

Proverbs

A Suggested Outline of Proverbs

Introduction (1:1–19)

I. Wisdom's Calls and Folly's Calls (1:20–9:18)

- A. Wisdom's first call—to salvation (1:20–33)
- B. Wisdom's Path—righteousness and safety (2–4)
- C. Folly's first call—condemnation (5)
- D. Folly's second call—poverty (6)
- E. Folly's third call—death (7)
- F. Wisdom's second call—to wealth (8)
- G. Wisdom's third call—to life (9)

II. Wisdom's Contrasts (10–15)

A series of proverbs contrasting wisdom and folly.

III. Wisdom's Counsels (16–31)

A series of proverbs on practical matters.

Introductory Notes to Proverbs

I. Title

Our English word “proverb” is made up of two Latin words: *pro* (instead of) and *verba* (words). So, a proverb is a sentence that is given “instead of many words”; it is a short statement that summarizes a wise principle. The Hebrew word translated “proverb” means “a comparison.” As we shall see, many of the proverbs of Solomon are comparisons and contrasts. Like most Oriental peoples, the Jews did much teaching through proverbs. These short, “catchy” sentences were easy to remember, and they condensed much wisdom in a small space.

II. Author

In Prov. 1:1, 10:1, and 25:1, we are told that Solomon wrote most of the proverbs in this book. First Kings 4:32 informs us that Solomon spoke 3,000 proverbs, and these were undoubtedly recorded in the official records. The men of Hezekiah (a group of writers in King Hezekiah's employ who assisted in copying out the Scriptures) copied out the material in Prov. 25–29 (see 25:1), while King Solomon himself wrote or dictated Prov. 1–24. In Prov. 30–31 we have material from other writers, although many believe that "King Lemuel" in 31:1 was really Solomon. Solomon was certainly known for his wisdom, even though later in his life he turned to idolatry and folly.

III. Theme

The key word is wisdom. We commonly think of wisdom as the ability to use knowledge in the right way, and this is a practical definition. But, in the Bible, wisdom means so much more. True wisdom is a matter of the heart and not the mind alone. It is a spiritual matter. There is a "wisdom of this world" (1 Cor. 2:1–8; James 3:13–18), and there is a divine wisdom from above. In Proverbs, wisdom is actually pictured as a lovely woman who calls people to follow her into a life of blessing and success. Folly is pictured as a wicked woman who tempts the foolish and leads them to hell. Of course, Jesus Christ is the Wisdom of God to the believer

(1 Cor. 1:24, 30; Col. 2:3). When you read Solomon's description of wisdom in Prov. 8:22–31, you cannot help but see Jesus Christ. Wisdom is described as eternal (vv. 22–26), the creator of all things (vv. 27–29), and the beloved of God (vv. 30–31). Immediately you think of John 1:1–2 and Col. 1:15–19. To yield your life to Christ and obey Him is true wisdom.

IV. The Fool

Proverbs often mentions three classes of people who desperately need wisdom: the fool, the simple, and the scorner (see 1:22). The fool is the person who is dense, sluggish, careless, and self-satisfied. Nabal in 1 Sam. 25 is a good example; the name "Nabal" means "fool." The fool hates instruction (1:7, 22) and is self-confident (12:15). He talks without thinking (29:11) and mocks at sin (14:9). The simple are those who believe everything and everybody (14:15) and lack discernment. They are easily led astray by others because they lack understanding (7:7). They cannot see ahead (22:3) and, as a result, repeatedly walk into trouble. Scorners mock at God's wisdom because it is too high for them (14:6), but they will not admit it because they know everything (21:24). The Hebrew word for "scorner" literally means "to make a mouth"; and we can easily picture them sneering and curling up their lips in scorn. They never profit from rebuke (9:7–8; 13:1) and, as a result, they will one day be judged (19:29).

V. The Wise

Proverbs outlines for us the character of the wise: they listen to instruction (1:5); obey what they hear (10:8); store up what they learn (10:14); win others to the Lord (11:30);

flee from sin (14:16); watch their tongue (16:23); and are diligent in their daily work (10:5).

VI. Value

Proverbs is valuable to us as a guidebook for practical wisdom in everyday life. It teaches us about such things as the tongue, money matters, friendship, the home, and business contracts. It would be well for believers (especially young people) to read one chapter of Proverbs a day, and thus read the entire book through each month. The NT quotes Proverbs in: Rom. 3:15 (Prov. 1:16); Heb. 12:5–6 and Rev. 3:19 (Prov. 3:11–12); James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5 (Prov. 3:34); Rom. 12:20 (Prov. 25:21–22); and 2 Peter 2:22 (Prov. 26:11).

VII. Interpretation

Proverbs are generalizations about life and not promises for us to claim, although there are some great promises found in the Book of Proverbs. The basic requirement for understanding and applying these proverbs is the fear of the Lord (1:7) and a willingness to obey (3:5–6; see John 7:17). The aim of the book is to give the godly person skill in human relationships and endeavors. This begins with submission to the Lord. It is dangerous to lay hold of one or two statements in Proverbs but ignore the total message of the book. Also, though we can find examples of exceptions to some of the proverbs, this does not minimize the lesson they contain. Not all godly people live long lives (3:1–2) or become wealthy (3:10). In some parts of the world, believers are dying from famine and poverty. But generally speaking, those who obey God do not ruin their bodies or waste their substance. The Book of Proverbs summons us to understand and apply all of God's revealed wisdom for all of life.

Proverbs 1–9

In this lesson we want to consider Wisdom and Folly, the two “women” who are out to woo and win the hearts of people. You will note in the suggested outline of Proverbs that there are three calls from Wisdom and three from Folly. Wisdom calls us to God and life; Folly calls us to sin and judgment. We want to study these six important invitations and contrast them.

