbs 1:7 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” The assumption of Proverbs 31:10-31 is that the person seeking a mate isn’t a fool but someone who fears the Lord. So it’s important for such a believer to look for someone who fears the Lord, too.

We should note here that “fear of the Lord” isn’t just some vague religious inclination. For Christians, “fearing the Lord” means a specific content to faith, the conviction that Jesus is God’s Son who died for our sins and rose from the dead. And the realization that being a follower of Jesus means being an active part of his people, the church. As you think about a potential husband or wife, read Ephesians 4:1-6. Does the person you are considering marrying share with you the “one body and one Spirit. . . the one hope that belongs to your call. . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all”? If not, you are placing yourself in spiritual jeopardy by being married to that person. It’s simply foolish to think you can fulfill your commitment to Christ while living with someone who doesn’t share it

with you.<sup>8</sup>

2. *Don't marry anyone you don't fully trust.* The first thing said about the excellent wife in Proverbs 31:11, after stating her value, is, "The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain." Trust is one of the most foundational principles in any marriage. On more than one occasion, when talking with women whose husbands have been unfaithful to them, I have heard them say, "I can't believe I was so stupid that I didn't realize what was going on." My response is always the same: "There's nothing stupid about trusting your spouse. You have every right to expect faithfulness and truthfulness from your husband (or, wife)." No one should have to live wondering if their husband or wife is cheating on them with someone else.

Proverbs 2:12-15 counsels the young man to avoid "men of perverted speech, who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness." Then in verses 16-17 the wise man says something we don't expect. Rather than focusing on untrustworthy and evil *men*, he says, "So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words, who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God." What does avoiding evil companions have to do with being delivered from "the forbidden woman"? I see two possibilities

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<sup>8</sup>Although he does not specifically mention marriage, it would seem that Paul's admonition in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1, "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers," would be peculiarly suited to this application. For an excellent survey of the pitfalls of "interfaith marriages" from a secular point of view, see Stanley Fish, "Marrying Out of the Faith," *The New York Times* (April 1, 2013). This article contains Fish's review of Naomi Schaefer's 2013 book "*Til Faith Do Us Part: How Interfaith Marriage Is Transforming America.*"

here. One is that “evil men” is actually a catch-all expression for “evil people” in general, both men and women. The other is, if the young man learns to exercise good judgment about his companions, then he won’t be in the habit of frequenting places and people (adulterous women included) where he can be led astray easily. Either way, he is being advised to avoid untrustworthy people.

But here’s the problem: you can’t always predict whether or not another person, man or woman, will remain faithful to you. Some people do “forsake faithfulness,” which means they were at one time faithful, but then proved to be otherwise. That’s why there always has to be an element of trust in one another in any successful marriage. However, the warning is, if you don’t fully trust someone you’re considering marrying *now*, that’s a huge warning sign. A person who does not show loyalty to you and you alone prior to marriage isn’t likely to do so after marriage either. One of the greatest fallacies of people about to marry is the assumption that “He’ll change once we’ve said ‘I do’.” Don’t count on it. It may happen, but it may not. Lack of faithfulness now is a sign you need to move on and look for someone you can trust. To go ahead, knowing you cannot trust your prospective husband or wife is just plain foolish.

*3. Avoid marrying a lazy person.* We’ve already seen what Proverbs has to say about “the sluggard,” the perpetually lazy individual who is “like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes.” And that’s the effect the sluggard has “on those who send him” (i.e., on business or an errand). And if a sluggard is that annoying in a business or work setting, imagine being married to one!

Make no mistake: many lazy people are very likeable in other ways. They may be funny, intelligent, and enjoyable to be with, but all of that wears very thin in a marriage.

So it isn't surprising that Proverbs 31:13-19 focuses considerable attention on the industriousness of the good wife.<sup>9</sup> She works, she provides food and clothing for her family, she buys property, she plants a crop, and "she does not eat the bread of idleness" (verse 27). Notice that many of the things attributed to the good wife are some that we might think are characteristic of the good husband! Running a household, for both husband and wife, requires a lot of hard work, and if someone isn't inclined to be hard-working, they aren't likely to make a good husband or wife. Husbands and wives have to be partners in providing for themselves and their family, and a sluggard simply isn't going to pull his or her weight. Don't go there!

