

The Book of Proverbs: Living Wisdom, Part 4

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Sermon 77, The Sayings of the Wise, Proverbs 22:17-21

Proposition: The thirty sayings of the wise teach us the wisdom of faith and truth.

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I. Introduction: A New Section of Proverbs

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this evening to a new section in our journey through Proverbs. Remember, if you would, that the book is divided into seven sections, each marked off by a heading within the text. We have looked together at the first two of these sections; the first two are the longest two, and together make up over 70% of the book. They are, of course, the prologue, which consists of longer speeches urging a son to apply his heart to wisdom, and then the proverbs of Solomon proper, which we finished looking at last week. In this third collection, which is one of the longer of the shorter ones, we come to a slightly different genre.

A. Its Title: The Sayings of the Wise, v. 17

The section is titled “The sayings of the wise,” and it is followed by the shortest section in Proverbs, the further sayings of the wise. In other words, right off the bat we are told that this section and the next are not composed of proverbs by Solomon. Rather, these are proverbs that he gathered from elsewhere — that is, from “the wise”.

B. Its Source

And indeed, we actually have one or two of the source books from which this section is drawn. In keeping with the heading, which tells us that the content is essentially quoted from other sources than the author of most of the rest of Proverbs, some of these sayings of the wise come from Egyptian books of wisdom, including the *Instruction of Amenemope*. I won't take the time to quote lines from Amenemope and then compare them with Proverbs, but I have a commentary

that does so at length in case you're interested. More profound is the question "How can the word of God have a pagan source?" In one sense, this seems like a big problem. But in another, it's not a problem at all. Rather than positing that God learned from the old pagan Amenemope, it makes more sense to say that the pagan Amenemope learned from God! Even outside the sphere of the covenant, outside the community of God's people, wisdom can be found. She makes herself known in the midst of fools, as we saw earlier (Prov. 14:33). In other words, just as that verse affirmed the presence of wisdom everywhere in the abstract, so this section, by drawing some of its sayings from Amenemope, reaffirms the presence of wisdom everywhere but this time does so in a concrete way. The wisdom of God can be found in the musings of an Egyptian scribe. Brothers and sisters, here again we see one of the major points of Proverbs: Wisdom is not something limited to a particular domain or arena. Wisdom is omnipresent because wisdom is the alter ego of the Son of God! This does not mean that everyone is equally wise; rather, it means that everyone is equally in the presence of Wisdom. You can either listen to the voice of wisdom, which cries out not only in the Bible and the proclamation of the church but also in nature, in history, and in the very structure of the human being, or you can try to drown it out by pursuing folly. That is the dominant message of both of the first two sections of the book of Proverbs. The first section pictures it by telling us about Lady Wisdom crying out in the streets and offering her instruction to passersby; the second section expounds it by contrasting the behavior of the wise man and the fool in verse after verse after verse. Now this third section is once again calling on you to listen to wisdom, even to wisdom found in foreign lands and non-Christian eras.

Don't misunderstand me. A few of these sayings of the wise are quoted from Amenemope. The rest are presumably quoted from other sages, though we have no idea who these might have been or whether they believed in Yahweh or not. Here's what I'm not saying: I'm not saying that because Solomon quotes from an Egyptian wise man that therefore everything the world calls "wisdom" actually is wisdom. Yes, we absolutely must listen to the wisdom found in foreign lands and non-Christian eras. But to say that is not to affirm that such times and places are rife with sound wisdom. There is some there, of course, and Solomon indicates as much by cherry-picking from Amenemope. But he doesn't just throw a multi-page chunk of Amenemope into the text of Proverbs wholesale, as though everything from the Egyptian scribe is equally valuable and correct.

God has made foolish the wisdom of this world. Nonetheless, some of the things the world says are still good and wise, and we ought to adopt these. But we don't use the world's criteria to determine what wisdom is; we use God's criteria, and by them we will occasionally find a valuable nugget in the wisdom of the world.