I. Wisdom's First Call—Salvation (1:20–33)

This is an open call out in the streets where people can see and hear. God's call to hearts is not a secret matter; His Spirit invites people openly to come to Christ. Note that Wisdom invites all three classes: the simple, the scorner, and the fool (1:22). Wisdom can see judgment coming and she wants sinners to escape it. What a

wonderful offer she makes to those who will hear: the gift of the Spirit of God and the Word of God (v. 23).

How do sinners respond to this call? It seems that they totally reject it. Verses 24–25 indicate their responses: they refused to heed; they did not regard God's outstretched hand; they even made light of it. What will the result be? Destruction. And God will laugh at them just as they laughed at Wisdom. "Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer" (v. 28). They will reap just what they have sown (v. 31). Why did they refuse God's gracious offer? Verse 32 indicates that the "ease" (turning away) of the simple and the prosperity of the fools gave them a false assurance; they thought they would never see judgment.

Following Wisdom's first call we have three chapters that present the path of wisdom. The words "path" and "way" are each used thirteen times in these chapters. The message of chapter 2 is that Wisdom *protects* our paths (2:8), of chapter 3 that Wisdom *directs* our paths (3:5–6), and of chapter 4 that Wisdom *perfects* our paths (4:18).

Wisdom offers people salvation, but in chapter 5 we see Folly offering them condemnation. Wherever God gives His gracious invitation, Satan is there with an alluring offer of his own. Read this description of the wicked woman and see how Satan tries to make sin appear attractive. But note 5:5—"Her feet go down to death; her steps take hold on hell." God warns us not even to come near her door (5:7–8). Sin is always a costly thing: you can lose your reputation (5:9), your possessions (5:10), your health (5:11), and your very life (5:22–23). The "cords of sins" bind slowly, but they bind surely, until one day the sinner discovers escape is impossible.

II. Wisdom's Second Call—Wealth (8)

Wisdom is back in the streets again, calling sinners to follow God's path. In v. 5 she calls the simple and the fools, but not the scorner. He was the one who laughed and mocked (1:25–26), so God now passes him by. How solemn to think that hearts can be so hard that they no longer hear the voice of God.

The invitation is to true wealth, the wisdom that is far above silver, gold, and precious jewels (vv. 10–11). See Prov. 4:1–10 for a similar exhortation. In fact, to know God's wisdom is to reign like a king (vv. 15–16). Verses 18–19 affirm again that wisdom and godly living are greater in value than all worldly wealth. After all, to know the Lord and obey Him is to have all the wealth of heaven and earth at your disposal. In vv. 22–31, Solomon introduces an OT picture of Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24, 30). As you read this description, you see Christ, the beloved Son of God, the Creator of the universe. To know Him is to have true wisdom. (Of course, Christ was not "brought forth" [vv. 24–25] in the sense of being created by the Father, since the Son existed from all eternity. This is symbolic language.)

Wisdom invites us to wealth, but in chapter 6, Folly invites us to poverty (6:20–35). Here is the "strange woman" again, all painted up, flattering the young man, tempting him to sin. In 6:26, we see that sin leads to poverty; see also 6:31. True, many ungodly people today seem prosperous, but their wealth will not last.

III. Wisdom's Third Call—Life (9)

Wisdom's first invitation was to the fool, the scorner, and the simple; her second invitation was only to the fool and the simple (8:5); but her third invitation is only to the simple (9:4). The fool decided to follow Folly, and in 8:36 he experienced death (see 1:22). Alas, the simple too will reject Wisdom's gracious call and end up in the depths of hell (9:1–18). Here are the results of these invitations:

- (1) The scorner rejected Wisdom and met destruction (1:24–27); he listened to Folly and received destruction (6:32)
- (2) The fool rejected Wisdom and was led to death (8:36); he listened to Folly and received death (5:22–23)
- (3) The simple rejected Wisdom and went to hell (9:18); he listened to Folly and ended up in hell (7:27)

The lesson is obvious: to reject Wisdom is to accept Folly. There is no middle ground. "He that is not with Me is against Me," said Jesus. "No man can serve two masters," and nobody can live without having some master. We either follow Wisdom or Folly, Christ or sin.

Verses 1–6 picture Wisdom preparing a wonderful banquet. This reminds us of the several "banquet" parables of Christ, especially Luke 14:15–24. Salvation is not a funeral; it is a feast. "Forsake the foolish, *and live*," Wisdom calls, for receiving Christ is the only way to receive life (1 John 5:11–13). "By me your days will be multiplied," Wisdom promises in v. 11 (nkjv).

But Folly is busy inviting people to her banquet (chap. 7). It takes little imagination to see the foolish young man as he toys with temptation and finally listens to Folly and goes to her feast. But he goes like an ox to the slaughter (7:22). When you yield to this particular temptation, you become like a dumb animal. Wisdom is offering life, but Folly offers death (7:26–27). Temptation looks fascinating and enjoyable, and there are pleasures in sin "for a season" (Heb. 11:25), but in the end, sin leads to death and hell. See James 1:13–15.

These, then, are the invitations we face in this life. We can listen to Wisdom and enjoy salvation, true wealth, and life; or we can listen to Folly (temptation and sin) and experience condemnation, poverty, and death. There are several practical lessons that we ought to note before closing this study.

A. *We cannot avoid decisions.*

"Decision determines destiny." We choose either the path of Wisdom or the path of Folly; we cannot postpone this decision or avoid it. To choose one is to reject the other; to reject one is to choose the other. What decision have *you* made?