*4. Look for someone who is kind.* Two verses in Proverbs 31 emphasize the quality of kindness: "She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy" (verse 20). "She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue" (verse 27). Notice that these two verses emphasize the importance of kindness in both words and actions. Why is this important in choosing a spouse? If he or she isn't kind to others, what makes you think they will be kind to *you*?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>David Atkinson observes that the picture of the industrious wife "answers to the aspirations of ordinary, hard-working people whose characteristics have been traced in earlier parts of the book" (167).

<sup>10</sup>We should also remember that "kindness" is part of the "fruit of the Spirit" (5:22-26). A perpetually unkind person is not being led by God's Spirit and isn't likely to make a good

Proverbs also speaks of the opposite of kindness: a contentious person. "A continual dripping on a rainy day and a quarrelsome wife are alike; to restrain her is to restrain the wind" (27:15-16). Don't jump to the conclusion that Proverbs is focusing solely on the caricature of the nagging wife, for 20:3 says, "It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling." Both men and women are equally susceptible to this tendency, and it is abhorrent in both.

So here's a clue when thinking about someone to marry: If you find yourself constantly (or even frequently) quarreling with your prospective bride or groom, watch out! It is highly unlikely that this will change after the wedding. You will most likely be setting yourself up for a lifetime of strife and contention. Once the days of romance are over and the realities of finances, keeping up a house, raising children, conflicting schedules, and everything else that goes with being married set in, things are far more likely to get worse than to get better. Do you really want that? If you don't, then don't marry a quarrelsome person. It's that simple.

*5. Look for someone whose behavior is respectable.* Concerning the good wife, Proverbs 31:11-12 says, "The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not harm, all the days of her life." Verse 23 adds, "Her husband is known in the gates<sup>11</sup> when he sits among the elders of the land." By

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husband or wife.

<sup>11</sup>The reference is to the gates of the town where they live. It was typically the place where the older, wiser men gathered and where disputes were often heard and settled. To "sit in the gates" or to be "known in the gates" means to be respected by the community.

being such a noble wife, this woman causes her husband to have the respect of others. If she were the opposite of what is described in Proverbs 31, he would never be looked upon as a respectable citizen. This implies, of course, that his own behavior is likewise respectable, so this requirement for a strong marriage works both ways.

We have all witnessed (too many times!) the sad spectacle of some public figure who has been caught in scandalous behavior, and the tragic effects on his or her entire family. How embarrassing for all of them! But this doesn't apply only to celebrities and politicians; it applies to all of us. If your prospective mate frequently embarrasses you by what he or she says or does, you'd better think again about marriage. This may well be the story of the rest of your life.

Earlier we discussed the potentially negative effects of alcohol, drugs, and other forms of intoxication. Here's the hard truth: If the person you see as a potential husband or wife engages in such things now, don't think for a moment that it will change after marriage, even though there may be promises to that effect. You should have wisdom enough to see the handwriting on the wall: a person who behaves in disreputable ways now may never be any different. It continually amazes me how many people become distraught over the behavior of their husband or wife five or ten or fifteen years into a marriage, when that is exactly the way they behaved before marriage. Here's a good rule of thumb: *Expect to live with the person you marry*, not with someone else, not with the person you think you can "change him/her into" once you are married. To think otherwise is foolish in the extreme.

Don't get me wrong. People can and do change, and you can likely think of many examples of such couples who were "unequally yoked" at the beginning who are now happily married. However, for every one of those, there is at least another story of heartache, disappointment, and chaos which could have been avoided simply by paying attention to the warning signs. You want to give yourself the best possible chance for a great marriage, and that will happen only if you don't walk into a disaster that could have been avoided.

*6. Avoid someone who consistently makes bad decisions.* Here's an ugly picture: "Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion" (Proverbs 11:22). By contrast, consider this statement regarding the excellent wife: "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised" (31:30). Why the focus on beautiful women either with or without discretion and fear of the Lord? It's not that hard to figure out: men are attracted to physically attractive women. And sometimes physical beauty blinds men to defects in character. On the other hand, a woman who fears the Lord, regardless of her physical beauty or lack of it, is a treasure.