C. Its Content: Thirty Sayings, v. 20

Well, aside from direct quotation, the other thing that was borrowed in this section of the words of wise was the structure. This is a sequence of thirty sayings, a structure unique in Proverbs and in the Bible as a whole. Apparently the number thirty was important in Egypt, where a particular

high court had thirty judges. But, as the same commentator who communicated that information noted, thirty was not an important number in Israel. Probably for that reason, then, the word “thirty” has dropped out of the text and been replaced by a word that means “third-class” or “three days ago.” The element of threeness is retained in the Hebrew text we have, however. Way back in 1905 a German scholar guessed that the text should probably be changed by one letter to bring it back to “thirty.” In the 1920s, then, another scholar was reading *The Instruction of Amenemope* and discovered that it’s quoted in this section of Proverbs. Furthermore, he found that Amenemope wrote in thirty chapters. That feature, then, has been borrowed for this section of Proverbs, and if you have an NIV you’ll see that the translators have added headings throughout the text to mark each saying.

There are thirty sayings here. They deal with wealth, which we’ll look at next week, and then with discipline, drunkenness, and other wisdom topics.

With that introduction in mind, then, we should pay attention to what’s written here.

II. The Command: Listen to the Words of the Wise, v. 17

It begins with a command: Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise. To “incline your ear” is to turn it toward the source of sound so that you can hear better. Yet the command doesn’t stop with the ear. You are exhorted further to apply your heart.

Now, we’ve just heard an awful lot of proverbs. One count I read said there are about 930 separate proverbs in this book. Well, that’s a lot of proverbs. That’s enough proverbs to make even the most devoted connoisseur of proverbs feel like he needs a break. Indeed, at the rate we’ve been going of about 7 or 8 proverbs per week, we are already 77 weeks into the book. That’s over a year and a half. That’s a lot of proverbs! And so, just as my pastor when I was in college called out one Sunday, “I think it’s a little warm in here. Would someone please check the thermostat?” — so the narrator or editor of Proverbs takes a break here and throws in something a little different just to wake you up. Indeed, that Sunday no one moved. So Pastor Biggs said it again, and kept saying it until one of the deacons got up and walked across the room to the box on the wall, unlocked it, and hit a button on the thermostat. Afterwards I asked my pastor about it and he said, “Well, yes, I was a little warm but the temperature was fine. So many people were asleep that I had to stop and do something different to get them to wake up!”

Well, that’s what’s going on here. The words of the wise are here. We are done with single-verse proverbs for the time being, and you need to listen to the new material that’s going to be presented here. You need to not just take this in with the ear, but give your heart to examining it.

Do you wholeheartedly listen to every sermon you hear? Is your entire attention on the words that are coming in? How much of your mind is on lunch, on your upcoming project at work, on that confrontation you’re dreading, or how to get your one-year-old to sleep through the night? The wise man says, “Apply your heart to my knowledge.” We should think of this ultimately as Christ speaking and telling us to apply our minds to His knowledge. Do you listen

with your heart as well as your ears? Are you so in love with your Savior that you are eager to hear something of Him, something from Him?

We live in the age of fandom. It's easy to find article after article asserting that there's no better time to be a fan of this or that pop-culture phenomenon. And a true fan is really dedicated to experiencing everything that thing of which he's a fan has to offer. Imagine a Star Wars fan who hasn't watched all the films, or a Patriots fan who hasn't seen all the games, or a Marvel fan who doesn't know the name "Tony Stark." That, essentially, is a very minor shadow of how ridiculous is to claim to be a follower of Christ but not be interested in reading everything He's written to you.

"Yes, He's my God and Savior and I love Him and can't wait to live with Him forever. But I don't want to read what He has to say to me." This attitude makes no sense! The reason you ought to listen with both ears and heart to the words of the wise is that they are the words of Jesus Christ. Do you love Him? Then listen to Him.