B. *Sin is always alluring.*

Folly does everything she can to make sin attractive. She never reveals her true nature; she never tells people that her house is the way to hell. The only way to detect Folly is

to walk with Wisdom; read Prov. 2:10–22 carefully. Those who walk with Wisdom, obeying the Word of God, will not easily be tricked by Folly.

C. It takes time for judgment to fall.

The simple, the fool, and the scorner all thought they “had it made” when they rejected Wisdom, because nothing disastrous immediately happened. But judgment eventually caught up with them. “Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap” (Gal. 6:7, nkjv).

D. Satan appeals to the flesh.

It is clear in these chapters that the “wicked woman” (or “strange woman”) is appealing to the young man’s appetites. She tells him he can use his body as he pleases and not suffer for it. But Prov. 5:1–14 makes it clear that sexual sin leads to tragic results, both in body and soul. In these days of flagrant immorality (in movies, TV, music, advertising, etc.), it is important that young and old people keep their hearts and minds pure.

E. God continues to call.

So long as people will hear, God’s Spirit continues to call. But when sinners refuse to obey, their ears become deaf to the Word of God. Beware! “Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts” (Heb. 3:7ff, nkjv).

Proverbs 2–4

When you know Jesus Christ, you know true wisdom (1 Cor. 1:24, 30), and through His Word, you receive wisdom for daily living. In these three chapters, Solomon is urging the young man (“My son” is repeated five times) to lay hold of divine wisdom because of the blessings it will bring to his life. Of course, these instructions apply to anyone who will hear and obey.

I. Wisdom Protects Our Paths (2)

The key idea here is that of God’s protection over His own (vv. 7–8, 11–12, 16). The path of life is not an easy one, and the older we get, the more dangers we face. The world, the flesh, and the Devil are out to defeat us, and we need the wisdom of God to keep us out of their power. Sinners are out to entice the young (Prov. 1:10–19), and too often their temptations are so alluring they are difficult to resist. But the Christian who knows the Bible and seeks to obey it will be kept safe from their power.

A. God’s commands to His own (vv. 1–9).

Note what we are to do with God’s Word: receive it, hide it in the heart, incline the heart toward it, apply it to our lives, cry out to God for wisdom, and search the Word to find

God's will. Solomon is not talking about simply "reading a chapter a day" and letting it go at that. He insists that we live in the Word of God and allow the Word to live in us. Verse 4 compares Bible study to the mining of precious metal. The truths of the Word must be "dug out" and put through the furnace of personal experience. They must be "minted" into spiritual coins that we can keep in our treasury for future use (Matt. 13:52). Furthermore, this wisdom will become a shield to our lives (v. 7) so that God can protect our paths. When Christians deliberately turn from the wisdom of God found in the Bible, they are putting themselves (and others) in danger.

B. God's care for His own (vv. 10–22).

Solomon sees two great dangers in the world: the evil man (vv. 10–15) and the strange woman (vv. 16–22). The evil man is known for his "big talk" (v. 12). He always has some scheme for the young man to consider. But he is walking in the paths of darkness and being controlled by the Prince of Darkness, Satan. Instead of walking on a straight path, the evil man walks on a crooked path; you simply cannot trace him. The evil man wants you to believe that there are "shortcuts" to wealth and success, and that you can profit by disobeying the Lord.

The "strange woman" uses flattery and appeals to the appetites of the flesh. She has forsaken her own husband and broken her marriage vows (v. 17). She leads the foolish young man to death and hell. How believers today (especially young men and women) need the wisdom of God from the Word to protect their paths!

II. Wisdom Directs Our Paths (3)

Proverbs 3:5–6 are precious promises to Christians who want to know and do God's will in every area of life. God wants us to know and do His will; He is eager to reveal His will to us (Eph. 5:8–10; John 7:17). There are certain conditions that we must meet before God can direct our paths.

A. Listen to the Word (vv. 1–4).

God's will is found in God's Word (Col. 1:9–10). It is not only the mind, but also the heart that should remember and consider the Word. We must ask the Spirit to write the Bible on our hearts

(2 Cor. 3:1–3). We must receive the Word every opportunity we have—in class, in church services, through reading. The better you know your Bible, the better you will know God's will for your life.

B. Obey the Word (vv. 5–10).

If we really trust God, we will obey Him. We may think that our own wisdom is sufficient, but it is not; we need the wisdom of God. Verse 5 does not teach that Christians should fail to think and consider facts when making decisions, because God expects us to use our brains. Rather, it means that we should not *trust* our own ideas or wisdom; we must

ask God to direct us (James 1:5). A willingness to obey is the first step toward knowing God's will (John 7:17). Note that faithful giving is a part of obeying.

C. Submit to the Word (vv. 11–12).

Sometimes God has to chasten us to bring us into His perfect will; see Heb. 12:5–11. If we submit, God will turn it into blessing.

D. Treasure the Word (vv. 13–26).

Matthew 6:33 summarizes this perfectly. Put Christ first. Solomon lists in vv. 21–26 the blessings that come to believers who let the Word direct their paths. Note how every part of the body should be controlled by the Word (Rom. 12:1–2).

III. Wisdom Perfects Our Paths (4)

In vv. 14–19, there is a contrast between the path of the wicked and the path of the righteous. The path of the wicked is darkness, and it keeps getting darker; but the path of the just is light, and it keeps getting brighter. Salvation begins with the “dawning” in our hearts (“Dayspring” in Luke 1:77–79). As we walk with the Lord, the light gets brighter, until one day we shall step into God's eternal light, in a land where there is no night.