Do you remember the story of a woman named Abigail and her husband Nabal? It's found in 1 Samuel 25. David was in the wilderness of Paran when he encountered this couple. Nabal was a very wealthy man, and his wife Abigail is described as "discerning and beautiful" (1 Sam. 25:3). What a dynamite combination! However, the same verse describes her husband as "harsh and badly behaved." Just how "badly

behaved” became evident on the day when David sent some of his young men to Nabal to ask him to furnish food for them. Nabal’s shearers had been working among David’s men and had been well treated and even protected by them, so David thought it only appropriate to ask Nabal to return the favor, to say nothing of the ancient Near Eastern tradition of extending hospitality to any strangers who might be in your territory.

Nabal’s response was shockingly rude: “Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants these days who are breaking away from their masters. Shall I take my bread and my water and my meat that I have killed for my shearers and give it to men who come from I do not know where?” (1 Sam. 25:10-11). David’s response to this insult was swift, and would have been deadly had not Abigail intervened. When she learned of her husband’s behavior, she sent a generous gift of food to David, then came to him and prostrated herself before him, begging him to hear her out. She described her husband as a “worthless fellow,” which was consistent with his name, which means “Fool,”<sup>12</sup> and pled with David not to exact vengeance on him. And because of her intercession, David relented of his anger and did not destroy Nabal and all that belonged to him.

The moral of this story: When you seek someone to marry, look for someone with the discretion of Abigail, not the foolishness of Nabal. Watch out for the signs of bad decision-making such as employment instability, legal troubles, bad spending

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<sup>12</sup>I think we have to assume this was a nickname he had already earned before encountering David and not just as a result of his foolish behavior in this incident. It is difficult to imagine any parent saddling their child with such a name.

habits, etc. They aren't that difficult to spot, if you're looking. And if you see them, keep looking. . . elsewhere.<sup>13</sup>

So when it comes to choosing someone to marry, choose wisely. Watch out for the obvious signs of a difficult person with whom it will be hard to maintain a relationship, and don't ignore them when you see them. No matter how someone looks or how much fun they are to be with, look more deeply and find someone who reflects the kind of character described in Proverbs 31. You'll be glad you did and possibly sorry if you don't.

And, if you have been blessed with a good wife or a good husband, give thanks to God for that blessing, and be sure to let your spouse know how grateful you are for them.

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<sup>13</sup>Atkinson (168) takes 31:10-31 as an idealized portrait rather than a realistic one, and believes it is intended to point to the personification of Lady Wisdom herself, and what a home in which she ruled would look like. Koptak (675) seems to concur, when he says the question posed in verse 10 "may refer to the elusive nature of wisdom itself." But this seems to rob the text of its very practical value as a goal for which wives should strive and a treasure prospective husbands hope to find.

## *Appendix*

### **Proverbs and the New Testament**

Before we leave our study of Proverbs, a few words need to be said about its relationship to the New Testament. What impact did Proverbs have on the New Testament writers, and how did they tend to use both its language and its ideas? Since, as far as we know, all the New Testament authors but one were Jews, it would be surprising if we did *not* find at least traces of the influence of Proverbs on their thinking,<sup>1</sup> and in fact we find considerable evidence of its influence. So in what ways do we see traces of Proverbs in the New Testament? I will focus on three.

#### *Quotations and Allusions*

There are several NT texts in which the writers either quote or closely paraphrase the words of Proverbs, and others where they may be alluding to Proverbs without actually quoting it.

For example, Proverbs 3:7 says, "Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and turn away from evil." Similarly, Romans 12:16 admonishes, "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your

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<sup>1</sup>The lone exception to this Jewish background is Luke. Yet reading both his Gospel and Acts shows that although a Gentile, he had a profound knowledge and understanding of the Old Testament and its place in revealing God's plan through the coming of Jesus.

own sight." Obviously, it is that last sentence that corresponds with the words of Proverbs. Likewise, Proverbs 3:11-12 says, "My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights." Hebrews 12:5-6 not only quotes these words, but urges the readers to remember "the exhortation that addresses you as sons," an obvious reference to Proverbs 3:11-12. This indicates that the author expected both that his readers would be familiar with Proverbs, but also that they would acknowledge that what is written in Proverbs addresses them.<sup>2</sup> They -- and we -- are the "sons" to whom Proverbs speaks.

Proverbs 3:34 ("Toward the scorners he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor.") is quoted (or nearly so) twice in the NT. One is James' reminder, "Therefore it says, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'" (James 4:6). The other is 1 Peter 5:5: "Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'." Notice that in both texts the writers assume the readers' prior knowledge of these texts.