III. The Reason: It Will Be Pleasant, v. 18

When you do, it will be pleasant. This word — pleasure — is a word that we have not seen very many times in Proverbs. We tend to equate pleasure with sin, and to think that we will find pleasure primarily in sin. But the wise tell us that pleasure is found in applying your heart to listen to wisdom. The text actually says that these words should be kept in your belly. That's too graphic for mainstream English translations, and from the King James Version onward our translators have paraphrased "keep them within you." But the sequence is clear: first the ear, then the heart, then the belly, then back out through the lips. What did the belly do to get banished? I'm not sure. Anyway, the sages insist that it will be pleasant if you store up words of wisdom in your belly and keep them on your lips. What's the idea? Learn what wisdom has to say. Retain it in the biggest storage chamber you've got. Kidding! Okay, sort of kidding. Obviously, if you're like me then you have more room in your belly than anywhere else in your body. If you're going to guess where the main storage is by looking at the outside of a human body, you're going to say "belly." And that's what the wise say here. You find it pleasant to put shrimp and grits in your belly; why don't you try stocking it with wisdom? How do you do that? By doing what we just saw: Inclining your ear and applying your heart. The pleasure of eating is a pretty great pleasure, and virtually all of us indulge in it on a daily basis. But wisdom is just as important, just as useful — just as pleasant! So listen with your ears, consider with your heart, and fill up your belly with the teachings of wisdom. Let that wisdom stick to your ribs, we might say.

And when you do, what will happen? Then you will have wisdom to dispense. Wise sayings will be ready on your lips. You won't be stuck spouting foolishness!

I hope that every one of you has had occasion to quote and use a proverb at some point over the last year and a half we've been looking at this book. I know I have. The Proverbs have explained situation after situation to me, giving me insight and directing my path. They are wise, and if you incorporate them into yourself then you will be wise!

This raises the specter of memorizing. Do you intentionally memorize Scripture? I used to; it's been a while though. I find that just by listening over and over I often retain a lot of Scripture without the pain of sitting down to memorize it. Still, I have no doubt but that I would retain more if I deliberately memorized — and so would you.

What have you done to put wisdom into your belly so that it's available to flow from your lips? How have you experienced this pleasure?

IV. The Goals

Well, that's an important question. But just as important, perhaps, is *why* would you want to experience this pleasure? After all, there are a lot of pleasures out there that I just don't want. I'm not even talking about the evil pleasures — the pleasure of getting revenge on your obnoxious boss, say. I'm talking about perfectly legitimate pleasures like skydiving, bungee jumping, hang gliding, flying a plane, eating olives, and on and on and on. Some of you may not enjoy fiction, or television, or particular foods, or particular trips. And, theoretically, one could say "Well, you know what? I'm going to give the pleasure of wisdom a miss. I don't need it. I can do perfectly well without it."

Well, these sayings of the wise answer that question. They give three purposes, three goals, that you can achieve only by listening to the instruction of wisdom, storing it in your belly, and having it ready on your lips.

A. The Central Goal: Your Personal Faith in Yahweh, v. 19

The first of these goals is most important; it is central to this first saying. Notice how there are two verses before and two verses after this center one. We've seen this structural device before: Call these Hebrews simple-minded, but if something was central, they would literally put it in the center. Our culture doesn't do that. If it's important, we put it first; we don't expect anyone to read what's in the middle. But that's not how they did it. They kept the central things central. And the central thing is your personal faith in God.

Yes, you heard me right. I know that most of us think of the Old Testament as the era of law; indeed, one of Alexa's friends recently admitted to throwing a fit when her husband wanted to do Proverbs for family worship. The friend said she didn't want to do Proverbs because it was all law and had been quoted to her by her mother way too often.

And folks, that's what many Christians think. Proverbs and a personal faith in Jesus Christ? Those two things have very little to do with each other. Or so we think. But if that's what we think, we are wrong!

Perhaps the most famous verse in the first section of Proverbs is what? Ch. 3, v. 5: Trust in the LORD with all your heart. And here, at the beginning of section 3, the theme comes up again, but this time with an even heavier emphasis. Essentially, in Hebrew there are three marks of heavy emphasis in the sentence. One of them is on the LORD and the other two are on you, even you. This means you personally. The sages are speaking to you and saying that you, individually, need to listen to wisdom and store it in your belly and keep it on your lips in order to trust in Yahweh.

A personal relationship with Jesus Christ is not absent from the pages of the Old Testament; it's right here! You, Joe Christian, you, Jane Christian — you need to listen to wisdom above all so that your trust might be in the LORD. You need to exercise faith in the God of Israel.

What is it to trust in the LORD? It is to know who He is. It is to accept that knowledge rather than resisting it. You have to give your assent, in other words. And finally, it is to personally trust Him to be who He said He is. This book of Proverbs was written for all the people of God; it exists to give cunning to the callow and knowledge and discretion to the young. But in the midst of that general purpose, it contains the specific purpose of evoking faith in the heart of the individual believer.