God wants to perfect the path of the believer. He has a plan for each life, and He wants to bring that plan to completion (Eph. 2:10; Phil. 2:12–13; 1:6). Solomon gives us several instructions to follow if God is to perfect our paths:

A. Seek after wisdom (vv. 1–13).

Solomon seems to be saying, “I recall when I was a young man and my father tried to teach me the right way. Now that I'm older and a father myself, I know that he was right.” It is not enough merely to *get* wisdom; we must also *keep* it and not allow it to slip away. “Take fast hold of instruction.” Get your hands on it. Verse 12 promises that the path of the wise person will not be “straitened” (“hindered”). The believer who obeys the Bible will avoid the pitfalls and obstacles that others encounter on their detours away from the will of God.

B. Avoid temptation and sin (vv. 14–19).

Here Solomon is teaching separation from sin and evil. We as Christians cannot be isolated from the world, because we must live with people and seek to win them to Christ, but we must not be infected by their sins or led into their ways. The old illustration is still good: it is fine for the boat to be in the water, but not for the water to be in the boat. The Christian must be in the world, but the world must not get into the heart of the Christian. There are wicked people in this world just waiting to take advantage of foolish young people who ignore the warnings of the Bible.

C. *Guard your life* (vv. 20–27).

Verse 23 reads, “Guard your heart above anything else you have, because it determines the kind of life you will live.” The heart is the “master-control” of the life; a wrong heart always produces a wrong life. To allow sin into the heart is to pollute the entire life. Solomon also warns us to *guard our lips* (v. 24) because they can get us into sin. The heart controls the tongue (Luke 6:45), so a guarded heart should result in guarded lips. A “froward” mouth is a proud mouth, a mouth that speaks scornfully and arrogantly. A Christian’s words must always be spoken in love (Eph. 4:15, 31), seasoned with salt (Col. 4:6). We must *guard our eyes* (v. 25) to be sure that we are keeping them on Jesus Christ and the goal He has for us (Heb. 12:1–2; Phil. 3:12–16). Eve permitted her eyes to wander and it led to sin (Gen. 3:6), and John warns about the “lust of the eyes” (1 John 2:15–17). Samson did not “look straight before” himself, but looked at the polluted honey in the carcass of the lion, and this led him into defilement and disobedience (Jud. 14:8ff). Finally, Solomon urges us to *ponder our path* (v. 26), to examine our lives, to see where we are going. “The unexamined life is not worth living,” said Socrates. The Lord is pondering (examining) our lives (5:21), and we must examine them too.

Live in God’s Word and He will protect your path, direct your path, and perfect your path, for the glory of Jesus Christ.

Proverbs 12, 18

There are many references to *the tongue* in Proverbs. We have suggested reading chapters 12 and 18 because they mention the tongue frequently, but you will want to follow the cross references and examine other verses as well. We so often take the wonderful gift of speech for granted and abuse an ability that ought to be guarded and used to the glory of God.

Before we consider some of the sins of the tongue, we ought to note the blessings of a godly tongue. (This demands a godly heart, because the tongue only speaks what the heart treasures.) When used for good, the tongue is like valuable silver (10:20); a beautiful and fruitful tree of life (15:4; see 12:14 and 18:20); a refreshing well of water (18:4; 10:11); and a healthy dose of medicine (12:18). See also James 3.

The tongue should be used for right purposes: bringing peace (15:1, 26); giving wise reproof to the erring (25:12; 28:23); delivering lost souls from death (11:9; 14:3–5, 25; 12:6); teaching people the things of the Lord (15:7; 16:21, 23; 20:15); and carrying the good news of the Gospel (25:25).

But Satan and the flesh want to control the tongue, and the results are sad. Perhaps more damage is done to lives, homes, and churches by the tongue than by any other means. It is sobering to realize that the tongue can be used to damage reputations and cause trouble, when it ought to be used to praise God, pray, and witness to others about Christ. The tongue is a “little member” of the body (James 3:5), but it is one member that must be yielded to God as a tool of righteousness (Rom. 6:12–13). Perhaps if we

consider some of the sins of the tongue, it might encourage us to use our gift of speech more carefully.

I. Lying (12:17–22)

God hates a lying tongue (6:16–17). Sometimes a lying tongue is only covering up sin in the heart (10:18), such as we see in Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) and Judas (John 12:1–8). In 12:18, Solomon suggests that lies are like cutting swords, but the truth is like a healing medicine. The truth is eternal, but lies will one day be revealed and the liars judged (v. 19). See Ps. 52:4–5. Verse 20 explains that it is deceit in the heart that makes a statement a lie. After all, the lips can utter true words, but if the intent of the heart is evil, the statement is false. Likewise, if we ignorantly speak an untrue statement, the statement may be a lie, but the speaker cannot be condemned as a liar. The Bible tests and reveals the intents of the heart (Heb. 4:12), so the best way to be sure of telling the truth is to allow the Word and the Spirit to control the tongue. The truth will deliver souls (14:25), but lies only lead to bondage and shame. Proverbs 17:4 indicates that liars enjoy listening to liars. People who enjoy listening to gossip will turn around and gossip themselves. The heart controls the ear as well as the lips. But all liars will be punished (19:5, 9); and when they “eat their own words,” it will be like gravel (20:17). Hell is waiting for the one who “loves and practices a lie” (Rev. 22:15, nkjv).