A slightly less direct quotation occurs in Hebrews 12:13: ". . . and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be

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<sup>2</sup>This was the common early Christian view of the Old Testament, as demonstrated by Paul's statement in Romans 15:4. After quoting Psalms 69:9, he says, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." See the similar thought in 1 Corinthians 10:11.

healed." The Proverbs text is 4:26: "Ponder the path of your feet; then all your ways will be sure." Notice that what Proverbs states positively, Hebrews turns into a warning. Another text that is less directly quoted, but which seems to be in the mind of the writers, is Proverbs 10:12: "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses." James 5:20 echoes this thought by urging readers to bring "back a sinner from his wandering," because by so doing they "will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins." First Peter 4:8 more directly quotes the proverb: "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins."

In urging Christians not to take vengeance, Romans 12:20 contains what amounts to an almost direct quotation of Proverbs 25:21-22, which reads, "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you." The Romans citation of this proverb omits the last line -- "and the Lord will reward you" -- but the reason for the omission is not evident. Instead, it states an implication of the proverb, "Therefore do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

When Peter was railing against the false teachers who were disturbing the churches of his day, he quoted (somewhat indirectly) from Proverbs 26:11: "Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly." Interestingly, Peter prefaces his quotation with the words, "What the true proverb says has happened to them." Also, he does not end with the dog and vomit quotation, but adds, "and the sow, after washing herself returns to wallow in the mire" (2 Peter 2:22). The fact that Peter seems to know

this proverb in a different form from that which occurs in Proverbs suggests that it was possibly a well-known saying that circulated in many forms.

Interestingly, there are fewer allusions to Proverbs in the NT than there are direct (or nearly direct) quotations. Among them are Colossians 2:3, which declares that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” This echoes Proverbs 2:4-5, which urges the young man to seek understanding “like silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.” If Paul has this proverb in mind (which seems likely), then he is saying that what Proverbs urges us to seek can now be found in the person of Jesus. For all the fullness of God’s wisdom, we need seek no further than him.

When Luke 2:52 summarizes the early life of Jesus by saying that he “increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man,” it seems probable that Proverbs 3:1-4 was in mind:

My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments,  
for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you.  
Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck;  
write them on the tablet of your heart.  
So you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man.

It is difficult not to conclude that Luke intended by his summary to say that Jesus embodied throughout his life the qualities of one who lived by the commandments,

pursued steadfast love and faithfulness, and as a result found favor “in the sight of God and man,” just the kind of person Proverbs urges us to be.

The only apparent reference to Proverbs found in Jesus’ own teachings occurs in Matthew 7:24-27, in the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders.<sup>3</sup> The ending of the parable states that the house built by the foolish man (i.e., the person who does not hear and obey Jesus’ teachings) falls, but the wise man’s house (one who hears and obeys) remains even during the time of severe testing. Proverbs 12:7 says, “The wicked are overthrown and are no more, but the house of the righteous will stand.” Just prior to the parable Jesus had rejected the plea of those who claimed to know him by calling them “workers of lawlessness,” which makes it seem all the more likely that he had Proverbs 12:7 in mind.

### *The Letter of James as Wisdom Literature*

As we have already noted, James quotes twice from Proverbs, but his affinity to it does not stop there. In fact, James is sometimes described as “New Testament Wisdom Literature” due to the similarity of his letter to the Wisdom writings, particularly to Proverbs.

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<sup>3</sup>In his famous sermon in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus said, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Physician, heal yourself’.” Although the ESV, NIV, and NRSV all use the word “proverb,” the Greek term is *parabole*, from which we get our word “parable.” It is a broad term that can refer to a proverb, a riddle, a question, or any kind of comparative statement between two things, since its basic meaning is “comparison.” In the case of Luke 4:23, “proverb” is obviously the best translation, but Jesus’ words are not from the book of Proverbs.

Because Proverbs is a book of exhortations to seek wisdom and live by it, it naturally contains many imperatives. So does James, fifty-four in Greek, and as many as sixty-one in English (depending on the translation used). Since the book has only 108 verses, that amounts to a significant percentage of the whole -- at least half. But it isn't only the number of imperatives that makes James read like OT Wisdom Literature, but also the fact that his book contains numerous brief sentences of instruction which, like those in Proverbs, are not always clearly related to one another.<sup>4</sup> Beyond the style of writing, there is the fact that James' primary theme is Wisdom, just as in Proverbs.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, James urges his dispossessed readers to follow the path of wisdom in facing their trials (see, for example, 1:5-8). He also urges them to distinguish between true and false Wisdom, between that which is "from above" as opposed to that which is "earthly, unspiritual, and demonic" (3:13-18). And in some sense, all of his admonitions urge some specific aspect of wise living, just as in Proverbs.

