

Wisdom in Proverbs

What Are Proverbs?

- The book of Proverbs is the primary locus of prudential wisdom
 - “Memorable aphorisms people can use to help themselves make responsible choices in life”
 - Aphorism: “a pithy observation that contains a general truth”
 - It concentrates mostly on practical attitudes and behavior in everyday life
- It provides no guarantee that life will always go well if its advice is followed
- However, if the wisdom found in Proverbs is lived out, it will help develop the basic attitudes and patterns of behavior that a responsible person needs
- Proverbs also presents a sharp contrast between choosing a life of wisdom and one of folly
 - A life of folly is marked by such things as:
 - Violent crime (1:10-19; 4:14-19)
 - Careless promises (6:1-5)
 - Laziness (6:7-11)
 - Malicious dishonesty (6:12-15)
 - Sexual impurity (2:16-19; 5:3-20; 6:23-35; 7:4-27; 9:13-18; 23:26-28)
 - A life of wisdom is marked by such things as:
 - The opposite of those things that folly engages in
 - Caring for the poor (2:22, 27)
 - Respect for government leaders (23:1-3; 24:21-22)
 - The importance of disciplining children (23:13-14)
 - Moderation in consumption of alcohol (23:19-21, 29-35)
 - Regard for one’s parents (23:22-25)
- Specifically religious language is seldom used in Proverbs
 - It is present (1:7; 3:5-12; 15:3, 8-9, 11; 16:1-9; 22:9, 23; 24:18, 21, et. al.)
 - But it isn’t predominant
 - This is because not everything in life has to be *religious* to be godly
 - In fact, Proverbs can act as a correction to extremist tendency to spiritualize everything
 - As if the material world that God created is completely ‘evil’

Uses & Abuses of Proverbs

- Proverb: “A brief, particular expression of a truth”
- The briefer the statement, the less likely it is to be totally precise and universally applicable
 - But conciseness makes the truth conveyed easier to remember
 - Ex.) “Look before you leap” vs. “In advance of committing oneself to a course of action, consider all circumstances and options”
- Likewise with proverbs, they must be understood reasonably and taken on their own terms

- Proverbs do not state everything about a truth, but rather points toward it
- They can be technically inexact if taken literally
- But as learnable guidelines for shaping of selected behavior, they are unsurpassed

Hermeneutics in Proverbs

Here are some guidelines for understanding proverbial wisdom

1. Proverbs are not legal guarantees from God
 - The particular blessings, rewards, and opportunities mentioned in Proverbs are likely to follow if one chooses wise courses of action
 - But nowhere does Proverbs teach automatic success
 - See examples on p. 244-245
2. Proverbs must be read as a collection
 - Each proverb must be balanced with others and understood in comparison with the rest of Scripture
 - It is important not to read them in isolation
 - See examples on p. 246
3. Proverbs are worded to be memorable, not to be theoretically accurate
 - No proverb is a complete statement of truth
 - Thus they do not stand up to the scrutiny of theory because they are grounded in the practical
 - See examples on p. 247
4. Some proverbs need to be 'translated' to be appreciated
 - Many proverbs express their truths according to practices and institutions that no longer exist, although they were common to the OT Israelites
 - The truths they convey are still applicable, but need to be brought into modern settings
 - See examples on p. 248

Review

1. Proverbs are often parabolic (i.e. figurative, pointing beyond themselves)
2. Proverbs are intensely practical, not theoretically theological
3. Proverbs are worded to be memorable, not technically precise
4. Proverbs are not designed to support selfish behavior, but rather the opposite
5. Proverbs strongly reflecting ancient culture may need to be 'translated' so as to not lose their meaning
6. Proverbs are not guarantees from God, but poetic guidelines for good behavior
7. Proverbs may use highly specific language, exaggeration, or any of a variety of literary techniques to make their point
8. Proverbs give good advice for wise approaches to certain aspects of life, but are not exhaustive in their coverage
9. Wrongly used, proverbs may justify a crass, materialistic lifestyle. Rightly used, they will provide practical advice for daily living.