II. Talebearing (18:8)

Moses warned about this sin in Lev. 19:16. A “talebearer” is one who runs from person to person telling matters that ought to be concealed, whether they are true or false. See 11:13. “Love covers all sins,” says 10:12. See also 17:9, 1 Peter 4:8, and James 5:20. When we love others, we seek to help them privately, and we try to win them back to the right way (Matt. 18:15–18). Think how many people have been wounded by the talebearer. Words can be as deadly as weapons; in 25:18 Solomon compares deceitful words to three different weapons: a maul (battle-ax) that crushes at close range; a sword that cuts; and an arrow that pierces and can be shot from a distance. Stay away from the talebearer (20:19). He or she is a kindler of fires (26:20) and a destroyer of friendships (17:9).

III. Talking Too Much (12:13; 18:6–7)

The idea behind these verses is that the fool talks too much and talks his way right into trouble. His mouth becomes a trap, and he himself is snared by it. Read 6:1–5 to see how this sin gets people into trouble. “In the multitude of words sin is not lacking,” warns 10:19 (nkjv). A controlled tongue means a safe life (13:3); a loose tongue means poverty (14:23—many people would rather talk than work) and foolishness (15:2). The person of few words is a person of knowledge (17:27–28). Unfortunately, there is sometimes a “multitude of words” even in God’s house, and Ecc. 5:1–7 has some good counsel about this.

IV. Talking Too Soon (18:13, 17)

“Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak,” commands James 1:19. Too often we are slow to hear—we never really listen to the whole matter patiently—and swift to speak; and this gets us into trouble. It is wise to “restrain the lips” until you really have something to say (10:19). A godly person will study to answer, but a fool will open his mouth and pour out foolishness (15:28). Potiphar did not listen to Joseph’s side of the story and committed a great crime because of it. Jesus and the Apostles were not permitted to tell their whole story; the verdicts were passed by their enemies before the cases were honestly tried. God wants us to search out each matter carefully (25:2) and then give fair judgment. Proverbs 18:17 warns us not to agree with the “first cause” that we hear but to seek to understand both sides of a matter. Even where dedicated Christians are involved, there are two sides to a story. This is not because people necessarily lie, but simply because no two people see and hear the same matter in the same way. David jumped to conclusions about innocent Mephibosheth because he failed to get the other side of the matter (2 Sam. 16:1–4; 19:24–30). All of us need to pray, “Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips” (Ps. 141:3). See Ps. 39:1.

V. Flattering (26:28)

Flattery, of course, is a form of lying, but it is so dangerous that it deserves separate attention. “A flattering mouth works ruin,” warns 26:28 (nkjv); and 29:5 compares flattery to a dangerous net spread before an innocent man’s feet. For an X ray of the flatterer’s mouth read Ps. 5:9. Flattery is insincere praise given by one who has selfish motives. “Flatter” and “flutter” belong to the same family of words, and you can just see the flatterer as he “flutters” around his victim, trying to impress him. Satan used a form of flattery to tempt Eve: “You will be like God.” The evil woman uses flattery to tempt the young man (5:3; 7:5, 21). “The rich has many friends” mainly because they want to flatter him and get something out of him (14:20; 19:4–6). We are warned not to meddle with people given to flattery (20:19). Sad to say, sometimes the righteous will flatter the wicked in order to get advantages (25:26); and this will pollute a home, a church, or a nation like a poisoned spring. Honest rebuke is better than flattery (28:23). “Faithful are the wounds of a friend,” says 27:6, “but the kisses of an enemy (like Judas) are deceitful.”

Of course, there is a place for honest praise in the Christian life; see 1 Thes. 5:12–13. Honest praise is like a furnace (Prov. 27:21); it brings to the top either the pure gold or the dross. Some Christians are so carnal they cannot take praise; it goes to their heads. Worse still, they cannot stand to see another person praised. When the Jews praised David for his victories, this praise made David humble, but it revealed the envy and pride in Saul’s heart (1 Sam. 18).

VI. Quarreling (12:16, 18)

There is a righteous anger (Eph. 4:26), but too often it becomes unrighteous anger and leads to arguing and displays of temper. See 29:22. An angry person keeps adding fuel

to the fire only to make the matter worse (26:21), and angry words are the fuel. The best way to stop an argument is with soft words (15:1–2); this is the best way to “break the bones” (25:15). Being able to control one’s temper is the same as ruling an army or an empire (16:32). See also 14:17, 29, and 17:14.

Proverbs 23

Our emphasis will be on vv. 15–35 in which the godly father warns his son against the sin of drunkenness. We will also study other Scripture passages to show that the Bible magnifies total abstinence. There are millions of alcoholics in the United States and millions more “problem drinkers.” At least 70 percent of the problem drinkers started when they were in their teens. No wonder brewers and distillers focus a large part of their annual advertising budget on winning the young people.

I. The Bible Warns against Strong Drink

The concerned father tells his son what evil results will take place in his life if he takes to drink:

A. Poverty (vv. 20–21; 21:17).

The liquor ads often show a “man of distinction” and give the impression that drinking goes along with success and fortune. Yet drinking and poverty have always gone together. Americans spend billions of dollars a year on alcohol, much of it money that ought to purchase clothing, food, and education for the drinkers’ families. Alcoholics lose many days from work every year, costing industry millions of dollars in man hours, all of which help to raise prices for the consumer, drinker or nondrinker.

B. Misery (vv. 29–32).

Alcohol is a great deceiver (see 20:1); it promises joy, but brings sorrow; it pretends to bring life, but really produces death. It has never made a home happier or a person healthier. Look at the results: woe, sorrow, contentions (this means “arguments, brawls”), babbling, wounds, redness of the eyes. Over 55 percent of fatal auto accidents involve drinking drivers. Anyone who thinks that drinking makes a person successful ought to visit a city rescue mission or listen to the testimonies at a local Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. Alcoholism is the #3 health problem in the United States, after heart disease and cancer.