So although James does not frequently quote Proverbs, it is clear that his letter is heavily influenced by the OT book, as well as by other OT Wisdom Literature and

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<sup>4</sup>This does not, however, mean that there is no internal structure to the letter. See the discussions of this in James T. South, *Uncommon Sense: The Wisdom of James for Dispossessed Believers* (DeWard, 2014).

<sup>5</sup>"In my view, wisdom is the orienting concern of this book by which all else is understood: after all, James refers to wisdom as the divine "word of truth," which is graciously provided to a faithful people to make sense of their trials and to guide them through those trials in order to insure their future destiny in the new creation."(R.W. Wall, "James, Letter of," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. by Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids [InterVarsity Press, 1997], 552).

Jewish Wisdom Literature outside the Bible.

*Christ as the Embodiment of Wisdom*

An argument could be made that in some sense, the entire NT is “Wisdom Literature,” because it tells of the One who embodied all the wisdom of God in his person. In this respect it is a significant advance beyond the OT Wisdom Literature, since it speaks, not of “Wisdom Personified” (as Proverbs 2 and 8, and elsewhere), but of “Wisdom Incarnate.” All that the OT had said about Wisdom is now shown to be realized in Jesus Christ, not an abstract revelation of Wisdom, but a personal one.

I am not suggesting here that Proverbs gives some sort of prophecy about Jesus as the embodiment of Wisdom. Rather, that the NT writers see in Jesus the fulfillment of everything that the OT had said about God’s Wisdom. Referring to the NT presentation of Jesus as God’s Wisdom, Koptak says, “We do not read these later understandings back into the Old Testament texts, but rather look to see how the Old Testament provides the language to describe what God has done in sending Jesus into the world he made” (36). He further points out that in ways similar to the sages of Israel (uses of comparisons and proverbs, as well as talking about Wisdom; 41), Jesus taught about Wisdom. For example, in extolling the greatness of John the Baptist, Jesus said that in contrast to the criticisms leveled at John’s ascetic lifestyle, “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds” (Matthew

11:9). Likewise, in Matthew 12:42 Jesus said, "The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here." By speaking of "something greater than Solomon," Jesus is obviously referring to himself. If people were eager to hear Solomon's wisdom, they should be all the more ready to listen to Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

Outside the Gospels we cannot overlook Paul's two statements about Jesus as the embodiment of God's Wisdom. The first is 1 Corinthians 1:24-25, where, after declaring that God has made foolish the wisdom of this world, Paul concludes by saying, "but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." Equally compelling are his words in Colossians 2:1-4:

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and

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<sup>6</sup>Ben Witherington III builds his entire commentary on Matthew around the idea that Matthew's purpose is to present a "sapiential" (wisdom) portrait of Jesus as both the ultimate Jewish wisdom teacher. He seems to me to have overstated his case (there are, after all, some things in Matthew that surely do not fall under this heading), but his point is well taken. Ben Witherington III, *Matthew* (Smyth & Helwys, 2006). Koptak (42) also points to the close affinity between John 1:1-14, where Jesus is the Word" (often a synonym for Wisdom) who participates in creation, and Proverbs 8. See also Hebrews 1:1-2.

the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Concerning this, D. A. Hubbard comments, "As Christ fulfilled the law and the prophets, so he fulfilled the wisdom writings by fulfilling God's wisdom."<sup>7</sup>

We do not often speak of Christ as "fulfilling" the wisdom writings, and probably rarely associate him directly with the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament, but given all that the NT writers say and assume about him and about God's wisdom, perhaps we should.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>D.A. Hubbard, "Wisdom" in *The New Bible Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, edited by J.D. Douglas *et al* (IVP Academic, 1996) 979. He also adds, "If Proverbs is an extended commentary on the law of love, then it helps to pave the way for the One in whom true love became incarnate."

<sup>8</sup>This is a good reminder that the meaning of "fulfilled" Scripture is not limited to "predictions which come true," but means something more like showing the full or ultimate meaning of a text.