How does this book do that? Well, it shows us God's wisdom. It allows our minds to say "Yes! This God is wise and understanding and knowledgeable." More than that, though, faith is both a passive reception and a working action. Faith is the hand that receives God's gift of His Son. But faith is also a motivating power. Faith works, even though faith is not itself a work. When we listen with the ear, pay attention with the heart, store in the belly, and bring forth on the lips, we are engaging in the practices that nourish faith. These practices are not faith per se — but they are generated by faith and they in turn generate faith. In order for you to trust God, the sage says "I have taught you personally." Notice the relationship between knowledge and faith. Why do you teach someone? So that he will learn. And when you have learned, what do you do? You believe. That's what this verse says. Knowledge produces faith; knowledge is an essential component of faith.

So how's your faith? Do you trust God? Do you trust that Jesus died for your salvation? Do you trust that God will keep His promises? If so, then you're wise.

What's the difference between fearing God and believing God? They emphasize different aspects of the religious spirit. If you know who God is, then you are afraid to offend Him. But if you know who He is, you can't help trusting Him. Faith and fear are both aspects of a healthy relationship with God, as they are of any healthy relationship.

What do I mean? Well, if you are truly fearless in any relationship then you essentially have no relationship — certainly no relationship that's viable long-term. For instance, in terms of everyday social interaction you have a fear of what would happen if you just took something from your friend. You fear what would happen if you walked into their house and got into their bed. You fear what your wife would say if you got home two hours late without telling her anything. If you value the other person as a person and respect him the way he deserves, then you are afraid of his bad opinion and his disapproval! The same goes for the Almighty. But though fear of God is used as shorthand for the entire Christian faith in Proverbs, it is not the only aspect of the religious life that bears emphasis. Faith is equally important with fear. Indeed, fear itself is predicated on faith. To fear a God you've never seen requires you to believe in Him in the first place! So fear God, yes — but trust Him. Believe in Him. Know that these words of the wise are taught to you with the goal of increasing your faith.

B. Knowing Truth, v. 21a

But the second goal (though not a central goal) of these words of the wise is to make you know the certainty of words of truth. In the Hebrew, words for “truth” occur three times in this verse. A huge part of wisdom’s instruction is about learning the truth!

One key part of the modern world has been the idea that we can and should drop the search for truth. Why bother trying to figure out the truth about God, the world, the afterlife? If we can build things that work, isn’t that enough? So asks the pragmatist. But the Bible sticks to this old idea that truth is important. If you listen to these words of the wise, you will know what’s right and true. In the biblical world, that’s important regardless of whether it has any cash-value. You need to know with certainty the words of truth. To believe a lie is a problem — a big problem.

This feeds into faith, of course. As we already saw, faith is built on knowledge and trust. If you know the truth, it will increase your faith! Do you want to know the truth? Then listen to the words of the wise.

C. Returning an Accurate Report, v. 21b

The final reason to listen is so that you can return an accurate report. The commentators say that this envisions a setting in the royal court. In that era before electronic communications, generally the best way to make sure a message got through was to send someone to take it. Upon the messenger’s return, then, he would be the most accurate source of knowledge about conditions in the location where he had taken the message. Thus, in this context, returning an accurate report became extremely important, because decisions of state were riding on the accuracy of your report. Even today, inaccurate reports on which major decisions were based have become notorious. Perhaps the most famous example is the alleged weapons of mass destruction in search of which the USA invaded Iraq in 2003. That report, it appears, was false. George W. Bush was a laughingstock both at home and abroad for his decision to invade based on a false report.

In your line of work, you may be called on to author reports. Wisdom will give you the ability to make them accurate. If you don’t officially have to report, yet certainly you will unofficially have to report. What did your mom say on that telephone call? What did the doctor tell you about your child’s sickness? What does the Bible say about a Christian’s sex life? And on and on. You will need to report, formally or informally. Are you ready to make a true report? Are you ready to speak what needs to be heard? Brothers and sisters, wisdom breeds faith. That’s why you should listen to it, store it in your belly, and speak it. Amen.