C. Immorality (vv. 26–28, 33).

Many a woman has lost her virtue and character because of drink; and many a man has done likewise. Drinking and disobeying the seventh commandment often go together. Alcohol is *not* a stimulant; it is a narcotic that affects the brain and makes a person lose

control. Alcohol is *not* a food; it is a poison. When young people lose control of themselves, there are many temptations that prove alluring and lead to sin.

D. Instability (vv. 34–35).

What a vivid picture of a staggering drunk! (And there is nothing comical about a drunk, no matter what the entertainers may do on TV.) Drink robs a person of stability; he or she can't walk straight or think straight. This is why the king is warned not to drink (Prov. 31:4–5).

E. Eternity in hell (1 Cor. 6:9–10).

Drunkards go to hell. Of course, drunkards can be saved; see v. 11. But once alcohol gets ahold of a person, conversion to Christ can become very difficult. The drunkard may intend to trust Christ someday, but his or her life may be taken before that day comes.

II. The Bible Magnifies Total Abstinence

Keep in mind that the word “wine” in your Bible can refer to many different drinks, including simple grape juice. “New wine” was grape juice that had not yet fermented; see Matt. 9:14–17. The Jews sometimes mixed their wine with spices or other fruit beverages (Isa. 5:22; 24:9). Wine and strong drink are often mentioned separately (Deut. 14:26; Prov. 20:1). Note how the Bible magnifies total abstinence by giving many examples:

(1) Israel in the wilderness did not drink wine (Deut. 29:6). Wine was not used in the Passover (Ex. 12:8–10), for fermented wine contained leaven, and leaven was prohibited. Wine was added to the ceremony later; it was not commanded by God.

(2) The priests had to abstain when serving in the temple (Lev. 10:8–10). As NT priests (1 Peter 2:5, 9), should today's Christians have a lower standard as we serve the Lord daily?

(3) Nazarites were forbidden to drink wine (Num. 6:1–3). John the Baptist was such a person (Luke 1:15), and Jesus called him the greatest preacher born of woman.

(4) Daniel refused to “follow the crowd” (Dan. 1:5, 8, 16, and 10:3), and God honored and promoted him. Contrast this with drunken Belshazzar in Dan. 5, and Herod in Mark 6:21ff.

(5) Paul warned Christians to do nothing that would cause their brother to stumble (Rom. 14:19–21). See 1 Cor. 8:13 also. The “social drinkers” who belong to our churches are supporting a wicked industry just as much as the skid-row drunks, because they are influencing others to drink. In fact, a “moral church-going drinker” is a better advertisement than is the drunk in the gutter. Paul contrasts being filled with the Spirit to being drunk (Eph. 5:18), and in Gal. 5:21 he lists drunkenness as one of the sinful works of the flesh. First Timothy 5:23 refers to a medicinal use for grape juice in a day when doctors did not have modern medicines. To say that we have the right to use alcohol because it is used in some medicines is as reasonable as saying we can use

morphine or some other narcotic because the dentist or the surgeon uses it on his patients.

(6) Peter warns Christians to “abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11); and since drunkenness is such a fleshly lust (Gal. 5:21), total abstinence is the best way to obey this admonition. How does one begin a drunkard's life? By taking the first drink.

(7) The OT prophets thundered out against strong drink. Habakkuk 2:15 pronounces a curse on those who give a drink to their neighbor; see Isa. 5:11–22. Amos condemned the idle Jews who had to drink their wine out of bowls because their cups were too small (6:3–6).

(8) Jesus Christ is our greatest example. “But didn't Jesus turn water into wine?” Yes, He did; any person who can do the same thing today ought to be allowed to drink the wine. At the end of His ministry, Jesus said, “I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine” (Matt. 26:29). Today, Jesus is a total abstainer! He refused the cup at the cross (Mark 15:23). Those who want to make Christ their “example” in drinking usually point to verses such as Matt. 11:18–19 and forget Matt. 26:29. What about the Lord's Supper? Nowhere in the Bible is the word “wine” associated with the Lord's Supper; it is either “the cup” or “the fruit of the vine” (Matt. 26:27–29).

The Japanese have a proverb: “First the man takes a drink; then the drink takes a drink; then the drink takes the man.” What is the right course to take? Refuse the first drink and keep refusing it for the rest of your life.

Proverbs 25

We must notice from the start that there is a righteous anger against sin that itself is not sinful. Verse 23 teaches that an angry look will silence a gossip. Jesus “looked round about on them with anger” (Mark 3:5), and Paul advises us to “be angry, and do not sin” (Eph. 4:26). Of course, we should be angry at *sin* and not at people. Proverbs 27:4 warns us that anger is cruel and outrageous; it can lead to physical hurt and even murder (Matt. 5:22). Angry parents can permanently wound the body and emotions of a child. Sinful anger is of the flesh (Gal. 5:19–21) and does not accomplish God's will (James 1:19–20). Satan can work through our angry words and attitudes (Eph. 4:26–27), so God warns us to “put off anger” (Eph. 4:31; Col. 3:8). An angry person is a dangerous friend (Prov. 22:24; 29:22), and an angry woman makes a poor wife (Prov. 21:9, 19; 25:24).

In this chapter we are given the instructions for dealing with anger in our lives and in the lives of others.

I. Patience (25:8)

The minute we hear something that disturbs us, how easy it is to become angry and to rush into the matter without thinking or praying. The wise thing to do is to think the matter through and wait upon God. This does not mean we look for an excuse to pass

over some sin, even though love does cover a multitude of sins (Prov. 10:12; 12:16). Rather, it means we act prudently, knowing first what is involved. It is a wonderful gift of God to be "slow to anger" (Prov. 15:18); the person who is quick to get angry will deal foolishly (Prov. 14:17). "Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; do not fret—it only causes harm," counsels Ps. 37:8 (nkjv). So, before rushing into a matter, stop to pray and to think. Take time to read God's Word and to allow the Spirit of God to give you inward peace.

II. Privacy (25:9–10)

Our first desire is to "tell the whole world" and get everybody on our side. But the Bible counsels just the opposite: talk to the person alone and do not allow others to interfere. This is what Jesus commanded in Matt. 18:15–17, and if this policy were followed in families and churches, there would be fewer fights and splits. It is sad when professing Christians tell everybody but the one involved. Certainly, it takes courage and Christian love to talk over a difference with a brother or sister, but this is the way to grow spiritually and to glorify Christ. Perhaps the matter cannot be settled by you two; then ask two or three spiritual people to assist you. If this fails, then the church must step in, and if the party refuses to hear the church, he or she must be disciplined. "As much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men," says Rom. 12:18 (nkjv). Unfortunately, there may be some people we cannot live with peaceably because they will not obey God's Word.

III. Wisdom (25:11–14)

Words are not just sounds that we hear; they are living, powerful realities that can either help or harm. In Prov. 25:18 Solomon compares lies to three weapons—a battle-ax, a sword, and an arrow. But in vv. 11–14, he states that words can also be lovely fruit ("apples of gold" are citrons or oranges), beautiful ornaments, and refreshing cold water from the mountain snows. In dealing with a matter, we must use the right words and present them in the right way. Our words must be "fitly spoken," arranged like lovely fruit in a silver basket. See Job 6:25. Proverbs 19:11 states that discretion (prudence) will cause people to hold their anger. Only a fool utters all his mind (Prov. 29:11); wise people ponder what they will say, how they will say it, and when they will say it; see Prov. 15:23. Of course, this spiritual wisdom must come from God (James 1:5).

IV. Gentleness (25:15)

What a contradiction: "a gentle tongue breaks a bone." This parallels Prov. 15:1 (nkjv), "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." Our first reaction to someone's meanness is to be mean in return, but this only adds fuel to the fire (see 26:20–21). See also James 3:5. We are commanded not to return evil for evil (Rom. 12:21), and not to revile others who revile us (1 Peter 2:20–23). If we are seeking to restore a sinning believer, we need a spirit of meekness (Gal. 6:1) and not an attitude of anger. This is the way Paul ministered to his converts (1 Thes. 2:7), and this is what he commands believers to do (2 Tim. 2:24). Elijah had to learn that God sometimes uses

the “still small voice” and not the tornado (read 1 Kings 19:11–13). Many have the idea that gentleness is weakness, but it is not: it is power under control. It is the gentleness of the surgeon that makes him great, and only the Holy Spirit can give us this precious grace (Gal. 5:22–23).

V. Kindness (25:21–22)

Gentleness ought to lead to kindness; see Rom. 12:19–21, where these same verses are quoted by Paul and applied to NT Christians. Instead of adding coals to the fire of anger (Prov. 26:20–21), we help to put out the fire by showing love and kindness. Read Christ's commandment in Matt. 5:9–12. If the person needs to be chastened, God will take care of the matter: “Vengeance is mine, I will repay.” We must be careful, however, to perform these kind deeds with the right motive. If we try to obligate people to us, or if we try to “buy them off,” God will not bless. But if we sincerely love them and want to help them, God will honor and reward us. Of course, these good deeds must not be done to impress people; Prov. 21:14 says they ought to be secret. Solomon is not suggesting a bribe here; rather, he is saying that kindness will be like oil that will heal the troubled waters.

VI. Self-control (25:28)

This lies at the very heart of the matter: the Christian who practices self-control will not be destroyed by anger, nor will he or she destroy others. This verse ought to be compared with 16:32, “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.” For people to rule their own spirit, the “inner kingdom,” is better than to rule the world. Alexander the Great was able to conquer the known world, yet he could not conquer himself. Of course, the only way for us to have this self-control is through the kingship of the Lord Jesus Christ in our lives. We “reign in life” through Christ (Rom. 5:17). Self-control (temperance) is one of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23); the flesh cannot produce self-control, for the flesh is at war with God.

It is self-control that gives us the patience we need, as outlined at the beginning of this study. If we exercise self-control at the very start of a problem, it will save us all kinds of trouble later on. Proverbs 17:14 compares the beginning of strife to a small leak from a dam; if you are not careful, the break will enlarge and you will have a flood on your hands. It is easier to stop the small leak at the start than to try to control a raging flood. Proverbs 30:33 presents a different picture: the churning of butter and the wringing of the nose. The lesson is clear: to force wrath and encourage trouble only produces more trouble. Self-control, produced by the Spirit, will enable a believer to handle these matters patiently and wisely.

The ability to be angry about the right matters in the right way helps to build character. Certainly we ought to be aroused about injustice and sin. But when anger flares up in temper, it becomes destructive. Godly anger is like the steam power in the boiler: if it is directed to the right matters it accomplishes much good. Unrighteous anger—losing one's temper—is more like a forest fire that gets out of control and destroys much good. Psalm 19:14 (nkjv) is a good prayer for us to use: “Let the words of my

mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

Proverbs 31

Only in eternity will we fully see the blessing that godly women have brought to this world. Proverbs has much to say about wicked women in chapters 1–9, and about nagging wives (21:9 and 25:24); the book closes, however, with a glorious tribute to the godly, dedicated woman who brings honor to God and joy to her family. Many servants of God thank God for godly mothers and godly wives. Next to making a decision for Christ, the most important decision a Christian will make is the choice of a life's mate. “A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband” (Prov. 12:4). “He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the Lord” (Prov. 18:22, nkjv). “A prudent wife is from the Lord” (Prov. 19:14). Christians must not be unequally yoked together with unsaved mates (2 Cor. 6:14–18). They are to marry “in the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:39). A Christian woman who marries an unsaved man may be endangering her life in childbirth; see 1 Tim. 2:12–15. This chapter of Proverbs describes the “virtuous woman” and lists her fine qualities.

I. Her Spirituality (31:1–9)

The king's mother is teaching her son to obey the Word of God. Some students think that “King Lemuel” is actually King Solomon, but we have no proof of this. The most important ministry mothers and fathers have is the spiritual training of their children. See 2 Tim. 1:5 and 3:15. The mother boldly warns Lemuel of some of the dangers he will face in life: sinful companions, strong drink, and a temptation to disobey the Word of God. Happy is that person who had a God-fearing mother who warned about sin, and happier is the person who heeded her warnings.

II. Her Loyalty (31:10–12)

The two key words here are heart and trust—love and faith. Marriage is a matter of the heart; there must be true love between husband and wife. What kind of love should a man show to his wife? The same kind of love that Christ shows to the church (Eph. 5:18ff): sacrificial, patient, suffering, tender, constant. A wife has no problem submitting herself in obedience to a husband who loves her *and shows it*. Husbands need to take care that their jobs and household chores do not take them away from their wives and children. A happy home does not “just happen”; it is the result of hard work, prayer, and real love. When husbands and wives trust the Lord and each other, there will be happiness and blessing. The marriage vows are promises that must be taken seriously. To break these vows is to sin against God and each other.

III. Her Industry (31:13–22)

This priceless woman is a worker. Whether it be sewing or cooking, taking care of the children or assisting her husband in family business, she is faithfully doing her share. Note that she works willingly (v. 13); it is not a matter of compulsion but compassion. She loves her husband and therefore seeks to please him. (See 1 Cor. 7:32–34 for a wonderful principle of marriage—live to please the other person.) This ideal woman does not spend the morning in bed; she is up early to do her tasks (v. 15) and, if necessary, she stays up late at night (v. 18). Note Paul's instructions to young women in 1 Tim. 5:14. While there are sometimes emergencies and situations that require women to work outside the home, it must be remembered that even there her first responsibility is to her family.

Proverbs has nothing good to say about laziness, whether it involves a man or a woman. See 6:6–11; 10:4, 26; 13:4; 15:19; 18:9; 19:15, 24; 20:4, 13; 21:25; 22:13; 24:30–34; 26:13–16. In these days of “labor-saving devices,” there is still no substitute for hard work and diligence.

IV. Her Modesty (31:23–26)

Her husband is known in the gates; she is known for her faithfulness at home. Man and woman both have a place in the economy of God, and when either one steps out of place, there is confusion and trouble. Of course, the headship of the man does not mean dictatorship; rather it means example and leadership in love. Verse 25 suggests that the godly woman does not depend on fancy clothing to be successful; she wears “strength and honor” on the inner person. Peter writes about the outward adorning of extravagance and the inward adorning of a “meek and quiet spirit” (1 Peter 3:3–4). Paul commands women to wear “modest apparel” (1 Tim. 2:9) and to depend on spiritual beauty, not the artificial beauty of the world. Verse 26 tells us that the godly woman is careful in her speech as well as in her dress. How wonderful it is when the “law of kindness” rules the tongue.

V. Her Piety (31:27–31)

“A woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised.” This is the secret of her life: she fears God and seeks to obey His Word. No doubt she would arise early in the morning to meditate on the Word and to pray. All day long she would pray for her husband and her family. Her true beauty is within; though the years might change her body, her beauty in the Lord only grows greater. Her praise comes from God. “I do always those things that please Him.”

How does God praise this woman? By blessing her labors and her life. The fruit of her life will praise her. She will certainly reap “life everlasting” because she has sown to the Spirit, not to the flesh (Gal. 6:7–8).

Her husband and children also rise up and praise her. What a need there is today for husbands and children to show constantly their appreciation for what the wife and mother does in the home. One of the greatest weaknesses in many homes today is that family members take each other for granted. Husbands need to set the right example before their children by openly praising the Lord and the wife for the blessings of the home. How often a dedicated wife sacrifices for the happiness of the home and never

receives so much as a simple "thanks." What a sin lack of appreciation is in our homes. This kind of appreciation must not be reserved for Mother's Day or Christmas; rather, it must be shown sincerely all year long. Gratitude is a wonderful Christian virtue. It needs to be cultivated in every home.

Of course, these same qualities ought to be seen in the man of the house as well. How often we see a godly woman patiently suffering with a carnal, worldly husband. The Bible knows nothing of a "double standard" for husbands and wives. It is important that the husband be spiritual, loyal, industrious, etc. In God's gracious plan, He has ordered that *both* husband and wife are needed in the home and that each one must fulfill certain ministries. One cannot replace the other, although in some emergencies (such as death of one mate) God has given grace for a person to be both "father and mother" in the home.

Husbands and wives must constantly be on guard lest Satan move in and break up the home. They have spiritual, material, and physical responsibilities to each other, and if these are not met, Satan goes to work (1 Cor. 7:1-6; 1 Tim. 5:8; Eph. 5:21-33; 1 Peter 3:7). It is especially important to be on guard after the children have grown up and left home, for then the true strength of the home is tested. A man and woman can no longer say, "We will stay together for the children's sake." May God help us all to choose the right mates in His will, and to build the kind of homes that glorify His Name.